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**Maternal Reminiscing Conversations During Middle Childhood: Associations with
Identified Learning Difficulties**

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Abstract

This study examined maternal reminiscing conversations with 8-year-old children with an identified learning difficulty. Maternal reminiscing refers to conversations in which caregivers and children jointly reflect on past experiences, particularly emotional events, and has been shown to support socioemotional development across childhood (Salmon & Reese, 2016). However, relatively little research has explored these processes in children with learning difficulties during middle childhood. Using a mixed-methods design, we utilised reminiscing conversations from the 8-year timepoint of *Growing Up in New Zealand*: a large, diverse, prebirth national cohort. The quantitative component ($n = 1,234$) examined differences in conversation topic (disappointment versus social disagreement or injury) and the quality of conversations (elaboration and resolution) for children with learning difficulties compared with children without. The qualitative component ($n = 11$) utilised reflexive thematic analysis to explore conversations for children with learning difficulties who discussed an academic disappointment with their caregiver. This analysis identified themes that align with the existing reminiscing literature within typically developing populations (e.g., *emotion discussion* and *sensitive guidance and validation*). Several novel themes were also identified (e.g., *mindset* and *comparison to the norm*) which may have particular relevance for children with learning difficulties. The findings underscore the potential of everyday caregiver-child interactions as strengths-based, preventative support for children with learning difficulties; with potential implications for early social and educational level interventions, family-focused practices, and intergenerational pathways of risk and resilience.

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Overview

Parent-child interactions sit at the core of early developmental processes, providing the relational and communicative scaffold through which children acquire foundational cognitive, social, and emotional competencies (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). These dyadic exchanges are embedded in a broader socio-cultural context, where parental responsiveness, emotional understanding, and elaborative language practices jointly shape children's emerging understandings of self and others (Bornstein, 2015; Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005). Through everyday conversation, shared problem solving, and co-constructed meaning-making, parents offer critical support for the development of socioemotional skills, narrative competence, and internal working models of relationships (Bretherton, 1991; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). High quality interaction patterns, characterised by sensitivity and mutual engagement facilitate children's ability to organise experiences, regulate affect, and develop coherent autobiographical frameworks (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Thompson, 2006). Within this framework, specific communicative practices such as parent-child reminiscing provide a distinctive context for examining how children's autobiographical memory and identity development are scaffolded through reflection on past events (Fivush, 2011; Reese et al., 2022).

As children move into middle childhood, many of the challenging events they experience occur without their parents present, for example, with peers or at school. Reminiscing may be an important context for caregivers to support children's regulation, understanding and problem-solving, outside of the 'heat of the moment' (Salmon & Reese, 2016). Children with learning difficulties experience a number of challenging situations, particularly in the school context, and parents are a particularly important source of support in navigating this process (Anthony et al., 2024). Despite this, only a handful of studies have observed parent-child conversations among dyads where the child has a learning difficulty,

and the aim of this research is to contribute to this small but important literature (Alsancak-Akbulut et al., 2023; McCabe & Bliss, 2003). This introduction will begin with an overview of reminiscing within typically developing populations, before exploring learning difficulties and the role of parents and parent-child interactions for this population.

Reminiscing

Parent-child reminiscing begins to emerge in early childhood, typically around age two to three years, when children develop basic narrative and memory skills. Reminiscing conversations occur naturally in everyday interactions, with estimates suggesting parents engage in brief reminiscing episodes several times a day during shared routines and conversations (Fivush, Haden & Reese, 2003; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Reese, 2002). These conversations play a critical role in shaping children's cognitive, emotional and social development in that they influence how children understand themselves and others within the world around them. The structure of parent-child reminiscing conversations in particular has been linked to multiple developmental outcomes in children and adolescents (Fivush, 2019; Salmon & Reese, 2016; Waters et. al., 2019; Wu & Jobson, 2019).

