VYTAUTO DIDŽIOJO
UNIVERSITETO
ŠVIETIMO
AKADEMIJA

# Mutual Support Phenomenon: Voices of Students With Written Language Disorders

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**Annotation.** Adopting a phenomenological approach, this study analyses the "children's voice" which reveals how children experience the defining experiences of a written language disorder and gives meaning to the phenomenon of mutual support. The results of the study present the components of the mutual support phenomenon, through which the interpretation of their understanding is revealed: being empathetic, seeking recognition in the community, modelling learning activities, interpreting learning support.

**Keywords:** *"children's voice", learning activities, learning support, status in the community, written language disorder.*

## Introduction

Children's ability to use language is developed in a holistic way, with the ability to recognise the meanings and nuances of concepts, listen, reflect, express themselves, take an interest in written language, and understand symbols (Brodin & Renblad, 2020). Children's language development cannot be separated from their language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Sajedi et al., 2015), and their interpretation of language through hand movements and gestures (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). Despite the fact that digital technologies are increasingly facilitating writing processes, knowledge and ability to write in written language are still relevant parts of everyday school life (McMaster & Roberts, 2016) and serve as an important prerequisite for academic success at school, university, and

most workplaces (McCloskey & Rapp, 2017). The ability to speak, to express thoughts verbally, plays an important role not only in learning but also in building social relationships (Feldman, 2005). Learning to communicate in a language is one of the most important stages in a person's life (Reilly et al., 2015).

Written language combines the processes of writing and reading. It is a complex, multifaceted structure involving the construction of the sound sequence of words, the writing of words, the application of grammatical forms, and the conveyance of thought (Blood et al., 2010). Karlsdottir & Stefansson (2002), Racine et al. (2008) report that about 30% of children with normal development have difficulties in learning to write, and about 10% of these children have severe and persistent difficulties that are experienced in a variety of life situations. According to Chung et al. (2020), up to 30–47% of children who encounter difficulties in writing also have problems in reading. This is explained by the significant relationship between the components of the language system: spoken language, reading, and writing (Kim et al., 2014; Spencer & Petersen, 2018; Chung et al., 2020; Petersen et al., 2022). Neuroscientific studies have shown that cerebral cortical dysfunction is not confined to isolated areas. Overlapping mechanisms affect different cognitive functions, resulting in learning difficulties among these children across a range of learning domains (Peters & Ansari, 2019). It is likely that when difficulties occur in one of the language systems (spoken language, reading, or writing), they are also present or will be present in the other two systems (Kim et al., 2014; Spencer & Petersen, 2018; Petersen et al., 2022).

Written language disorders affect the development of a child's personality. Research studies show that students with reading and writing disorders have lower self-esteem, more severe distress, high levels of social pretension and defensiveness, greater dependence on adults, and a tendency towards low self-esteem compared to their peers (Matsyuk & Yelagina, 2020). Consistent failure in learning negatively affects the children's motivation to learn and promotes avoidance of participation in learning (Gargot et al., 2021). However, with the right support, many of these disorders can be minimised (Duff et al., 2008). The research results show that the earlier the speech and language disorders are identified, the better long-term educational, mental, and emotional outcomes will be achieved (Roitsch, 2020); moreover, improvement in one area can lead to growth in another (Petersen et al., 2022).

Speech, language, and written expression disorders are common problems in the learning process but tend to be interpreted by the school and the family as character deficiencies (Chung et al., 2020). A common reason for not understanding children's problems is that children's voices are ignored or considered only superficially (Whitty & Wisby, 2007; Singer, 2014). Research shows that young children are rarely involved in research because they have the potential to provide meaningful insight into science (Conroy & Harcourt, 2010). These children are granted a say in simple everyday matters such as what to eat or what to wear but are not asked for their opinion on issues

that are important in their lives, such as which school to go to (Pekince & Avci, 2018). Yet, children's opinions, as part of the context in which their personality develops, are of great importance, sometimes determining their social participation (Hellmich & Loeper, 2019). Although the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) gives children the right to express their views in a way that suits them and to be heard before decisions that affect them are taken, there is a lack of agreement on what counts as the "children's voice", and as a result, children's views are often ignored or poorly respected (Murray, 2019). Adult researchers can establish facts about children's actions and words; however, not knowing the children and their context, they can only make assumptions when interpreting the children's actions or words, without always avoiding misinterpretations. Such assumptions provide poor evidence, which, if used in policy making, can lead to services for children that are not based on what children really want or need (Murray, 2017; 2019). Meanwhile, active listening to the "children's voice" is an excellent opportunity to know and understand children's needs and to create favourable conditions for the development and learning of each child (Murray, 2017; 2019). It is, therefore, important that children-related research is conducted together with the children (Murray, 2017).

