

“I Went on the Mound and I Felt Like I Didn’t Have a Learning Disability”: A Qualitative Study of a Former Professional Baseball Player With Learning Disabilities

**Matthias Grünke
Carsten Klöpfer
Thorben Wellmann
Janine Bracht**

University of Cologne, Germany

Individuals with severe academic challenges constitute one of the most vulnerable groups of our society. Science has to find ways to help arm them against life’s challenges and cope with the many risk factors that they are usually confronted with. Team sports like baseball seem to be a suitable means of achieving that goal. In this qualitative study, we interviewed a young man with learning disabilities who played professional baseball for two years. Our participant talked about his life as a student and related how his career in baseball made his academic difficulties appear much less significant. He gave some meaningful insights into what helped him to build a happy and fulfilling life for himself – not only in spite of his challenges but also because of what his learning disabilities taught him. Support from significant others, a sense of purpose, a fighting spirit ignited by sports, and the success that he experienced on the baseball field were among the most relevant factors. Overall, this study highlights the importance of finding an outlet for young people with learning disabilities where their academic problems fade into the background while their talents are validated.

Keywords: Learning Disabilities, Inclusion, Resilience, Baseball

INTRODUCTION

Science and Human Well-Being

Life is suffering. This declaration is the first noble truth in Buddhism. But even though it is mainly associated with this world religion, most other major spiritual belief systems also consider pain an integral part of human existence. At the center of Christianity, for example, is a man taking on the tremendous suffering of the world by being tortured to death. The very word *Islam* means “submission,” and a central way to submit to Allah is to endure the pain that inevitably comes our way. Most everyone agrees that nobody goes through

Insights into Learning Disabilities is published by Learning Disabilities Worldwide (LDW). For further information about learning disabilities, LDW’s many other publications and membership, please visit our website: www.ldworldwide.org.

life without experiencing considerable suffering. And some of the challenges we are faced with can be overwhelming.

According to Purtil (1970), the central purpose of science is to observe, explain, and predict. Further, Schoenfeld and Mestrovic (1991) argued that these three functions should always be geared towards improving the human condition. In other words, science ought to aim at reducing suffering by improving external living circumstances and enhancing subjective well-being.

With regard to the first of these – improving external living conditions – science has done rather well. Thus, in his widely recognized book *Factfulness*, Rosling (2018) suggests that the world has undergone some tremendous positive changes over the last decades. For example, the proportion of people living in severe poverty has halved in the past 20 years, most of the world's population now lives in middle-income countries and, on average, life expectancy around the globe has increased to about 70 years. However, with regard to enhancing subjective well-being, science has some catching up to do. In fact, even in countries with the highest living standards, the percentage of adults who chronically feel burdened, overstrained, hopeless, and immobilized has recently risen substantially (Patalay & Gage, 2019). The 2019 World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2020) reveals that overall life satisfaction around the globe has declined in the last 15 years. Specifically, in a large and widely accepted study, Twenge and colleagues (2015) found that American adults have been getting considerably more miserable since 2000. In sum, regardless of the advancements that Rosling (2018) describes in his book, people overall do not tend to grow in happiness commensurate with improvements in their external living conditions.

Building Resilience Against Life's Adversities

Research provides some insights into circumstances that bring and maintain inner balance and satisfaction: If people are able to draw on social connections and constructive coping strategies, they are likely to successfully adapt to life tasks, even in the face of highly adverse situations (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). One of the most recognized studies of the reasons for the continuing trend of declining happiness has been going on for more than 80 years now. According to the well-known Harvard Study of Adult Development (Martin-Joy et al., 2017), embracing community is the main key to happiness. In a world in which individualism and market interests seem to prevail over personal relationships, life satisfaction all too often falls by the wayside. If we have to cope with strokes of fate or permanent unfavorable living conditions without feeling part of a community, tragedy strikes us much more severely.

Developing an inner robustness to outer stress in preparation for what is ahead is the second main prerequisite for finding contentment. Research provides a lot of evidence for this assumption: If people are able to look at the bigger picture, maintain a positive attitude, and view setbacks as an opportunity

to grow, they tend to not get knocked off balance by minor or even by major blows. They toughen up, adjust to challenging times, and increase the amount of joy in their life (Odaci & Cikrikci, 2012; Özdemir, 2017; Ryu et al., 2020; Sagone, 2017).

A promising way to gain knowledge about how to build supportive social networks and develop coping styles associated with emotional strength is to examine incidences of positive outcomes. Indeed, a scholarly field that explicitly zooms in on successful life courses despite a high load of risk factors is called resilience research (Kate, 2002; Miller-Karas, 2015). *Resilience* is commonly defined as “the ability to withstand, recover and grow in the face of stressors and changing demands” (Deuster & Silverman, 2013, p. 24). Probably the best known study on this topic was conducted by Werner (2005) and her research group. They followed 698 children from the day they were born until middle adulthood. The central findings indicate that individuals who turned out very resilient and led healthy, happy, fulfilling lives as grown-ups despite multiple risks drew upon three kinds of resources during their upbringing:

(1) protective factors within the individual (they held a strong belief in their own effectiveness and a conviction that the problems they confronted could be overcome by their own actions),

(2) protective factors in the family (they had a close bond with at least one competent, emotionally stable person who was sensitive to their needs and grew up in households that instilled in them a value system which provided meaning in their lives), and

(3) protective factors in the community (they could rely on peers and older mentors in their environment for emotional support and seek them out for counsel in times of crisis).