Parent-child emotion reminiscing refers to conversations about past emotional events in which parents help children reflect on what happened, how they felt, and why the event was meaningful. Rather than prioritising factual recall alone, emotion-focussed reminiscing highlights internal states, meaning-making, and the child's perspective (Fivush & White, 2019; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). The level of elaboration used during parent-child reminiscing conversations has emerged as a key determinant in the developmental outcomes briefly highlighted above (Salmon & Reese, 2016). High elaboration is characterised as including rich details, asking open-ended questions, and validating the child's contributions and emotions (Fivush & Nelson, 2006). Mothers who engage in highly elaborative reminiscing

nurture children's advanced autobiographical memory, language skills, and emotional understanding (Fivush & Nelson, 2006; Reese, Haden & Fivush, 1993). High elaborative mothers use open-ended questions, provide interpretive comments, and co-construct the narrative with their child, prompting emotional labels, causal attributions, and reflections on coping (Reese et al., 1993; Haden et al., 2001). It should be noted that while the term parent will generally be used throughout this thesis, the majority of research in this area has been conducted with mothers.

In contrast, low elaborative mothers, who rely on repetitive or closed questions and provide minimal detail, tend to have children who produce less detailed and coherent memory narratives (Fivush et al., 2003), resulting in more fragmented emotional narratives and fewer opportunities for emotional learning (Peterson & McCabe, 1994; Wang, 2007). Repetitive reminiscing limits children's participation and restricts opportunities for emotional sense-making and internal state language (Fivush, Haden & Reese, 2006). Emotion content becomes structured through these style differences, shaping children's understanding of feelings, causes, consequences and supporting emerging emotion regulation (Dunn et al., 1991; Thompson, 2015).

Empirical evidence shows that elaborative emotion reminiscing predicts stronger emotional understanding, coping, and socioemotional outcomes. Bird and Reese (2006) found that mothers who explained and resolved children's emotions had children with a more coherent self-concept, while Van Bergen and Salmon (2010) found associations between elaboration and an independent measure of children's emotion understanding. More recent work also suggests that elaborative emotion-rich reminiscing supports psychological wellbeing and adaptive emotion regulation across development (Fivush & Salmon, 2023). Collectively, this research underscores that high elaborative and emotion rich reminiscing functions as a relational mechanism through which children develop emotion knowledge,

narrative skills, and resilience; whereas low elaborative or repetitive patterns may constrain these developmental opportunities.

The elaborative reminiscing style not only enhances children's narrative and memory development, but also shapes the child's understanding of social norms, emotional regulation, and identity through shared meaning-making (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Therefore, maternal elaboration during reminiscing serves as a vital mechanism through which children internalise cultural, linguistic, and emotional frameworks for interpreting their own lived experiences.

Socioemotional and Sociocultural Theories of Development

Parent-child reminiscing conversations can provide a chance for children to reflectively think about the past event, learn how to evaluate and problem solve in relation to the past event, and subsequently plan for similar future events (Fivush, 2007; Fivush et al., 2003; Laible, 2004). These conversations are occurring at a stage in which children are developing their understanding of the self as being present in the past and future as well as in the present time; nurturing their sense of self-concept (Fivush & Nelson, 2006). These conversations can also allow for children to develop their understanding of the emotions involved during the past event, and learn different ways to express and regulate those emotions in future (Fivush et al., 2003). All of these factors play an important role in the development of the child. Two major theoretical perspectives that can provide valuable lenses through which to examine the developmental significance of reminiscing are emotion socialisation and sociocultural theory.

Emotion socialisation refers to the processes through which parents shape children's understanding, expression and regulation of emotions. It is a central mechanism connecting family interactions to children's socioemotional development. Eisenberg et al. (1998)

identify three primary pathways of emotion socialisation; parents' modelling of emotional expression, their reactions to children's emotions, and offering explanations or guiding children toward adaptive coping. All are associated with more advanced emotion knowledge, stronger self-regulation and improved social competence. In contrast, dismissive or punitive responses may limit children's opportunities to learn about internal states and undermine regulatory skills. More recent work by Eisenberg (2020) highlights that emotion socialisation is dynamic and shaped by the child's developmental characteristics and vulnerabilities.

Importantly, emotion socialisation may be especially consequential for children with learning difficulties. These children are more likely to experience challenges in language processing, working memory, and executive functioning, all of which are linked to difficulties in emotion understanding and regulation (Viesel-Nordmeyer et al., 2023). Research has shown that children with learning or language-based difficulties often have reduced access to emotional vocabulary, produce shorter narratives about emotional events and may struggle to organise emotional experiences coherently. As a result, they may rely heavily on parental scaffolding to interpret feelings, generate explanations, and learn coping strategies (McCabe & Bliss, 2003). Emotionally supportive parental practices such as elaborative reminiscing, validation, and reflective questioning may therefore play a compensatory role in supporting children's socioemotional development in the context of learning difficulties. This makes parent-child reminiscing conversations; particularly around challenging events such as disappointment, a crucial context in which emotion socialisation processes unfold (Bliss & McCabe, 2008).