The previous studies on "children's voice" show that students with learning disabilities have the same needs as their peers without disabilities. Recognition of their status is crucial for them (Grobler & Wessels, 2020). These students appreciate relationships with teachers to whom they feel close and do not justify punishing or ignoring students with difficulties. These students particularly value the recognition of student diversity and the fostering of close relationships within the student-teacher community (Ramírez-Casas del Valle et al., 2021). They see themselves as playing a valuable role in their schools and community, and maintaining good relationships (Bonati & Andriana, 2021). In favourable contexts, such as when using information technology, they characterise themselves as creative, hard-working, eager to learn, and comfortable with the learning process (Schock & Lee, 2016). Although children have been more actively involved in research over the last few decades (Kalenjuk et al., 2023), there are still few studies that have explored the voices of children with disabilities (Templeton et al., 2023; Montreuil et al., 2021).

*The aim of the research* is to respond to the question of how the mutual support phenomenon reveals itself in the experience the pupils encounter when striving to overcome difficulties caused by written language disorder.

## Research Methodology

*Research design.* The research is constructed based on a phenomenological approach, which provides an understanding of the phenomena through which meanings and

relationships emerge in our interactions with each other and with the world around us (Vagle, 2014). The study of phenomena and the meanings that surround them attempts to explain the essence of phenomena and to understand the complexity of the experience lived (Fuster-Guillen, 2019). It uses the method of hermeneutic phenomenology in pedagogy, which, as Van Manen (2016; 2023) and Fuster-Guillen (2019) argue, analyses the basic structures of pedagogy, and explains them, but does not limit itself to presenting new educational alternatives, but rather focuses on reflexive justification of these alternatives, thus providing educational value and direction for the pedagogical interactions with the students. In this study, the phenomenon of mutual support among children with written language disorder is analysed, which reflects the children's well-being, perception of quality of life, and attitudes towards the possibility of solving the problem, through the children's reflections on offering support to a friend who is experiencing the same situation of failure as they do.

*Research data collection and procedure.* To obtain maximum authenticity in the children's voice and to avoid any influence of the researcher on the children's deliberations, the interview method, which is more common in phenomenological research, was replaced with the children's essay method. This method allows the children to speak freely about their experiences and share their insights (Elliott & Morrow, 2007).

As part of the curriculum, fifth and sixth grade students (aged 11–12) from two Lithuanian schools were invited to watch the play "Kisses, Oscar" based on the novel "Oscar and the Lady in Pink" by Eric-Emmanuel Smitt. The content of the performance is based on twelve letters written to God by a ten-year-old boy dying of cancer. In his letters, Oscar reflects on twelve days of his life, full of hope, anticipation, love, and hatred. After watching the performance, during the Lithuanian language lesson, the children shared their ideas on what they went through during the performance, reflecting on Oscar's experiences, sharing their own insights, and reflecting on situations of difficulty and need for help. During the following lesson, the Lithuanian language teacher gave the children a letter from a boy named Matas, who asks for advice from his peers because he is failing to learn to write without mistakes and read fluently. In response to Matas' letter, the students were invited to write an essay titled "A Letter of Help", sharing their insights, ideas, or experiences. In this way, children with a written language disorder, for whom Matas' situation is familiar and personally experienced, shifted from the role of a weak child with difficulties to the role of the stronger one, with the competence to advise others. The title of the essay directed the children's thoughts towards the aim of the research.

*Participants and research context.* The essay was written by 216 5th–6th grade students. For the analysis of this study, the teacher selected 20 essays written by students with writing and reading disorders, as confirmed by the Pedagogical Psychological Service. The essays were presented to the researchers depersonalised and coded (S1, S2, etc., where the letter S stands for the student and the number stands for the essay number).

It was assumed that the students would draw on their own personal experiences in the essays, reflecting on their own practices, experiences, and understanding of coping with difficulties.

*The data analysis process.* The method of hermeneutic phenomenology was used to analyse the data, delving into the research data in stages (Fuster-Guillen, 2019):

1. ***Overview of the research material.*** Reading essays in order to review all available research material.
2. ***Collecting students' lived experiences.*** Reading the students' essays again with the goal of feeling and understanding the ideas they have expressed and hidden between the lines. Attempting to enter the world of the children involved in the research.
3. ***Reflecting on and structuring each experience.*** Attempting to delve deeper into the students' specific experiences and ideas when reading the students' letters, structuring them, and looking for meanings that emerge from the situations lived that the children in the study talk about. Trying to reflect the underlying meanings of the experiences analysed by looking for contradictions and unexpected tendencies. The emerging meanings of students' experience is structured into generalised experiential components.
4. ***Producing a phenomenological text.*** The aim is to integrate the different parts of the reflective experience into a whole, highlighting the essence and meanings of the phenomenon in question, which could inspire teachers to interact in a targeted way with their students in order to address the problems posed by written language disorders.