People With Learning Disabilities as a Vulnerable Group

Various questionnaires – like the well-known Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS; Holmes & Rahe, 1967) – have been developed to operationalize the concept of suffering, (capturing hardships like chronic illness, physical limitations, economic pressure, under- or unemployment, discrimination, social isolation, abuse, harassment, violence, etc.). One group that generally has to cope with an especially heavy load of stress factors as listed in these instruments are people with disabilities, who commonly have to face a variety of challenges and are excluded from many parts of everyday life. Among them, people with learning disabilities (LD) are often identified as the most vulnerable in the community (e.g., Franz et al., 2017; Perry, 2011; Yitzchak, 2014). In a knowledge-driven world, having severe problems in basic psychological processes that manifest themselves in a limited ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations (Fattig-Smith, 2005) pushes one to the fringes of society. Individuals with LD are among the lowest percentages with regard to

employment (Aro et al., 2019; Pallisera, 2011), they are relatively often hit by poverty (Chandler, 2014), they are confronted with discrimination more frequently than other groups (McMahon et al., 2016, 2017), and they are more likely to get assaulted than the general population (Hogg et al., 2001).

Hence, on average, people with LD are not only confronted with a higher amount of afflictions, they are also more socially excluded than their non-labeled peers (Musetti et al., 2019), placing them at great risk for emotional distress. Having to cope with a high level of life's suffering can be very difficult. However, having to handle it without enough supportive relationships can be bone-crushing. Unfortunately, the body of existing studies on the resilience to outer stress of individuals with LD seems to suggest that they are less able to cognitively adapt to adversity than most everyone else (e.g., Bagnato, 2020; Firth et al., 2010; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2010).

Preparing People With Learning Disabilities for a Better Future Through Sports

Pleasant external living circumstances do not always coincide with a high level of subjective well-being. Someone can be comparatively well off, but miserable. But then again, many people feel overall happy with their lives despite a wide range of challenges that they are affected with. In line with the basic perspective in resilience research, we want to explore cases in which individuals with LD have flourished despite all odds. Thus, understanding more about the significance of different protective and supportive factors in the lives of people with severe academic difficulties and analyzing the conditions under which they have managed to live healthy, happy lives is key to finding ways to support others facing similar challenges.

Possible paths that marginalized people can pursue to create a supportive communal network and to build cognitive strength should provide opportunities for mingling with (non-labeled) peers and for dealing with setbacks collectively. According to Clifford and Feezell (2009), a social and cultural activity that fits this description perfectly is sports. The authors point out that physical exertion in which individuals or teams compete against each other is ideal for bringing people together and very appropriate for character building. However, not all types of sports are equally amenable in this regard. In his article, "Meaningful inclusion of all students in team sports," Ohtake (2004) highlights the benefits of intergroup competition as opposed to competing for oneself. For example, building relationships and creating opportunities for supportive social interactions is easier when people with disabilities are part of a team as opposed to having to contend with others in individual athletic activities.

The Case for Baseball as a Means of Stabilizing People With Learning Disabilities

Whereas every popular team sport seems to provide some opportunities to enhance resilience among people with LD and related disorders, Grünke and Martis (2020) make a particular case for the benefits of baseball. They argue that in basketball, football, and hockey, it is frequently not possible to pinpoint the blame. However, in baseball, the contribution that each player made to a failure or a triumph can be exactly quantified ... baseball teaches you more than any other popular team sport that success is hard earned and that you are accountable for your actions. All too often, people with [learning] disabilities are told that they are victims of society. It is important to send them a constant message of encouragement that motivates them to take up responsibility and use their abilities to reach their potential. (p. 93)

The impact that such a message can make on young people is documented in a study by Lumpkin and Favor (2012). By taking on personal responsibility to reach a common goal (which baseball is destined to do), young people are encouraged to become more aspiring, persistent, and patient. This does not only help them to better deal with life's challenges, but also to reach higher academic standards. For example, Lumpkin and Favor's (2012) research clearly indicates that student athletes outperform non-athletes significantly in G.P.A. scores. The authors interpret this to mean that team sports exert positive group pressure on young people to develop self-discipline, build time management skills, and keep on working hard despite repeated failure.

Purpose of the Present Study

In this study, we interviewed a young male athlete with LD in reading (dyslexia) who overcame numerous obstacles and setbacks in life by following his passion for baseball and excelling in it. Thus, he served as a positive example of an individual who managed to develop an optimistic attitude towards life and a positive identity despite the suffering he had to endure due to his academic struggles. In undertaking this study, we hoped that through his insights, we would be able to provide answers to our research question of how baseball can help young people to cope with a life with LD. There are multiple ways to help to foster resilience in individuals with low academic achievements. However, we decided to focus on one particular activity (playing baseball) that seems to be especially conducive to achieving this goal.

METHOD

Brandon (name changed to retain anonymity) was a 27-year-old administrative employee at the time of the interview. He and the first author had

met about a year before the study took place at an event at which Brandon spoke about how he was able to lead a happy and fulfilled life despite his LD. The participant grew up in a large metropolitan city in the United States. Even though he had always struggled with reading and writing, it was not until he entered middle school that he was officially diagnosed with LD.

All throughout his life, Brandon had been passionate about sports and played baseball and basketball for his high school and different colleges. Because of his extraordinary skill level, he signed with a prestigious professional baseball team at age 24, playing high-level sports while receiving national recognition for his talent. Sadly, after two years, muscular problems and other physical challenges prevented him from continuing his career. After retiring from professional athleticism, Brandon started coaching baseball and followed a path in administration.

We used a semi-structured, open-ended interview format to explore Brandon's experiences of how baseball helped him build resilience. Key topics included (a) childhood, (b) life as an elementary and a high school student with LD, (c) developing an interest in baseball, (d) discovering a talent for baseball, (e) challenges of a baseball player with dyslexia, (f) baseball as a resource for coping with life's problems, and (g) life as a professional baseball player. However, these themes only served as a general outline. Whenever Brandon brought something up that related to the key issue of how he coped with struggles associated with his LD as an athlete, he was provided with the opportunity to go into what he wanted to talk about.