From a sociocultural theoretical perspective, children's cognitive development occurs through participation in culturally organised social interactions, supported by the use of cultural tools such as language (Vygotsky, 1978). Within this framework, parent-child reminiscing is understood as a mediated activity through which children internalise cultural

norms, values, and ways of understanding the self. Vygotsky (1978) emphasised the centrality of guided interaction, viewing parents as more knowledgeable partners who scaffold children's participation in shared narrative construction. Through these co-constructed narratives, children learn to organise events, interpret emotional experiences, and make sense of the world around them.

Importantly, sociocultural approaches highlight that the style and content of reminiscing are culturally patterned rather than universal. Cross-cultural studies show that parents in different cultural communities vary considerably in elaboration, emotional focus, and the kinds of meanings they emphasise when discussing past events. For example, Wang (2007) demonstrated that European American mothers tend to engage in highly elaborative, emotionally expressive reminiscing that highlights children's personal experiences, whereas Chinese mothers focus more on social roles, behavioural lessons, and relational harmony. Similarly, Schröder et al. (2013) found that maternal reminiscing styles—such as autonomy-supportive versus relationally oriented conversations—aligned with broader cultural models of independence and interdependence across diverse societies including Germany, Greece, Cameroon, and others. These studies show that cultural expectations shape how children learn to remember, evaluate, and narrate their experiences, ultimately influencing their developing autobiographical memory.

A growing body of research also illustrates how these cultural narratives contribute to the development of a coherent life story, with reminiscing playing a foundational role in shaping autobiographical memory and identity (McAdams et al., 2001; Waters et al., 2019). Through repeated conversations about shared past events, children come to understand not only what happened but also what those events mean within their cultural and familial context.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, culturally grounded reminiscing practices similarly reflect diverse narrative traditions. Research with Māori whānau highlights the importance of kōrero as a relational, intergenerational practice that strengthens whanaungatanga and provides opportunities for children to learn moral, social, and cultural values through shared stories. Reese and Neha (2015) found that Māori mother-child reminiscing was highly elaborative and relationally oriented, often drawing on whakapapa, collective experiences, and the importance of maintaining harmonious relationships. Additional work comparing Māori, Pākehā, and Pasifika families shows that parents emphasise different themes when reminiscing about emotionally or morally significant events. For example, Reese et al. (2014) reported that Māori parents often situated transgressions within a broader relational context, emphasising respect, responsibility, and restoring balance; while Pākehā families tended to focus more on individual behaviour and rule-based explanations. These findings underscore the need to understand reminiscing practices in Aotearoa New Zealand within the wider cultural landscape, recognising that children's autobiographical memory and socioemotional development are shaped by the cultural values embedded in narrative practices.

Learning Difficulties

The conceptualisation of learning difficulties has evolved considerably over the past century, reflecting shifting understandings of cognition, education and development. Early descriptions in the mid-20th century framed learning difficulties in primarily neurological or deficit-based terms, often linked to brain dysfunction or perceptual disorders (Kirk, 1963; Bateman, 1965). However, subsequent research broadened this view to recognise the complex interaction of biological, cognitive, and environmental factors contributing to learning difficulties (Fletcher et al., 2019). Longitudinal studies have consistently shown that children with learning difficulties are at increased risk for academic underachievement, low

self-esteem, and socio-emotional difficulties that persist into adolescence and adulthood (Snowling et al., 2007; Maughan & Carroll, 2006). Beyond educational achievement, learning difficulties have been linked to poorer employment outcomes, mental health challenges, and reduced quality of later life (Raskind et al., 1999). The more contemporary understanding emphasizes early identification and intervention, as supportive learning environments and tailored instruction can mitigate long-term negative impacts and promote adaptive functioning across the lifespan (Vaughan & Fuchs, 2003). Therefore, the history of research on learning difficulties reflects a paradigm shift from deficit labelling towards a developmental and strengths-based approach focused on enhancing lifelong learning and psychosocial adjustment.