*Research ethics.* The study was consistent with the basic ethical principles of socio-educational research: voluntary participation, respect for personal privacy, confidentiality and anonymity, non-harming the research participant, and justice (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). The study analysed anonymous students' essays. The students were not directly involved in the study. In accordance with the principles of professionalism and ethics in research on the humanities and social sciences, prior to the study, school leaders and parents of students, in consultation with their children, confirmed in writing their consent to the right to analyse students' essays. All data from the study are depersonalised. Access to the data is restricted to the authors of this study.

*Limitations and implications for further research.* This study explores the "children's voices" that reflect the meanings given to the phenomenon of mutual support by school-children with a written language disorder. The results of the phenomenological study provide subjective interpretations, without aiming at purified objectivity but rather complementing the results of other available studies or raising new questions that require further research. This study involves learners from two schools of Lithuania and reflects their experiences in a specific educational context.

The results of this study encourage further research into effective ways of helping students to overcome written language disorder and other learning difficulties, to understand the nature of their disabilities, and ways of peer and self-help. It is important to model systems for the targeted participation of parents and other family members in helping their children, based on research evidence. It is important to further develop educational organisation strategies that reinforce meaningful learning experiences with peers without feelings of inferiority.

## Findings

Reading the children's essays, where they describe their personal experiences, or these experiences are reflected in the advice given to a child with similar difficulties, revealed the feelings, interactions, and ideas that the students experience. Grouped into structured experiential components for analysis, they highlight the experiences of children with written language disorder, the way they experience the disorder, and the phenomenon of mutual support (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**
*The Structure of the Phenomenon of Mutual Support*
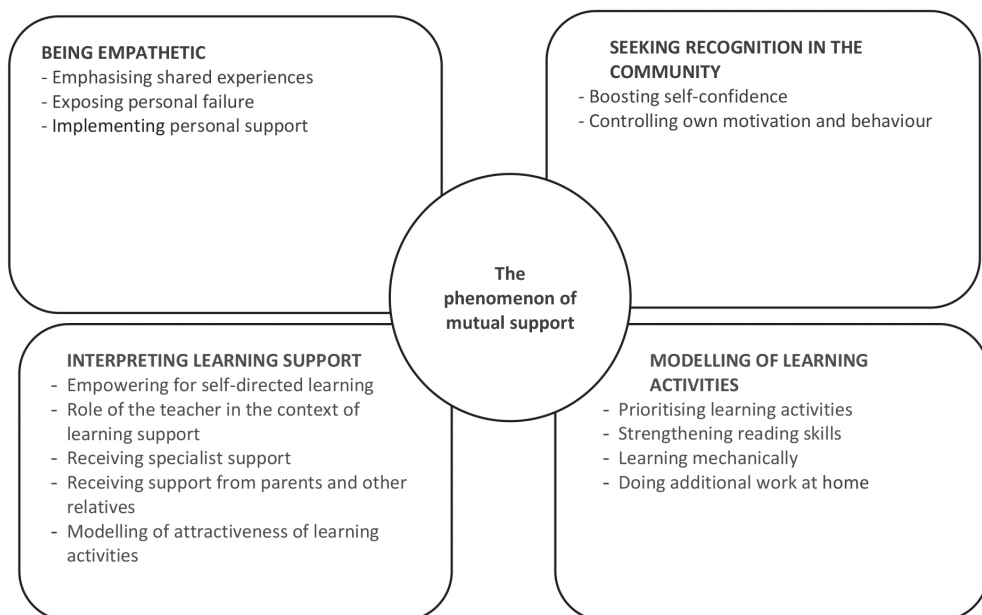
### Empathy and Self-Identification

The theme of empathy for a child in difficulty is clearly highlighted in the students' essays "A Letter of Help". It is revealed in discussing the identification of the student's own experiences or the situation of the child asking for support.

***Emphasising shared experiences.*** In their letters, every student emphasises first and foremost the child's interest and ability to play football successfully: *"Hi Matas! It's great that you're doing well in football."* (M4) and the nature of his success: *"Hasn't your team lost yet?"* (M7). Most students relate this child's strength to their own hobbies and successful activities, highlighting the same skill - playing football – or another activity that they enjoy and find successful. *"I read your letter and I realised that you like football, and I like football too. But it's a pity that there is no football club in my school. As I told you, I like football, I also like drawing, and I like horses."* (M9). Despite the fact that the main focus of the letter written to Matas is placed on his expectation to receive advice to help him overcome a problem that is distressing the child, the students primarily focus on the component of success, not only by emphasising the boy's strength but also by linking it to their own activities in which they experience success. This finding suggests that the experience of success is a key component for students with written language disorders on their scale of activities and experiences lived.

