The Paradoxical Readers

Enjoyment of aesthetic reading despite dyslexia

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Introduction

Existing studies have reported on high educational students (HE) who, despite a history of reading difficulties and current word-learning reading problems, achieve reading comprehension levels within the normal range (e.g., Lindgren et al. 2011; Parrila et al., 2007). How this particular group of students achieves good reading experiences is unknown, as the standard model of reading comprehension states that:

“In order to comprehend what one reads, one must be able to identify the words contained in running text with enough accuracy and fluency to allow computation of the meanings embodied in the text within the limits of working memory.”

(Valtinus et al., 2004, pp. 5-6).

Similarly, the ability to immerse oneself in and enjoy reading is typically associated with automatic basic reading skills and good linguistic knowledge. Accordingly, students with dyslexia should not be able to achieve aesthetic reading experiences as, by definition, they struggle with basic reading skills. However, a pilot study conducted at AU, examining literacy experiences and dyslexia in HE, identified a group of students who showed good reading comprehension and reported great aesthetic reading experiences with descriptions of immersion, flow, and absorption during reading in spite of their word-reading difficulties.

“I immersed myself so much in the story that I could genuinely feel what it was like to be him. Tears ran down my cheeks and I didn’t realize that I was sitting in my couch before I threw the book straight across the room”

Ann, MA student with dyslexia reading Dostoyevsky

Methods

This PhD-project consist of three studies examining how common aesthetic reading experiences are for HE students with dyslexia, and what cognitive and personal factors affect their existence. Although standard theories of reading comprehension cannot explain how students with dyslexia can enjoy reading, both existing reading comprehension theories and research on reading for pleasure conducted with HE students without dyslexia suggest possible explanations that I will examine further.

Study I

Study I is a mixed-methods study that uses;

(1) A questionnaire to establish how frequent aesthetic reading is among HE students with dyslexia, and
(2) In-depth interviews of 10 HE students with dyslexia and 10 HE students without dyslexia, all of whom have reported experiencing immersion, flow, and absorption during reading.

The questionnaire, based on Literary Response Questionnaire (Miall et al. 1995) and Adult Reading History Questionnaire – Revised (Parrila et al., 2007), has been developed and distributed to 150 + 300 normal readers in two sessions. Subscales on empathy and vividness have been separately developed to a Danish context. The final questionnaire has been mailed to all students with dyslexia currently served by the Literacy Counseling Team at AU (about 250 individuals) and to 300 control students in HE.

Study II

Study II will examine how text properties and reader characteristics affect aesthetic reading. The participants will include 30 students with dyslexia and 30 students without dyslexia who all report aesthetic reading in study I. The materials will include short texts (self-selected text that they enjoyed; an aesthetic literature text and a high-quality nonfiction text).

The students will be asked to use audio recorders and describe both enjoyable and less enjoyable experiences while reading each text (e.g., Sikora et al. 2011). They will also be asked to complete questionnaires (Kuiken et al 2004) and a test battery to assess what cognitive and personal factors affect their experience of aesthetic reading (van den Broek et al 2011).

Study III

Study III will focus on reader characteristics and examine how students with dyslexia who report aesthetic reading (n = 30) differ from students with dyslexia who do not report aesthetic reading (n = 30). The independent variables include reading comprehension, inference making, memory, standards for coherence, tolerance for complexity and openness for new experiences. Students will be identified on the basis of their questionnaire responses (see above).

The Harry Potter effect

-Some preliminary results from study I

Study I is measuring seven different aspects in reading: Insights, empathy, vividness, leisure escape, concerns with author, story-driven reading and rejection of literary values.

Due to the preliminary results from the development of the sub-scales it seems that the Harry Potter-books were somehow involved in 72 % of the dyslectic readers enjoyment of reading and was mentioned unmotivated in both interviews and among the answers in the questionnaires. A Harry Potter-effect can also be seen in the dyslectic students’ descriptions of their time in elementary school as a form of an experienced explosive growth in reading motivation and reading development around 4th grade - within this generation especially related to the reading of Harry Potter!

Literature cited


"Even though I have always struggled with reading, I also always loved it. A lot! It started with Harry Potter. Maybe you could say that he was the one who taught me how to read. Now, I read everything. Old and new. I actually enjoy some of the classics, but a crime novel is also nice...I'm kinda crazy for words and... you know, all those other worlds it creates "

Christopher BA student with dyslexia,