In contemporary research and clinical practice, learning difficulties (more formally termed Specific Learning Disorders) are defined using the criteria outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR; APA, 2022). In Aotearoa New Zealand, the DSM framework is widely used by educational psychologists, clinical psychologists, and allied professionals to guide assessment and diagnosis, alongside Ministry of Education learning support processes ((Ministry of Education, 2018). The DSM-5 conceptualises specific learning difficulties as neurodevelopmental conditions characterised by persistent difficulties in key academic skills such as reading, written expression, or mathematics, which are substantially below age expectations and interfere with academic or everyday functioning. Importantly, these difficulties must not be better explained by intellectual disability, uncorrected sensory impairments, inadequate instruction, or broader psychosocial adversity (APA, 2013).

This definition reflects a shift away from global deficit models towards a more precise understanding of learning difficulties as specific, domain-based challenges that occur alongside average or above-average intelligence (Fletcher et al., 2019). Current diagnostic

frameworks also emphasise the importance of identifying learning difficulties through a combination of standardised assessment, developmental history, and evidence of functional impairment, rather than relying solely on discrepancy models (Fletcher et al., 2019). Within the Aotearoa New Zealand context, this aligns with inclusive education policies that promote access to learning support based on need rather than diagnostic labels alone (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Despite advances in conceptualisation, access to timely assessment for learning difficulties remains uneven. In Aotearoa New Zealand, formal diagnostic assessment is often contingent on financial resources, geographic location, and school advocacy, with private assessments frequently required to obtain a DSM-based diagnosis (Thomson & McPhillips, 2018). This can result in delayed identification, particularly for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or rural communities. Such delays are problematic, as early identification is associated with better academic, emotional, and behavioural outcomes (Snowling & Hulme, 2021).

Furthermore, variability in school-based identification practices means that some children's difficulties may be minimised or misattributed to motivation, behaviour, or parenting factors. This can contribute to frustration for children and families and may exacerbate feelings of failure or disengagement from learning (Riddick, 2010). These systemic barriers highlight the importance of understanding learning difficulties not only as individual cognitive challenges, but as experiences shaped by broader educational and social contexts.

Children with learning difficulties often encounter significant challenges within mainstream classroom settings. Academic tasks that rely heavily on literacy or numeracy skills may require greater cognitive effort, leading to fatigue, slower task completion, and

increased performance anxiety (Snowling et al., 2007). Without appropriate accommodations - such as differentiated instruction, assistive technologies, or explicit teaching strategies - these children are at risk of falling further behind their peers over time (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

Beyond academic demands, classroom experiences can also affect children's social and emotional wellbeing. Repeated experiences of difficulty, or perceived failure, may contribute to reduced self-confidence, heightened stress, and negative academic self-concept (Humphrey & Mullins, 2002). Peer comparison, particularly in environments that emphasise speed and accuracy, can further intensify these challenges, underscoring the importance of supportive teacher practices and emotionally responsive learning environments (Rubie-Davies, 2015).

In the short term, learning difficulties are associated with increased risk for academic underachievement, school avoidance, and emotional distress (Maughan & Carroll, 2006). As children progress through schooling, these challenges may compound, particularly if learning needs remain unmet. Longitudinal research indicates that individuals with learning difficulties are at elevated risk for mental health difficulties, including anxiety and depression, as well as lower rates of educational attainment (Snowling et al., 2007).

Longer term outcomes may extend beyond education. Adults with a history of learning difficulties have been shown to experience greater employment instability, lower income levels, and ongoing challenges with self-esteem and wellbeing (Raskind et al., 1999). However, outcomes are highly variable and strongly influenced by the quality of support, coping strategies, and relational environments experienced across development (Goldberg et al., 2003; Raskind et al., 2006).

Importantly, a growing body of research emphasises that learning difficulties do not preclude positive developmental trajectories. Many individuals with learning difficulties demonstrate notable strengths, including creativity, problem-solving abilities, perseverance, and interpersonal sensitivity (Goldberg et al., 2003). When supported by affirming environments, these strengths can foster resilience and adaptive functioning across the lifespan. Protective factors such as supportive caregivers, positive teacher relationships, and opportunities for emotional expression play a critical role in shaping outcomes (Raskind et al., 1999).