***Revealing a personal failure.*** Meanwhile, the failure of the student asking for help is mentioned only in a few essays of the students with written language disorders, and it is not highlighted: *"I realised that you are not very good at Lithuanian."* (M5), or expressed in a sympathetic way, while at the same time echoing one's own feelings after imagining the situation: *"It made me sad when I found out why you were writing me."* (M6). Even fewer of them admit that they have the same difficulties. They put their failures in the context of their successes, stressing their hobbies: *"I like drawing, singing, dancing, helping my mother, but there is one problem, sometimes I don't do well at school with English and maths."* (M7), or overcoming the difficulties they experience: *"I have started to read books, and I am getting better at them."* (M12). The discussion of the students' personal difficulties shows that the students do not tend to emphasise the fact that they are failing, but their proposed recommendations for overcoming the difficulties, which will be discussed below, clearly illustrate a strong sense and understanding of their relevance.

***Realising personal assistance.*** The students willingly adopt the role of advisor in their essays to Matas. In giving advice, they focus on the expected result: *"I would like to advise you on how to learn better."* (M7). They understand the value of their advice and their role as help-givers: *"I hope you won't forget my advice!"* (M8). By adopting this

role, they also assume responsibility and the expectation of a quality result. They tend to appreciate the value of the advice given, receiving feedback such as *"I'll be looking forward to your letter."* (M5), and expecting a significant change in the situation of a child in difficulty: *"I hope you'll write next time to tell me how well you are doing in school!"* (M6). By adopting this role, they also undertake responsibility and express the expectation of a quality result. They tend to appreciate the value of the advice given, expect to receive feedback: *"I'll be looking forward to your letter."* (M5), and to see a significant change in the situation of a child in difficulty: *"I hope you'll write to me next time to tell me how well you are doing at school!"* (M6).

The reactions of students with learning difficulties to the experiences of another child show empathy expressed through positive attitudes, recognition of abilities and successes, confidence, and emphasis on personal identity in successful situations. When addressing the situation of a child with learning difficulties, they avoid being sympathetic or emphasising the problem, but stress the meaning of success. This result suggests that for these children, any experience and recognition of success, even if it is not related to overcoming the problem they are facing, is very important for their well-being.

### Seeking Recognition in the Community

The findings of this study show that for students with written language disorder, their status in the community is of utmost importance. They are not willing to accept their current situation and are considering options to construct their status.

***Boosting self-confidence.*** Students understand and emphasise the importance of self-awareness and recognising their own potential: *"You need to be more confident and listen more carefully to what the teacher says. Be more confident in yourself."* (M17). They recognise that self-confidence is not a fact in itself. It requires a targeted effort. Students consider the ability to assess a situation adequately to be very important for their self-confidence: *"If you are left after school to learn something you don't understand, it doesn't mean you were left after school because of your bad behaviour. So don't worry."* (M19). Understanding the feelings caused by failure, they point out that the student is not alone in resolving his/her problem. The teacher is there, but mutual trust is essential to recognise the reasons for a teacher's decision that is unpleasant for the student, but important for the quality of learning. Students are assured that cooperation with the teacher, self-confidence, and focused effort will bring the expected recognition.

***Self-control of motivation and behaviour.*** In the discourse of students with disorders in writing, there is a strong emphasis on the experience of learning failure, which is linked to the control of learning motivation and learning behaviours. They consider low motivation to learn as laziness to perform necessary activities: *"Don't be lazy. Don't be lazybones. You can't be lazy; you have to learn more."* (M20). On the one hand, students see the consequences of avoidance as limiting their ability to achieve higher learning

outcomes; on the other hand, they see the risk of developing an undesirable student character that will hinder the achievement of their goals: *"Don't be lazy because you will not learn."* (M2).

The behaviour in the classroom is considered by the students to be an important component of the learning outcome. Avoiding indifferent participation during lessons is a significant opportunity to overcome learning failures: *"Don't talk during lessons. Listen to the teacher. Don't talk during class. Don't misbehave. Just don't make noise in the classroom because you won't hear the rules."* (M16). Misbehaviour is seen by students as a barrier to understanding the content of learning but is acknowledged to be under the student's control. Self-control, from the point of view of the learners, requires effort but has a meaningful sense of *"Keep learning, don't give up."* (M3). Students suggest ways to focus on learning: *"You can make an effort, think about your lessons, read a lot."* (M2). Students think that focusing on their thoughts and engaging in purposeful learning activities should help them achieve their goals. When discussing the possible loss of motivation for learning and the manifestations of misbehaviour, students also express the belief that the good status in the learning processes of a student with written language disorders is not determined by the results achieved, but by the effort they put into their studies: *"If you try hard, you will be praised."* (M15). Students who are constantly confronted with learning barriers are aware of their demotivating effect, which also provokes difficulties with appropriate behaviour. They tend to assume responsibility for controlling motivation and behaviour.