The interview was conducted by the first author via video conference and recorded. It lasted for 2 hours and 10 minutes. A verbatim transcription of the recording resulted in 40 pages of standard A4 sheets (8-1/4x11-3/4") containing 23,367 words. The transcript was analyzed using the MAXQDA 2020 software, which is designed to help organize and sort verbal data. An inductive category formation was carried out. For this, the relevant parts of the interview were initially identified. One coding unit was defined as a statement that was appropriate for answering the research question. Coding units were subsequently generalized into the category system at a higher level of abstraction, and similar statements were deleted. Statements at the new level of abstraction that were not significantly relevant were also deleted. Subsequently, the categories were summarized by bundling, integration, and construction to new paraphrases.

Two trained university students under the supervision of an experienced qualitative researcher went through the transcript independently and identified different empirical indicators in the text. In a next step, they assigned them to categories that were supposed to be as homogenous as possible. Subsequently, they reflected on their coding system and discussed any discrepancies until consensus was reached.

RESULTS

The qualitative analysis of the data yielded six overarching themes of 117 empirical indicators as follows: (a) Discovering dyslexia during childhood (7 indicators), (b) Lack of support and sympathy in school (12 indicators), (c) Dealing with dyslexia (28 indicators), (d) Sports and dyslexia (14 indicators), (e) Sports as a means of interaction (15 indicators), and (f) Personality (10 indicators). In the following presentation of our findings, the source number after each quoted statement refers to the paragraph number in the interview.

Discovering Dyslexia During Childhood

Brandon described his upbringing as stable and sheltered: “I grew up in a catholic white neighborhood in the city ... I went to school ... with kids from all over the city, inner city, wealthy ... It’s just that I was comfortable with myself at a young age” (22). He characterized his parents as very considerate: “Cause my parents are very caring and loving and I had good supports in elementary and kindergarten, in preschool” (28). His learning problems became evident at a young age, but they did not affect him in significant ways: “So I never knew anything was wrong with us. I mean, basically there’s nothing wrong. It’s just that we learn differently. But yeah, the teachers and my family never showed that I was different ... I kind of felt like I was a little slower, but I didn’t think like: ‘Oh I’m dumb or stupid.’ I just thought: ‘Oh, maybe I’m just a kid and whatever’” (28).

It was not until sixth grade that Brandon learned that he had dyslexia: “... one day I got caught for saying a word wrong. And someone said to me like: ‘You can’t read?’ And ... it hit me like a sack of bricks. I was like: ‘What?’ And then I got embarrassed ...” (24). From that moment onward, he viewed himself as being different, which changed his overall perception of himself and his personal confidence, leading to feelings of alienation and a disconnectedness from his classmates: “It really struck me and it really hurt me, because I felt like: ‘Oh wow, I’m different.’ Like I just wanted to be like everyone else” (24).

For the longest time he did not know what the term *learning disability* actually means. Only when teachers confronted him with his inadequate reading and writing performance did he begin to grasp the implications of this challenge on himself and his development: “And I had to go to the resource room. And I kinda learned about I had dyslexia at that moment ... as I said, in my elementary school, I really didn’t know how I had a learning disability, I had all the confidence in the world” (24).

However, his positive and future-oriented attitude led Brandon to inform himself about dyslexia on his own: “I basically was learning how my brain works. And I learned at that point that I don’t learn like everyone else. I learn differently than someone maybe next to me has ADHD. And here is someone

next to me that might be on the autism spectrum. And that's okay" (84). It was not until he dealt with the term and the associated symptoms that he understood and was able to accept this condition better and to feel a sense of relief. He characterizes his thinking and learning performance as follows: "My brain's going so fast that I can't keep up with my hands" (84).

Lack of Support and Sympathy in School

In school, Brandon experienced little support from classmates and teachers in his struggles. Instead, he felt excluded and misunderstood: "It was hard to make friends at first. And people don't understand me ... we were kids ... we were 11, 12 years old. They are not gonna understand why I'm leaving the room to take a test. They were just making fun of me. And that was embarrassing, because like ... I was just trying to get help. But the kids didn't understand" (78).

His teachers assigned him to a special group, where he was instructed for a couple of hours each day. It was well-meant, but contributed to further discrimination by his classmates, which ultimately led to a decline in self-confidence. He attributed the ostracism to a lack of communication among teachers, who failed to sufficiently explain Brandon's situation in class and to make it transparent: "You know what I mean, no one knew what dyslexia was at that age. So yeah, it was tough" (34).

Although his parents tried to support him the best they could, he found it very challenging to connect with them during that time: "I think, the other thing that was hard too is that I couldn't really express my feelings to my family, because I didn't know how to express my feelings. It's not that didn't have any emotions. Is just I didn't know how to sit down and say: 'Hey, this is what's going on, it is because of my dyslexia.' How to articulate a situation that I went through. So that was really tough with my family, because my parents like I said are very loving and supportive and ... I mean middle school and high school, there were a lot of days that it seemed like I was a happy kid, but I could put up a good front. I can be smiling and look like I have a good day. But I felt miserable inside from struggling and stuff" (42).

Dealing With Dyslexia

Being confronted with these challenges, Brandon had to develop a way to deal with his dyslexia. At first, he tried to hide his insecurities and later he dealt with his learning disability in a positive way and used it as a strength. During his school years, he tried to conceal his dyslexia by, for example, reading particularly quickly when reading aloud in order to be able to skip words without anyone noticing: "So I would read at my speed, how I talk fast with my accent. So people would never say anything ... the teacher didn't really notice because they thought I was just saying the right words and everything" (24). Furthermore, he would carefully observe his surroundings in order to get enough time

preparing what he had to read: “I would count the 10 students in front of me and look at the book and see what paragraph I would be reading. And I wouldn’t even pay attention what was going on in the class” (24).