The distinction between fixed and growth mindsets has significant implications for understanding the socioemotional development and learning trajectories of children with learning difficulties. According to Dweck's (2006) mindset theory, a fixed mindset is the belief that intelligence and ability are static, and can lead to the avoidance of challenges, heightened anxiety, and negative self-perceptions when children encounter academic struggles. In contrast, a growth mindset emphasises the potential for ability to develop through effort and effective strategies, fosters resilience, persistence, and adaptive coping in the face of difficulty (Dweck & Leggett, 1998). For children with learning difficulties, a growth mindset has been shown to protect against the emotional consequences of repeated failure, including low self-efficacy, learned helplessness, and poor motivation (Claro, Paunesku, & Dweck, 2016; Baird et al., 2020). Educational systems that embed strengths-based approaches, which identify and cultivate individual competencies rather than focusing on deficits, further support positive socioemotional outcomes by enhancing self-esteem, belonging, and engagement (Clarke, 2014; Seligman et al., 2009). Such approaches align with inclusive and asset-oriented models of special education, emphasizing empowerment and the development of adaptive learning identities (Louis, 2011). Ultimately, cultivating growth mindsets and leveraging strengths-based frameworks not only improves academic

persistence but also promotes emotional wellbeing and long-term positive adjustment in children with learning difficulties.

Building on this literature, recent empirical studies further illuminate how growth mindset frameworks operate within educational systems and teacher beliefs. For example, Yan et al. (2021) examined the relationship between formative assessment practices, growth mindset, and academic achievement across Eastern and Western educational contexts. Their findings suggest that formative assessment - when framed around feedback, progress, and effort rather than fixed ability - plays a critical role in fostering growth-oriented beliefs and improving student achievement. Importantly, the study demonstrated that a growth mindset was not merely an individual trait but was significantly shaped by instructional practices and classroom cultures. This has particular relevance for children with learning difficulties, as formative assessment can reduce performance anxiety, support self-regulation, and reinforce the belief that improvement is attainable through effort and strategy use. Such evidence strengthens the argument that systemic factors are essential in sustaining growth mindset interventions beyond individual-level approaches.

In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, Stephens et al. (2022) provide important insights into the role of educators' beliefs in shaping learning environments, particularly for students from diverse backgrounds. Their longitudinal study of preservice teachers (those undertaking initial teacher education prior to entering the profession) found that implicit biases related to ethnicity and beliefs about academic ability were malleable over time, especially when teacher education programmes explicitly addressed mindset and expectations. Teachers who endorsed growth-oriented beliefs were more likely to hold high expectations for all learners, which has been consistently linked to improved academic and socioemotional outcomes. For children with learning difficulties, teacher mindsets are especially influential, as fixed beliefs about ability can inadvertently reinforce deficit-based

narratives and limit access to meaningful learning opportunities (Gutshall, 2013). These findings underscore the importance of embedding growth mindset principles within teacher education as a mechanism for promoting equity, inclusion, and positive learner identities.

The application of growth mindset and strengths-based approaches is particularly salient within the Aotearoa New Zealand educational context, which emphasises inclusion, equity, and holistic wellbeing through frameworks such as *Te Whāriki* and *The New Zealand Curriculum*. These curricula prioritise learner agency, resilience, and the development of confident, connected, and actively involved learners. Stephens et al.'s (2022) findings highlight persistent educational inequities experienced by Māori and Pasifika learners and the documented influence of teacher expectations on student outcomes. Growth mindset-oriented teaching aligns closely with culturally responsive and relational teaching practices, which recognise learners' strengths, identities, and cultural capital rather than framing difference as deficit. When applied to children with learning difficulties, such approaches support mana-enhancing practices that foster belonging, self-worth, and motivation. Consequently, embedding growth mindset principles within inclusive education and teacher professional learning in Aotearoa New Zealand has the potential to support not only academic persistence but also socioemotional wellbeing and long-term positive adjustment for diverse learners (Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2016).