### Modelling Learning Activities

Students' attitudes towards learning processes, participation, and taking responsibility for their own actions are very important issues in the students' discourse on overcoming the learning problem. When reflecting on the possibilities of overcoming learning difficulties due to written language disorder, students look for a solution by emphasising the intensity of learning processes.

***Prioritising learning activities.*** In the context of coping with learning difficulties, students rethink their priorities. There is a tendency towards intensification of learning activities in students' discourse. Although they discuss the hobby of playing football as a significant strength, an opportunity to express oneself, and to experience success, in the context of overcoming a learning difficulty they prioritise intensive work, partly treating a successful hobby as a possible obstacle to the expected result: *"You mentioned in your letter that you know how to play football, so you might as well play less football and focus more on your lessons."* (M11). *"It's great that you are good at football, but don't forget to study, football is not a science."* (M4). On the other hand, the possibility of a successful experience remains important for the students but is brought to a different level of priority: *"I think you should think less about football, listen to the teacher, and do your best to learn, but don't forget football."* (M9). Students choose the prioritisation criteria

on the basis of learning activities in order to engage in those learning activities and to take responsibility for solving the learning problem themselves. When reflecting on the processes of learning activities, they look for links between their favourite activities and learning activities, without changing the order of priorities: *"I'm glad that you are a good footballer and that you have a good understanding of football. Football requires a lot of attention, so it can also help you spot your mistakes in Lithuanian. But that is not enough."* (M12). Student insights show that students with learning difficulties understand the structure of the learning process, are able to evaluate the impact of their decisions on the learning outcome, reflect on their effectiveness, and choose the right tools: *"choose books for their age with the letters neither too small nor too big."* (M12). Reading plays a very important role in the order of priority for learning activities. Students associate the development of reading skills with the possibility of mastering written language.

***Strengthening reading skills.*** In the student discourse, one of the components of self-help in overcoming a written language disorder is identified with the reading activity: *"reading lots of books."* (M4). The suggestion to read intensively is made to Matas by the vast majority of students. However, their suggestions also include a discussion of reading techniques that are valuable for dealing with the problem. Students value slow and conscious reading to achieve a specific goal: *"Read books and take your time."* (M18), *"I suggest you read a lot of books to learn to read."* (M8). Learning to read well is one of the goals of children with written language disorders. Students emphasise the purposefulness of the process of learning to read, which is supported by the teacher's guidance in selecting the right material for reading: *"Read what the teacher asks you to read."* (M8). Students also emphasise deep reading techniques. They suggest reflecting on the rules while reading *"It is good to read books and have a rule book."* (M11). They base their recommendations for learning to read on their own practical experience: *"I started reading books and I got better. It wouldn't do any harm to you either, maybe it will be better."* (M8). Reading clearly plays a very important role in the process of addressing disorders in written language from the students' point of view and is discussed as a key priority.

***Mechanical learning.*** Mechanical learning is based on the practice of mechanical (literal) memorisation. It takes place when the learner does not understand the material or makes no effort to understand it. The material is repeated until associations of relatedness are formed (Jatautaitė, 2000, p. 181). When discussing the effectiveness of learning, students highlight the learning of individual components that they consider important for the quality of written language: *"Learn the alphabet, learn the verbs, pronouns, and diphthongs with the particle -si, learn the noun."* (M11). However, in focusing on certain topics, they do not elaborate on the grammatical structures and their learning parameters but stress the fact of learning, which is usually achieved by learning mechanically, by rote memorisation and constant repetition of the learnt material. *"Do your best in the dictation tests. Revise the material before tests. You need*

*to revise what you have learnt more often. Always do this because it helps me."* (M15). The students recognise the fact of error as a major obstacle to the experience of success, but they also propose a mechanical learning method to overcome it: *"Remember the mistakes so that you don't repeat them again. Remember mistakes so you don't make them. Memorise where you make mistakes and don't repeat them."* (M13). These reflections suggest that students identify the difficulties they experience with written language as a learning problem and tend to encourage more intensive mechanical learning processes.

***Additional work at home*** is a topic that is actively discussed in the student's discourse. Emphasising the consistency and intensity of learning activities and recognising the importance of formal activities, students with written language disorders suggest a variety of extra work activities, ranging from the specific learning-related ones: *"Do homework and additional tasks."* (M20), to the undefined leisure activity: *"Do homework and do sports really well."* (M18). Students consider sport and recreation combined with learning activities to be valuable in terms of the issue in question. Additional learning activities at home are supported by writing exercises. Dictation is one of the forms of writing exercises. The students also think that their writing should be intensive. This activity also involves parental support: *"I want to advise you to write about two short dictations a day at home together with your mom."* (M19). However, dictation is not confined to the mechanical writing down of a text by listening but is based on a conscious analysis of the written text, recognizing the correct and incorrect use of written language options, *"... be good at dictation and good at correcting mistakes."* (M11). When discussing forms of supplementary learning at home, students also see the relevance of mechanical work in rewriting texts from books: *"Write a lot from books."* (M7) or writing in fine print: *"Start writing calligraphically."* (M7). The students' recommendations for dealing with learning difficulties clearly reflect intensive, repetitive, written language-based activities.

