



THINK TANK: CHILDREN

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The Unique Language of a Child with Learning Difficulties

I was almost brought to tears in front of a class of 10-year-old students recently. While I was teaching a class, a boy with “learning difficulties” (a term Barbara Arrowsmith-Young prefers over “disabilities”¹) had an emotional meltdown. Two of his classmates were having a play-fight as they made their way into class after lunch, and he became agitated and ready to cry because he couldn’t understand why they were pretending to hurt each other. I tried to help him cope with the overflow of his emotions, but I also had 25 other kids in the class to look after and I couldn’t leave



the room to help him find a quiet place outside to calm down.

A girl in the class asked me if she could help—her brother had learning difficulties too, and so she felt she might be able to help her upset classmate. She sat down with the boy outside the classroom

and talked with him. After a few minutes, she asked the boy if he felt OK. He nodded and returned to the classroom to sit with his friends. Emotions settled down, the friends who had the play-fight apologized to the boy, as they had not adequately considered the needs of their classmate, and everyone got on with their work.

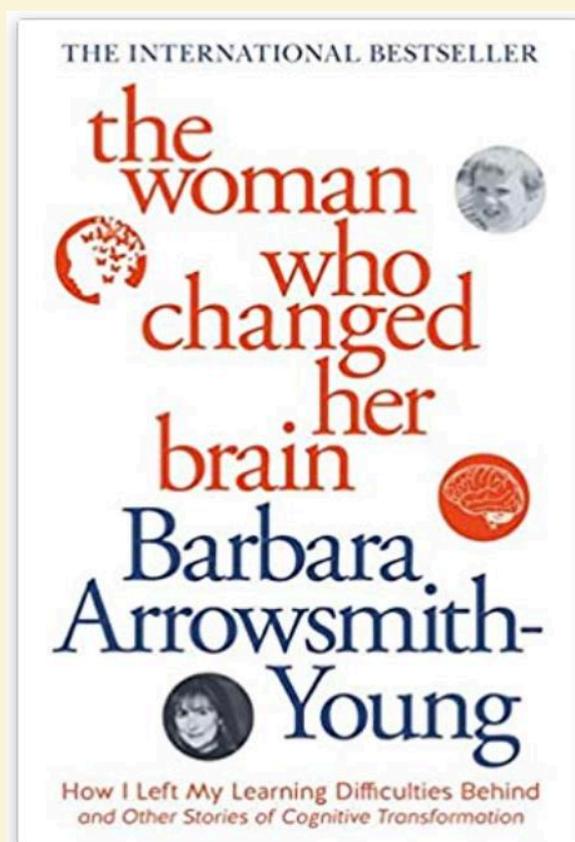
¹ In this article, I've used the broad, non-prejudicial term of "learning difficulties" that Barbara Arrowsmith-Young uses. See here for examples that are included in her definition: <https://arrowsmithschool.org/descriptions-of-learning-difficulties-addressed/>

I thanked the girl who had helped to soothe her classmate with learning difficulties. "Oh, that's OK," she said. "It's just because I know how to communicate with him." This was her gift, she told me: the gift of being able to speak his language. She knew his language because she'd grown up with a brother who spoke it. Not only did she know how to speak his language, but she could also interpret his language for others, and this is what she had done for me. Now it was my turn for a strong emotional response! The insight and maturity shown by a 10-year-old girl prompted me to reconsider my views and approaches to teaching children with learning difficulties.

Learn about your students' learning difficulties

Teachers would all agree that each of their students has unique learning challenges and strengths. This is because every brain is different. But how much do we *really* understand and cater for the diverse needs of our students with learning difficulties? It's something few of us were adequately trained in as preservice teachers. If you're like me, you may see it as the role of the specialist learning support teacher to intervene and help these students. Too often, we leave it up to the learning support teachers, or even the students with difficulties themselves, to fill in the gaps for us. "If only they could tell me what the problem is, I'd be able to help them." "How do I teach this child?" "Can you tell me what I need to know about their learning difficulties?"

It's difficult for students or parents to talk openly with teachers about the challenges of a learning difficulty, because there is a stigma attached to it. But a lack of understanding about learning difficulties can result in devastating effects on a student's self-esteem, self-awareness and their ability to relate effectively to others (Arrowsmith-Young, 2020). I think it's time for *us*, the "mainstream" teachers, to start taking a more proactive approach to learning about our students' cognitive differences and the behavioral challenges that often accompany them. One way we can do this is by reading and learning more about neuroscience in education. If you're interested in learning more



about this area, there is one person whose book should be on your reading list:

[Barbara Arrowsmith-Young](#).

Barbara Arrowsmith-Young: The woman who changed her brain

Barbara Arrowsmith-Young is an example of a teacher who has devoted much of her life to learning about cognitive differences and working with brain plasticity to develop areas of the brain where cognition is impaired. Born with several undiagnosed learning difficulties, Barbara was nevertheless able to achieve highly in certain academic areas through her own efforts after school and university. She spent hours after school memorizing facts that others could have

learned in a short time or replaying movie dialogues and song lyrics over and over to try and make sense of them. At university, she worked through the night reading papers 20 times over to get the gist of the text. This was exhausting but seemed the only solution to working with her learning difficulties.