However, he did not only deal with his challenges by trying to cover them up, he also reframed his dyslexia into something positive: “I look at it as I needed to go through that to get to where I am today. And I’ve been like that ever since I was a young kid, because I knew at that age that as much as I didn’t understand what was going on, it was for a purpose” (42). The person who particularly helped him to interpret even a very difficult life in a positive way was his grandfather: “My grandpa was a really big influence. So, I had that mindset at that young age that it really helped me with the bigger loops in life as I got older” (42).

Sports and Dyslexia

Tool for Success

An especially constructive way to cope with Brandon’s literacy challenges was his passion for baseball, which was ignited by his grandfather: “My grandpa was a big part of my life. I would watch the Red Sox with him every time I stayed over. And talk about sports and Boston sports and everything” (50). Brandon’s mother picked up on his evolving interest in baseball and tried to foster his athletic abilities: “My mom was really into getting me into being active and getting me into sports camps” (50). However, Brandon did not excel at first. In fact, progress did not come easy: “When I started sports, I wasn’t an athlete. I had trouble balancing ... At a young age, I would throw a ball off a wall and I’d fall. Like I had a horrible hand-eye coordination. It was horrible” (50).

While his grandfather kept his passion for baseball alive and his mother kept sending him to sports camps, Brandon gradually made progress and developed an ambition to not let any obstacles stop him from accomplishing a goal that he set his mind to: “But ... my mom put me in camps every year. And I would struggle and struggle, but it made me outgrow those things like my balance ... I got repetition of my practice. And then it made me ... every time I would fail at a young age and maybe like in my head I’m like: ‘I want to keep going, I want to prove people wrong.’ Because I mean I can’t say how many times people would tell me I couldn’t do something” (50).

Brandon was able to transfer this aspirational mindset to school-related challenges: “And I think I’ve grown up with a chip on my shoulder. But people told me I can’t read or write. Or I can’t throw ball or nothing” (50). Through baseball, Brandon learned to react differently to negative perceptions and obstacles on and off the field. Adversity made him try even harder instead of trying less.

As his interest in sports and his skill level increased, physical education became an ever more important part for him at school: “So, gym class was such

a huge thing for me” (50). Having a better balance of arduous academic lessons overshadowed by dyslexia and reinforcing physical education units made the school day much easier for Brandon, “... because that was my outlet ... I can get my energy out and be more relaxed in class instead of stressing about how I am gonna do this test or whatnot” (50).

Career

As the years went by and Brandon’s athletic abilities became more and more apparent, he viewed his dyslexia not so much as a hindering block but more as a resource that helped him to succeed. As mentioned, he described a central characteristic of his literacy problems this way: “My brain’s going so fast that I can’t keep up with my hands” (84). Getting heavily engaged in baseball and playing as a pitcher seemed to be a perfect match for him: “I knew in my mind, with my dyslexia and how I think and how I proceed really fast and being on the mound ... I could pitch a game. Some guys have a 90-miles-an-hour fastball, some guys have a great slider. But I could pitch a game. And that was because my brain was going so fast. I knew what to do ... I go: ‘Okay, I already know the next pitch is coming.’ Because my brain’s going. I was picking it ... it was finally a sport and a position that was at my speed” (90). Brandon even went so far as to conclude: “If I didn’t have dyslexia, I would not have been as successful as a pitcher as I was to play two years in pro” (94).

He was often approached by teammates and opponents because of his unusual pitching style, which clearly distinguished him from most other players: “And I remember some guys that have caught from me that are still in the majors now ... had great careers ... and they tell me, they’re like: I’ve never, I’ve caught ... like Clayton Kershaw, big guys, like guys that throw a hundred miles an hour, everything. And they said they’d never ever caught someone as unique how I pitched” (92). Because of this talent, his special needs moved to the background and his sports achievements came to the foreground.

His dyslexia also prepared Brandon for the many disappointments that baseball inevitably holds in store: “I had to learn how to get punched in the mouth at an early age and get up without complaining ... what made me who I am today through those experiences on the field and off the field with my dyslexia” (46). Baseball is often referred to as “a game of failure.” Averaging three hits in 10 at bats can earn a player a ticket to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Success is always hard earned. But unlike many other players that Brandon had to compete with, he was used to that. What is more, he had learned from a young age to stick up for himself in difficult situations. As opposed to other team sports, Brandon described baseball very fittingly, stating: “You gotta look out more for what’s on your back than what’s on your front”¹ (146), indicating that baseball

1 On a baseball jersey, the name of the team is stitched on the front, while a player’s name and number are on the back.

is a team sport, but played by individuals for themselves. Through a challenging life with dyslexia, Brandon felt prepared for a professional career in which competition is high and ever present: “I think that I learned that everyone’s out there for themselves at that level no matter if he’s your best friend or not. Because if you’re at the same position, I don’t care if you’re my best friend or family like: ‘I’m gonna do better than you.’ And when that competition comes out and stuff, that’s when one might ... that chip on my shoulder, it’s always out in that competition, because ... I want to play against people better than me and the best, because that’s brought out the best in me. So when I played at that level, I did the best” (146).