### Interpreting Learning Support

***Empowering self-directed learning.*** When making recommendations for addressing learning difficulties, students focus on the child's own effort, determination, and perseverance to achieve their goals. They acknowledge failure but interpret its causes in the context of the learning process. Motivation to learn is key to success, but they see the possibility of success through the intensity of the learning activity: *"But the most important thing is to be eager to learn. If you want to be successful, then spend more time studying. Study as much as possible."* (M13). Children's greatest efforts to achieve self-directed learning are focused on empowering the student to engage in systematic, methodical self-control and participation in the learning process. They point to the need for voluntary control of attention, which is also linked to the management of possible overactivity: *"Don't daydream, write the dictation. Listen carefully. Be very attentive, concentrate, don't be distracted, be calmer."* (M3). Students associate the process of concentra-

tion of attention with the possibility of better volitional memorisation: *"Concentrate so you can remember better."* (M8). Although students place great emphasis on the intensity of the work, they suggest slowing down the pace of the work, understanding that calm, slow work helps to maintain concentration and gives time to reflect on the completed task: *"Don't rush to write, just think. Take your time. Slow down."* (M15). Students also underline mindfulness in learning and suggest strategies for returning to the current activity. In the context of slow learning, there is an opportunity to check, rethink, and retrace work and to notice weaknesses: *"When you do a task, always check yourself. Only carefully. I would advise you to be more attentive during lessons."* (M8). Students believe that attentiveness and concentration are prerequisites for learning success, while frequent failures provoke a desire to disengage from the activity. Students refer to this feeling as laziness and recognise it as a significant obstacle to learning success: *"Don't be lazy. Don't be lazybones. You can't be lazy; you have to study more. You must not be lazy or you will fail to learn."* (M20).

When discussing the issue of coping with learning difficulties, the students' discourse focuses on the quality of the child's own participation in learning processes and activities. Learning support is also discussed in the context of self-help and self-regulation rather than focusing on the possibility of external support. However, students do offer this possibility. The teacher is the main provider of assistance from the point of view of the students.

**Role of the teacher in the context of learning support.** When discussing the teacher's support, students express a high level of trust in the teacher and the teacher's willingness to help the student. The initiative to help is attributed to the teacher: *"When I am experiencing difficulties, the teacher comes to help me."* (M14), but students' confidence in the teacher encourages the child's own initiative in asking for help: *"Don't be afraid to ask the teacher, because she knows and will help you."* (M7). When discussing the teacher's support, students appeal to the teacher's expertise, expecting new, unusual, effective advice, more target-oriented than what they can offer, sharing their own experiences: *"Maybe the teacher will give you some other advice and it will help you."* (M14). Yet, the student's own activity in successfully using the teacher's help is an essential prerequisite: *"And above all, listen carefully to the teacher."* (M5). Students feel that they can get help from the teacher during the lesson but that it is also meaningful to work individually with the teacher after the lesson: *"Stay with the teacher after school."* (M5). Students associate teacher support with the possibility of more effective participation in learning processes.

**Specialist support.** It is reflected in student discourse but is not widely developed. On the other hand, students clearly recognise the effectiveness of this support. Students appreciate the fact that it is acknowledged and recommended by the teacher: *"Once we wrote a dictation in the classroom. And when the teacher corrected it, she noticed a lot of mistakes on my part. Then she told me to see a special teacher (a speech therapist).*

*I still see him. And I am doing much better in Lithuanian now."* (M12). It is important that the student is active in the speech therapy sessions. When recommending speech therapy, students emphasise the systematic nature of participation and the consistency of activities: *"I will advise you to go to the speech therapist and do what he or she says."* (M14). They do not expect a spontaneous result from speech therapy, the student's own efforts are necessary. Students see the help in the context of their overall learning activities. They relate the goals of speech therapy exercises to the goals of learning Lithuanian and discuss these activities as supplementary ones: *"If you really want to know Lithuanian well, do speech therapy exercises."* (M5). While acknowledging the effectiveness of speech therapy, the students emphasise the coherence of holistic learning. They particularly emphasise homework: *"... go to the speech therapist, it helps a lot, and remember to do your homework."* (M10). The data from this study are not sufficient to answer the question of why the discourse of students with difficulties in written language clearly highlights learning at home, but it can be assumed that they feel the most failure when studying independently.