“We didn’t give him those gifts, he had them. But we gave him the engine to operate the gifts.”

Educational researchers at that time believed that damaged brain cells could not be restored, and

compensations to work around the problems were the only option available: if you struggled to read text, you listened to audio books; if you were slow at completing a test, you needed to take more time to do the test. For Barbara Arrowsmith-Young, the compensatory measures she had devised to make sense of her studies and her world were the only way she could achieve academic and relational success.

However, the research on brain plasticity that she was reading suggested something different might be possible. After reading the work of [Luria](#) and [Rosenzweig](#), Barbara began to wonder whether weaker areas of her brain could be strengthened with specific exercises, in the same way that any other physical area of the body might be strengthened through exercise. She gradually developed exercises to work on certain areas of the brain, and experienced success which she attributed to changes in the brain as a result of these exercises. Barbara tailored exercises to her specific needs.

Anecdotal reports from students who have been part of the [Arrowsmith Program](#) have been positive. While the empirical research behind the approach Barbara has pioneered is still emerging, some studies suggest that cognitive changes in participants with learning difficulties are occurring as a result of exercises used in the Arrowsmith Program.

These changes are across a range of areas, including visual and spatial awareness, attention, executive functioning, visual and auditory learning, and social or emotional awareness.



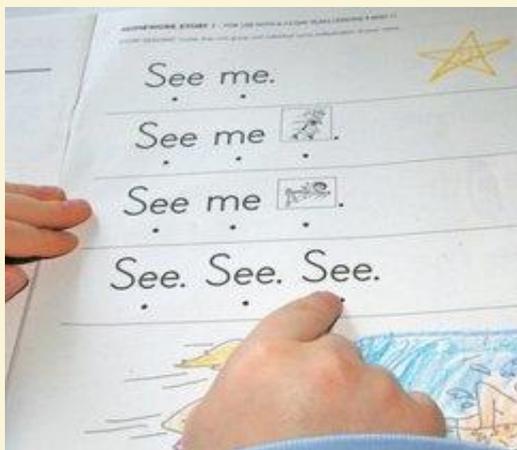
If you are interested in reading overviews of this research, you can find them [here](#). As is the case in every academic field, there are differing views on the research behind Barbara Arrowsmith-Young's work. Critics of the work claim that it [has not been scientifically supported that the cognitive exercises](#) she has developed remediate learning difficulties. One point to consider is that Barbara's personal experiences with these cognitive exercises took place during what she has termed the "pre-neuroplastic paradigm" of education (Arrowsmith-Young, 2020, p. 251). Educational research can be slow to welcome views that challenge traditional, established expectations of children with learning difficulties. For now, I am happy to listen, read and learn about the ongoing research developments in Arrowsmith-Young's work, and to see how these contribute more to the field of educational neuroscience.

Think differently about kids who think differently

As I reflected on Barbara's story and my experiences with a class of 10-year olds earlier this year, I began to think differently about learning difficulties. I began to realize that we are all on the continuum of learning difficulties. We all have cognitive strengths and weaknesses, because brains and lives are unique. There are many different factors that contribute to our cognitive strengths and challenges, but are we willing to try the innovation that Barbara has shown: to challenge ourselves to look for what we *can* do, rather than what we *can't*? In the same way, can we recognize the unique gifts that a student with learning difficulties has, as Barbara Arrowsmith-Young did when she recounted a story of a student with challenges who was part of the Arrowsmith program, and later went on to study design at university and won prestigious awards for designing racing cars: "We didn't give him those gifts, he had them. But we gave him the engine to operate the gifts" (Sirota, 2020).

Learn your students' languages

Not long ago, I used to feel apprehensive when a student with learning difficulties was put into my class. I saw teaching them as a challenge, or a "problem" that I wasn't equipped to deal with. Since my experiences earlier this year, however, my



perspective has changed: what I once saw only as a “problem,” I now see as a “gift.” There are still challenges, but I now see teaching these learners as being like an opportunity to travel to a new place and learn a new language I haven't learned before. The change in my perspective has been more than an emotional response. You could say that, like Barbara, my *brain* has changed with my new learning experiences and how I use them in my professional work as a teacher.

No matter how long we've been in the classroom, or which areas of education we work in, we have an opportunity to see things from a new perspective. Even if we are not trained as specialist learning support teachers, we should take an assets-based, rather than a deficit view of our students with learning difficulties, by focusing on what students *can* do rather than what they *can't*. We should not see a child with learning difficulties in terms of what they cannot do, but rather, as someone who speaks a unique language that we can learn. This is the lesson I learned from a 10-year-old girl and her friend with learning difficulties. And in doing so, I learned to observe, listen, and communicate better with my students—every single one of them.

References

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(Images from freeimages.com and [Mikhail Niloy](#) on [Pexels](#))

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