Sports as a Means of Interaction

Building Social Networks

Despite professional baseball’s competitive nature, Brandon was able to overcome the social exclusion that he experienced as a child by being a vital part of different teams as a skilled pitcher. Belonging to a group and even being named captain brought him prestige and taught him important skills for his life: “... it got me connected with people” (44). He was part of an ingroup with his learning problems not playing the slightest role: “And the mound, the pitching mound is like my safe haven. That’s the place in my life that I felt like ... I go on the mound I felt like I didn’t have a learning disability. It didn’t matter ... It’s nothing to the guys I am playing with and whatnot” (154).

About his friend and Boston Red Sox pitcher Chris Sale, Brandon recounted: “I always think that he’s a better person than he’s a player ... He’s just a great human being. I mean we talk baseball, but we also talked about life and that was really cool, because at that level, guys love to talk about baseball, but they’re human beings, you know what I mean, and they want to talk about life” (58). Brandon repeatedly related incidents about friendships that he was able to build and maintain. He managed to form these supportive connections despite the rivalry that was part of competing for positions on a team. About one particular friend who helped him several times when he had trouble with tightness in his throwing arm, Brandon said: “One of my good friends on the team had a sports science degree and was all about that. So he gave me some exercises, and the knots [in my arm] were gone in two days. And the next day, I threw 88 miles an hour” (116). “And that was really weird, because like I said, we’re all out for ourselves. And I think he just knew I was a reasonable guy. And I think he helped me because he understood how hard I was working ... I just put the work in and he was the same way ... And he gave me one of my shining spots in my career, because of him helping me and stuff ... And I will always appreciate that what he did for me” (150).

Becoming a Role Model

In addition, he realized that he had a gift to inspire and influence people: “I discovered that I was just a natural leader and that stuck with me all throughout until my playing career ended” (52). It was one particular high school coach who opened the door for Brandon’s leadership talents to unfold: “And my mentor, my coach ... he saw a leader in me. I never saw myself as a leader. I was always back of the class. And he really strived and pushed me ... he said I was a natural leader and he made me captain in my freshman year ... And I asked him and I said: ‘Why are you gonna give me a captain at 18 years old?’ Like I felt, like I didn’t deserve it. And he just said like: ‘People listen to you’ (130).

In the course of his later life, Brandon experienced numerous situations in which he managed to support young athletes through his ability to connect with them, especially with those who struggled in school. Talking about a young man with LD, he related: “There was this boy ... And he was hitting in the cage, but he was just missing everything ... And I was the assistant coach ... and I looked at him and I said: ‘Ryan, ... I have to tell you something. Do you want me to tell you now or after?’ ... And his eyes widened and he said: ‘After.’ He comes out of the cage and I said: ‘Do you know why I asked you that question?’ And he said: ‘No.’ And I said: ‘I can tell you have anxiety right now through sports.’ I learned at a young age that some students adapt better when you tell them afterwards instead of during. I said: ‘If I went into that cage and tried to fix something ... you would have been all bottled up.’ That was one of those moments when I realized ... what his learning style was. And a couple of days later ... he came up to me ... and said: ‘I really appreciate what you did Wednesday night ... It made me feel comfortable.’ And that’s the biggest thing – giving back to these kids” (154).

Personality

A big part of the interview consisted of Brandon’s explanations about how baseball molded his personality. “People will never understand how much of that sport impacted my life” (144). Even though his professional career had to end after only two years, he repeatedly expressed his gratitude for how the sport had formed him during that time: “And I have to appreciate those moments and smile because I remember when I was that kid asking: ‘Hey ... can I get an autograph?’ And I remember my first autograph I gave ... And it was nice ... I’ll always appreciate those moments and you know what I mean – to be able to go that far in play. And there’s nothing like it” (160).

Brandon adopted and cultivated a very distinct glass-half-full mentality. Reflecting on the early part of his career, he explained: “I wanted the whole pie, but God gave me a slice. And I have to be happy with that. And some people don’t even get a slice, some people don’t even get to college to play ball. And for me to play professional for two years and to be able to ... hang my three jerseys

in my room and ... look at them every night and be proud that I ... played professional. At the end of the day that's all that matters in life and that I accomplished one of my dreams. And now I can move forward and give back to people ... So that's pretty much sums up my story about baseball" (116).

It seemed as if he was able to make peace with his past and all the troubling times in his childhood and youth as an isolated student with dyslexia. During one pivotal moment of the interview, Brandon recalled his last game as a baseball player: "I struck out the side against the team that won the championship last year. And I'm walking off that mound and people were like cheering my name and stuff ... that was one of the most powerful moments. Because God knew that was my last game. And I didn't" (154). He recollected that he always wanted to be noticed and valued. Baseball gave him what other areas of life could not: "All my life with dyslexia, I just wanted to be heard. And, when I finally felt like I got to be heard, it was my last day of pitching professionally, when everyone was calling my name ... And I always want to be heard and people to hear me like: 'I'm struggling I want people to notice me.' And then my last game I played professionally, people were cheering and giving me hugs and high fives. And I finally set aside that moment, when I walked off the mound ... That's something I'll always cherish, I'll always look back to. Like, I always want to be heard in life, but I actually felt like I got heard that day. That was the last day I played ball" (154).

Brandon believed that experiences like this allowed him to develop a generous personality: "I realized, not every slice is about you. Other slices could be for other people" (156). With his slice, he had the opportunity to help and encourage children with learning problems who have received less support than he did then: "God was showing me that baseball wasn't all my life; that there's more purpose for me in my life than just throwing a ball" (156). The conclusion that Brandon drew about the significance that baseball played for him was summarized in one sentence: "Sports saved my life – if I had no sports, I wouldn't be here" (128).