***Support from parents and other relatives.*** Parents are the main providers of support in home education. However, the involvement of parents and the nature of co-learning are very poorly reflected in children's writing. The writings focus on instant parental help in case of specific difficulties: *"If you don't understand, ask your teacher or your mom and dad."* (M5). Other family members can also help with problems, for example, Grandma: *"Do your homework. If I don't do my homework, I call my grandmother."* (M6). Students refer to consistent learning with their parents in the form of dictation (see topic "Additional work at home"), and in other cases they mention parental help as a possibility, without specifying how it could be implemented: *"you can also learn with your parents."* (M6). The ideas proposed by students, often from their own personal experiences, show that there is no systematic parental support, coordinated with teachers or specialists, to overcome the written language disorder. Students also see the possibility of occasional help in the relationship with their siblings. However, they attribute this help to the practice of mechanical learning: *"If you have a sister or brother and you need to learn something by heart, try it with them."* (M17). The students' letters also suggest the idea of peer learning. For these students, collaborating with more gifted peers is acceptable and is linked to the practice of learning the subject (Lithuanian language): *"Meet friends who know a lot about the Lithuanian language."* (M1). Students' reflexions did not highlight the need for targeted support from parents and relatives in addressing the written language disorder. Students relate the way in which they address their difficulties to more general learning difficulties. However, they model and suggest interesting, age-appropriate activities that could reduce the tension and difficulties in learning.

***Modelling the attractiveness of learning activities.*** The students' discourse shows a sensitive understanding of the situation of a child in difficulty. For these children,

learning activities are challenging, often accompanied by failure, and therefore unattractive. A sensitive compassion and, at the same time, a strong support are evident in the children's discourse: *"You are still young and it is more interesting for you to play than to learn, so there are many games that are designed to develop your knowledge of the Lithuanian language."* (M18). They do not tend to attribute low motivation to learning difficulties, but explain it by a lack of appropriateness of the learning process to the age of the child, suggesting activities that are more suitable for the child's age and more effective in terms of learning: *"Well, if that sounds very boring to you, invite some good friends over and play some games to learn Lithuanian."* (M15). Students also observe the effect of contextuality on motivation and recommend using their own interests to make the activity more appealing: *"you can still write essays about football at home."* (M1). Recalling the hobbies of Matas, they consider the possibility of making the activity more meaningful. The content of the essays, related to an activity that is familiar to the child and has become a hobby, would help to focus and maintain attention in challenging activities.

## Discussion

The results of the study on children's voices provide insights into how students with written language disorder go through the disruptive experiences of the disorder and make sense of the mutual support. The phenomenon of mutual support in the experience of these children was manifested in four components of their life experience: being empathetic; seeking recognition in the community; modelling learning activities; and interpreting learning support.

An unexpected finding of this study is the strongly pronounced expression of children's empathy towards the child with learning difficulties, and its particular emphasis on the identity of the experience of success, on the prioritisation of participation in activities that lead to successful outcomes, and on the revelation of attitudes that are supportive and confidence-building. The emphasis on these meanings in relation to the others makes it possible to discern a deep, supportive prioritisation of the experience of success, which is significant for children's well-being and self-confidence. These children's experiences confirm Mitchel's (2022, p. 33) admonition to teachers: *"You develop positive self-beliefs in your students. You do this by encouraging and ensuring success."*.

The phenomenon of mutual support goes beyond the ability to address written language disorders. For these children, recognition of their status in the community is crucial. They take responsibility for creating their preferred status and hope to secure it through managing their emotions, will, and behaviour, and by increasing their self-management of learning. Children acknowledge the impact of self-control on their status in the classroom, but do not provide specific insight into its realisation. This

suggests that the issue of the status of children with learning difficulties in the classroom community is a very topical and complex one, requiring special attention from educators. Previous research (Florian & Black Hawkins, 2011; Isaksson & Lindqvist, 2015; Armstrong, 2021) has shown that seeking to cope with learning difficulties by providing support that differentiates those in need from the rest, by highlighting their otherness, and by ignoring the child's well-being in the peer group, does not lead to engagement as expected, but rather to exclusion and rejection. The findings of this study show that when students take on the role of a support provider, they first build an interpersonal relationship with the child in need, believing in and emphasising the possibility of expected progress.

Modelling learning activities is a very topical issue that students develop in the context of learning support. Intensity of learning is seen as an essential prerequisite for overcoming a learning problem. Learning is central to children's activities, but learning intensity is not synonymous with a high rate of learning. Students recognise the effectiveness of slow learning when there is enough time to reflect and understand. However, in detailing the learning methods, the emphasis falls on the mechanically learning the components of written language. Reading is the most frequently identified learning method to overcome written language disorders. Its effectiveness is highlighted by the recognition of written language structures. The monotonous nature of the students' learning styles shows that these students are not able to use scaffolding in their learning contexts and interactions and that they lack the variety of ways of learning that meet their needs. This choice of learning strategy could be explained by the results of a study by Geurten & Lemaire (2022), which show that children with learning disabilities are able to evaluate their choices of learning strategies but find it difficult to choose an appropriate learning strategy. The voices of children support Mitchell's (2020) assertion that these children do not require specific alternative learning strategies; yet, an educational strategy that uses a variety of learning strategies, from which the most appropriate ones are offered to them in a given learning context, enables these children to engage in the overall learning process and increases the learning effectiveness of all children.