DISCUSSION

Main Findings

The purpose of our qualitative case study was to gain insights into how baseball can help young people with LD manage their lives and handle obstacles in their way. Our interview partner was a 27-year-old man with dyslexia who struggled severely in middle and high school. However, through his involvement in baseball, he was able to find happiness and contentment. He discovered a sport that he could excel in and where his talent was recognized. Crucial for this positive development were his mother, his grandfather, and one particular high school coach. They sparked an interest in baseball in him and placed him in the

right situations for his potential to unfold. His talent, coupled with an immovable determination, resulted in a short but remarkable career that helped him to not define himself solely by his disability and to feel a deep gratitude for his life.

Our findings are not surprising. They square well with the results from the previously mentioned resilience study by Werner (2005), who identified certain protective factors in the individual, the family, and the community that enable one to cope and recover from problems and challenges. In the case of Brandon, it is easy to recognize all of these conditions or attributes in the accounts of his life. What is novel to our study is the insight gained on how these resources can be activated in young people with LD through baseball. Brandon developed a strong sense of self-efficacy through his participation in sports camps, in physical education, and in high school, college, and professional teams (protective factors in the individual). He had a loving family with strong values and a very special relationship with his grandfather who got him interested in baseball (protective factors in the family). Finally, he was able to rely on a net of friends on his teams for help and one particular coach who believed in him (protective factors in the community).

Limitations

Qualitative studies like ours provide analytical results but no statistically generalizable findings. Our participant was very communicative and eloquent, providing a good amount of verbal data that served as a basis for trying to reconstruct how he perceived his world and to develop ideas about how baseball can serve as a tool for personal growth. However, the value of a single qualitative analysis based on only one interview is clearly limited. More research like ours is needed to confirm the patterns that seemed to emerge from the conversation with Brandon.

In addition, a study like this can only take interim stock of Brandon's situation. As mentioned, he was 27 at the time of the interview. Even though his life had turned out very positively up to that point, there is no way to predict what his future has in store for him. We can only postulate suppositions about what helped Brandon up to now.

Implications and Future Research

Regardless of any shortcomings of our study, it seems critical to focus research attention on how to support young people with LD in finding psychological stability in life and to build social relationships that sustain them emotionally. As outlined above, science in general has helped improve external living conditions for people around the world, especially during recent decades. However, subjective well-being has not increased to the same extent. In fact, research indicates that it has even been declining lately (see above). With regard to individuals with LD, we know a lot today about how to support them in their academic struggles. A computer search in the databases Academic Search

Complete, ERIC, and PsycINFO using the terms *learning disabilities* AND *meta-analysis* OR *literature review* in the title field yields nearly 700 hits (as of September 30, 2020). This means that we have a solid and broad base of systematic syntheses of individual studies dealing with different topics around the phenomenon of low academic achievement. Almost all of these publications focus on ways to help students with severe difficulties in reading, spelling, writing, and math perform better.

However, the question of how to increase the emotional well-being of people with LD has not received the same degree of research attention. It is a worthwhile endeavor to accumulate more and more knowledge about how to teach struggling children and youth basic academic skills, especially if it involves cooperative grouping for interactive learning in inclusive classrooms. Students with LD might be able to participate well in the various activities and feel like they are part of what is going on. But every lesson eventually comes to an end and the school bell will mark the close of the school day. And at some point, students will leave the classroom and school for good. As outlined earlier, loneliness and social exclusion are among the most common concomitants of LD (e.g., Katz & Katz, 2013; Lackaye & Margalit, 2008; Musetti et al., 2019). Tilly (2019) fittingly entitled her paper on the ostracism of this group from mainstream society: “Afraid to leave the house: Issues leading to social exclusion and loneliness for people with a learning disability.” Individuals with severe academic challenges often experience an unusual amount of isolation, which can have a devastating negative effect on their psychic balance.

Taylor Duncan, founder and CEO of the Alternative Baseball Organization, hit the mark when he explained: “Life itself is a big challenge, no matter where you go and how you look at it. We have to arm young people with special needs with as many life skills as possible and enable them to execute them on their own... You need to be prepared for how to tackle life’s challenges on your own and with a network of friends that you have built yourself” (Grünke, 2020, p. 114). It is vital to come up with ways to equip young people with LD with resilience to raise their self-esteem, mental health, and overall well-being. Duncan elaborates further on this by saying: “A lot of them won’t know where to go, because they haven’t been taught the skills to be independent. That’s where baseball comes in. We’re teaching them life skills through baseball. We show them how to work together as a team so that maybe they can translate those skills into other life areas” (ebd., p. 114).

Admittedly, baseball is only one of many means to potentially help children, youth, and young adults with LD find their place in life. However, team sports are one of the best ways to bring people together, to create a sense of belonging, and to develop collaboration skills (Ohtake, 2004). What makes

baseball unique is the fact that it is a team sport played individually. Brandon pointed out that – unlike in other team sports – America’s pastime tends to place more emphasis on “what’s on your back than what’s on your front” (146). That is, while you are working as a team towards a mutual goal, almost all of the various statistics used to keep track of a game reflect the performance of individual athletes, the core being the battle between one pitcher and one batter. One’s success or failure is clearly on display for everyone to see and cannot be shifted to others on the team. For example, pitchers’ and batters’ accomplishments are measured by a whole array of metrics, like earned runs times innings in a game divided by innings pitched or hits divided by at bats, making it possible to pinpoint who contributed what to a win or a loss. At the same time, teammates must constantly support and encourage each other if they want to eventually walk away victorious.

Another characteristic that has to be mentioned in this context is the fact that success is unusually hard earned in baseball. As Theodore Williams, former MLB player and Baseball Hall of Famer, put it, “Baseball is the only field of endeavor where a man can succeed three times out of ten and be considered a good performer” (Dickson, 2011, p. 236). Hitting a baseball with a round bat that is coming in at a rate of 90 to 100 miles per hour is extraordinarily challenging. If someone finally succeeds at it and “gets on base,” he or she has accomplished something remarkable. Yet, even such an achievement is eventually not worth anything if no one can take advantage of this partial success and score a run.

Individuals with LD usually have to work harder than most everybody else to get to where they want to be. Reading, spelling, writing, or numeracy typically does not come natural to them. Outside of the classroom, making friends, finding love, or getting employment is much more challenging for them than for others. Their road is paved with frustration. Through baseball, they get used to not lose sight of their goal despite frequent experience of failure. Surely, pursuing this sport is only one of many options to teach valuable live lessons to youngsters with LD and prepare them for what is coming. However, the case study of Brandon convincingly demonstrates what an involvement in this game can bring about in the life of a young person with severe learning difficulties. What is especially notable about our participant is that he expressed repeatedly how he has not only managed to cope with a bumpy road, but also often been able to walk it with a happy bounce in his step. Baseball gave him what other areas in his life could not. During different moments of the interview, Brandon expressed his deep gratitude that he got “a slice of the pie” (156). He felt happy and content about his achievements in life, which were mainly associated with his career as an athlete. In a crucial moment of the conversation, he elaborated: “All my life with dyslexia, I just wanted to be heard. And, when I finally felt like

I got to be heard, it was my last day of pitching professionally, when everyone was calling my name” (154).

Our study illustrates how baseball can help to find healthy social acceptance and offers opportunities to be part of a group that provides support. In addition, it teaches valuable life lessons about personal responsibility and prepares for the many situations where success does not come easy. Brandon put the significance of his involvement in the game against the background of his many struggles and challenges in a nutshell when he expressed: “Sports saved my life” (128).

Initiatives like the Alternative Baseball Organization, the Miracle League of Arizona, or the Butler County Challenger Baseball have to be highly commended. They are designed to lower the hurdles for young people with special needs to join a team and actively participate in the game. Not everyone is equipped with such an outstanding talent as Brandon. However, for somebody else, the opportunities to learn and connect might be just as valuable as they have been for our participant. This is why it is so important to give every young person with LD the opportunity to find an outlet in life to express her- or himself. For many, baseball can be a wonderful tool to serve this purpose. But even for somebody as capable as Brandon, getting involved in the sport was not enough. It took a skilled and empathic coach to see through Brandon’s LD, recognize his gift, and to competently facilitate his exceptional aptitude for sport. In his illuminating essay entitled “Learning disabilities and player development: Understanding obstacles to coaching,” Epstein (2018) describes frequent language and math barriers that athletes with LD face as coaches give them instructions. Despite sometimes very distinguished pitching or batting abilities, these players are often grossly underestimated and cut from a team. Using simple language, visual aids, videos, and multiple repetitions can make an enormous difference when explaining a game plan or helping someone to make sense of different baseball metrics.

Conclusion

We hope that more research on how to support young people with LD outside the classroom will emerge. If we find ways to involve more of these individuals in activities that make them more robust against life’s stressors and help them to mobilize social relations, we have made an important step toward easing the suffering of a group of people that typically experiences an unusual amount of hardships. For Brandon, baseball was a lifesaver. Excelling in the game gave him the chance to build an identity independent from what otherwise seemed to define him to a large extent. Before his career as an athlete, he was mainly viewed as someone who could not read or write properly. This view of him changed as he became more and more involved in baseball. Brandon phrased it best when he said, “I went on the mound and I felt like I didn’t have a learning disability. It didn’t matter” (154).

REFERENCES

- Aro, T., Eklund, K., Eloranta, A.-K., Närhi, V., Korhonen, E., & Ahonen, T. (2019). Associations between childhood learning disabilities and adult-age mental health problems, lack of education, and unemployment. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 52*(1), 71–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022219418775118>
- Bagnato, K. (2020). Coping strategies of primary school students with specific learning disabilities. In Information Resources Management Association (Ed.), *Accessibility and diversity in education: Breakthroughs in research and practice* (pp. 356–367). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-1213-5.ch018>
- Chandler, R. (2014). Teachers' beliefs about poverty and the impact on learning disabilities identification in a poor, rural school district. *Rural Educator, 35*(3), 31–39. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v35i3.347>
- Clifford, C., & Feezell, R. M. (2009). *Sport and character: Reclaiming the principles of sportsmanship*. Human Kinetics.
- Deuster, P. A., & Silverman, M. N. (2013). Physical fitness: A pathway to health and resilience. *US Army Medical Department Journal, 8*(4), 24–35.
- Dickson, P. (2011). *Baseball is ...* Dover.
- Epstein, D. (2018). *Learning disabilities and player development: Understanding obstacles to coaching*. <https://www.beyondtheboxscore.com/2018/11/26/18110937/how-learning-disabilities-impact-player-development-mlb-milb-minors-prospects-coaching-obstacles>
- Fattig-Smith, M. (2005). *IDEA 2004: Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act*. Author House.
- Fergus S., & Zimmerman, M. A. (2005). Adolescent resilience: A framework for understanding healthy development in the face of risk. *Annual Review Public Health, 26*(1), 399–419. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.26.021304.144357>
- Firth, N., Greaves, D., & Frydenberg, E. (2010). Coping styles and strategies: A comparison of adolescent students with and without learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 43*(1), 77–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022219409345010>
- Franz, C., Ascherman, L., & Shaftel, J. (2017). *A clinician's guide to learning disabilities*. Oxford University Press.
- Grünke, M. (2020). The sky is the limit: An interview with Taylor Duncan on what baseball can do to help young people with disabilities reach their potential. *Insights into Learning Disabilities, 17*(2), 139-145.
- Grünke, M., & Martis, S. (2020). The inclusive power of baseball: How a game can help people with learning disabilities move away from the fringes of society. *Insights into Learning Disabilities, 17*(1), 87–97.
- Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., Sachs, J. D., & De Neve, J. E. (2020). *World happiness report 2020*. Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
- Hogg, J., Campbell, M., Cullen, C., & Hudson, W. (2001). Evaluation of the effect of an open learning course on staff knowledge and attitudes towards the sexual abuse of adults with learning disabilities. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities, 14*(1), 12–29. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1468-3148.2001.00049.x>
- Holmes, T. H., & Rahe, R. H. (1967). The Social Readjustment Rating Scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 11*(2), 213–218. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-3999\(67\)90010-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-3999(67)90010-4)
- Kate, T. (2002). *Building resilient students: Integrating resiliency into what you already know and do*. Corwin.
- Katz, S., & Katz, S. (2013). Assessing the loneliness of workers with learning disabilities. *The British Journal of Development Disabilities, 48*(2), 91–94. <https://doi.org/10.1179/096979502799104184>