Learning support in the experience of students with written language disorder emerges as a multifaceted support but with little coordination in the general learning context. This may be the reason the children identify help with self-help more, with a focus on regulating their own learning processes: work attitude, perseverance, motivation, and self-control. These results show that students' willingness to address learning difficulties reflects their attitudes towards self-directed learning. According to Scharle & Szabó (2000), self-directed learning takes place when a student is able to take responsibility for and participate in decisions about their learning. The results of this study show that children tend to take responsibility for how they learn, but do not consider how they could take responsibility for what they learn. They accept the teacher's help as an opportunity to

learn by working with the teacher and to turn to them when difficulties arise in the learning process. Children associate the focus and consistency of the help with speech therapy exercises, which can be applied to their learning of the Lithuanian language. Parental support at home is identified with solving immediate problems and practising writing. This evidence of the children's voices confirms the problem highlighted by the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, namely, that parents lack the competence to provide targeted and focused support to their children (Bond, 2020; Karasel et al., 2020; Parmigiani et al., 2020; Galkienė & Monkevičienė, 2023). Help from siblings and more capable classmates is also very acceptable, but it is episodic.

At the heart of the phenomenon of mutual support for students are tools that enhance motivation to learn, help them to engage in learning processes, and manage their emotions and behaviour. A meaningful, engaging, and accessible learning process could help students with written language disorder to overcome the feeling of emotional exclusion that is not expressed in words but is implied between the lines, participate in the learning process, and feel like fully-fledged members of the learning community.

## Conclusions

In the experiences the children go through when striving to overcome difficulties caused by the written language disorder, the mutual support phenomenon manifests itself through the intentional choice to not mention potential failure and to empathetically highlight success, as an attempt to give meaning to personal worth. This attempt constitutes the essence of the recognition in the classroom community, which is obtained via the efforts to overcome the potential demotivation to learn. The recognition of such efforts is so powerful that it results in the choice to limit one's favourite activity. The ideas that determine the learning success are named in the discourse of mutual support phenomenon as slow learning, intensive reading, doing dictation tests at home, and memorising grammar rules. In the experience of the children striving to overcome the difficulties caused by written language disorder, the participation of educators – teachers, specialists, and parents – is an important but not the main component of mutual support phenomenon. The main component is self-empowerment for winning.

The results of the research present the children's voice and highlight to teachers and parents that nurturing children's dignity in the community is no less important as a goal than tackling the consequences of written language disorder. Conditions that would ensure a possibility for all to participate fully and experience success in the common learning process would help to implement the fundamental condition for mutual support, namely, to empower oneself and to win.

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# Tarpusavio pagalbos fenomenas: rašymo sutrikimų turinčių mokinių balsai

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## Santrauka

Straipsnyje, vadovaujantis fenomenologiniu požiūriu, yra analizuojami „vaikų balsai", kurie atskleidžia, kaip vaikai išgyvena rašymo sutrikimo lemiamas patirtis ir įprasmina tarpusavio pagalbos fenomeną. Šio tyrimo tikslas – atsakyti į klausimą, kaip  tarpusavio pagalbos fenomenas atsiskleidžia mokinių patirtyje, su kuria jie susiduria stengdamiesi įveikti rašytinės kalbos sutrikimo sukeltus sunkumus. Straipsnyje analizuojama 20 penktų ir šeštų klasių mokinių rašinių, kuriuose atsispindi ir apmąstoma mokinių asmeninė patirtis ir atskleidžiamas jų supratimas apie sunkumų įveikimą. Tyrimas atkleidžia vaikų, turinčių rašymo sutrikimą, išgyvenamos pagalbos fenomeno sampratos keturis komponentus: empatiją, pripažinimo bendruomenėje siekį, mokymosi veiklos modeliavimą, mokymosi pagalbos interpretavimą. Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad vaikai supranta ir tapatinasi su sunkumus patiriančio vaiko situacija, tačiau kartu pabrėžia kito ir savo sėkmės patirtis, jiems labai svarbus jų statusas klasėje, už kurį atsakomybę prisiima patys. Rašymo sutrikimo įveikos kelią jie mato per labai intensyvų, bet lėtą, kognityvine veikla grindžiamą darbą, sąlygojamą pagalbos ir savipagalbos, o tai, vaikų manymu, yra priemonės, padedančios stiprinti mokymosi motyvaciją.