- Lackaye, T., & Margalit, M. (2008). Self-efficacy, loneliness, effort, and hope: Developmental differences in the experiences of students with learning disabilities and their non-learning disabled peers at two age groups. *Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal*, 6(2), 1–20.
- Lumpkin, A., & Favor, J. (2012). Comparing the academic performance of high school athletes and non-athletes in Kansas in 2008-2009. *Journal of Sport Administration and Supervision*, 4(1), 41–62.
- Martin-Joy, J. S., Malone, J. C., Cui, X. J., Johansen, P. Ø., Hill, K. P., Rahman, M. O., Waldinger, R. J., & Vaillant, G. E. (2017). Development of adaptive coping from mid to late life: A 70-year longitudinal study of defense maturity and its psychosocial correlates. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 205(9), 685–691. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0000000000000711>
- McMahon, B. T., McMahon, M. C., West, S. L., & Conway, J. P., & Lemieux, M. (2017). The nature of allegations of workplace discrimination for Americans with learning disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 46(1), 31–37. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-160840>
- McMahon, M. C., McMahon, B. T., West, S. L., & Conway, J. P. (2016). Workplace discrimination and learning disabilities in America: Characteristics of the charging parties. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 45(3), 295–300. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-160830>
- Miller-Karas, E. (2015). *Building resilience to trauma: The trauma and community resiliency models*. Routledge.
- Musetti, A., Eboli, G., Cavallini, F., & Corsano, P. (2019). Social relationships, self-esteem, and loneliness in adolescents with learning disabilities. *Clinical Neuropsychiatry*, 16(4), 133–140.
- Odaci, H., & Cikrikci, Ö. (2012). University students' ways of coping with stress, life satisfaction and subjective well-being. *Online Journal of Counseling & Education*, 1(3), 117–130.
- Ohtake, Y. (2004). Meaningful inclusion of all students in tea, sports. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 37(2), 22–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004005990403700203>
- Özdemir, F. (2017). Relationship between coping strategies and subjective well-being at different levels of relative deprivation. *Psikiyatride Guncel Yaklasimlar*, 11(1), 234–245. <https://doi.org/10.18863/pgy.616916>
- Pallisera, M. (2011). Transition scenarios for young people with learning disabilities in Spain. Relationships and discrepancies. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 26(4), 495–507. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2011.597187>
- Patalay, P., & Gage, S.H. (2019). Changes in millennial adolescent mental health and health-related behaviours over 10 years: A population cohort comparison study. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 48(5), 1650–1664. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyz006>
- Pavri, S., & Monda-Amaya, L. (2010). Loneliness and students with learning disabilities in inclusive classrooms: Self-perceptions, coping strategies, and preferred interventions. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 15(1), 22–33. https://doi.org/10.1207/SLDRP1501_3
- Perry, D. (2011). *Caring for the physical and mental health of people with learning disabilities*. Jessica Kingsley.
- Purtill, R. (1970). The purpose of science. *Philosophy of Science*, 37(2), 301–306. <https://doi.org/10.1086/288303>
- Rosling, H. (2018). *Factfulness: Ten reasons we're wrong about the world – and why things are better than you think*. Flatiron Books.
- Ryu, G. W., Yang, Y. S., & Choi, M. (2020). Mediating role of coping style on the relationship between job stress and subjective well-being among Korean police officers. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-08546-3>

- Sagone, E. (2017). The role of coping strategies in life satisfaction and psychological well-being: An investigation with deaf and hearing parents. *Life Span and Disability*, 20(2), 273–298.
- Schoenfeld, E., & Mestrovic, S.G. (1991). From the sacred collectivity to the sacred individual: The misunderstood Durkheimian legacy. *Sociological Focus*, 24(2), 83–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.1991.10570582>
- Tilly, L. (2019). Afraid to leave the house: Issues leading to social exclusion and loneliness for people with a learning disability. *Tizard Learning Disability Review*, 24(4), 168–175. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TLDR-02-2019-0005>
- Twenge, J., Sherman, R., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2015). More happiness for young people and less for mature adults. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 7(2), 131–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550615602933>
- Werner, E. E. (2005). What can we learn about resilience from largescale longitudinal studies? In S. Goldstein & R. Brooks (Eds.), *Handbook of resilience in children* (pp. 91–106). Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Yitzchak, F. (2014). *Specific learning disabilities*. Oxford University Press.

AUTHORS' NOTE

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Matthias Grünke, Department of Special Education & Rehabilitation, University of Cologne, Klosterstr. 79b, Cologne, Northrhine-Westfalia, 50931, Germany, E-mail: matthias.gruenke@uni-koeln.de.