Parenting Children with Learning Difficulties

Extending the discussion of growth mindset beyond the classroom, parental support represents a critical contextual factor influencing the socioemotional and motivational development of children with learning difficulties. Parents play a central role in shaping children's beliefs about ability, effort, and failure, particularly in response to ongoing academic challenges. Anthony et al.'s (2024) scoping review highlights that the diagnosis of a

specific learning disorder often evokes complex emotional responses for parents, including stress, uncertainty, and concerns about stigma. However, when parents are supported to adopt strengths-based and growth-oriented understandings of learning difficulties, they are better positioned to advocate for their child and foster adaptive coping at home. Complementing this, Bonifacci et al. (2016) found that supportive parent-child relationships characterised by emotional warmth, encouragement, and realistic expectations served as protective factors for both child and parent psychological wellbeing. Importantly, parental beliefs and behaviours were shown to influence children's self-perceptions and emotional adjustment in the context of learning difficulties. Furthermore, Yeager and Dweck (2020) found that growth mindset interventions were most effective when reinforced within supportive social contexts, including the home environment, where parental beliefs and responses to challenges shape children's persistence, resilience, and engagement with learning. Collectively, this research underscores the importance of integrating parents into growth mindset and strengths-based interventions, recognising the home environment as a powerful site for reinforcing adaptive learning beliefs and promoting long-term socioemotional wellbeing for children with learning difficulties. Parenting practices, including emotionally supportive conversations about challenges and setbacks, may be particularly important in helping children make sense of their experiences and develop coping strategies (Peterson et al., 2025). From a developmental perspective, understanding how parents talk with children about difficulty and disappointment may offer valuable insight into pathways of resilience for children with learning difficulties.

Although research on learning difficulties and reminiscing conversations has traditionally developed as separate lines of inquiry, an emerging body of evidence demonstrates their conceptual and empirical overlap. Both autobiographical reminiscing and learning difficulties involve core processes of language organisation, memory retrieval, and

meaning-making; domains that are often compromised in children with learning or language-based difficulties or disorders. Early work by Fivush and colleagues (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 1993) established that elaborative maternal reminiscing supports children's autobiographical memory, narrative coherence, and emotional understanding. These areas are often challenges for children with specific learning or language impairments, who may experience difficulties with sequencing, lexical access, and the integration of internal states into narratives (Bishop & Donlan, 2005; Henry & Botting, 2017).

McCabe and Bliss conducted early research examining narrative and learning difficulties (McCabe & Bliss, 2003; McCabe et al., 2008). They found that children with learning and language difficulties produced significantly shorter narratives, included fewer evaluative and emotional elements, and showed reduced coherence when recounting personal experiences. Importantly, they highlighted that these narrative limitations were not solely due to reduced memory capacity, but rather reflected broader challenges in organising experiences into meaningful, socially communicative stories. This distinction is critical, as it suggests that children with learning difficulties may recall events but struggle to construct narratives that convey emotional significance or personal meaning.

McCabe and Bliss (2003) also emphasised the role of conversational context in shaping children's narrative performance. When adult scaffolding was limited or directive, children with language difficulties showed minimal elaboration and engagement. In contrast, supportive and responsive conversational environments were associated with improved narrative structure and participation. These findings align closely with maternal reminiscing research, which demonstrates that elaborative, emotion-focused scaffolding can substantially enhance children's autobiographical recall and emotional insight (Reese & Fivush, 2008; Salmon & Reese, 2016). Together, this work suggests that children with learning difficulties

may be particularly sensitive to the quality of adult scaffolding during reminiscing conversations.

Subsequent research has extended these findings, showing that children with learning or language difficulties engage less frequently in emotionally rich reminiscing and often rely on caregivers to supply narrative structure and emotional content (Snow, 2016). Alsancak-Akbulut et al. (2023) examined high and low elaboration during parent-child reminiscing among a small cohort of 30 dyads where the child had a previously diagnosed learning disorder. Findings indicated that mothers who expressed lower levels of negative affect also engaged in more elaborative reminiscing. Their findings underscore the importance of maternal emotional functioning in shaping conversational processes for children with learning difficulties. Within typically developing samples, differences in reminiscing style have been linked to lower emotional insight, reduced self-concept clarity, and fewer opportunities to practise reflective thinking about past experiences; processes that underpin both academic learning and socioemotional development (Farrant & Reese, 2000). Without adequate scaffolding, children with learning difficulties may therefore experience cumulative disadvantages in narrative competence and emotional understanding.

Importantly, intervention studies demonstrate that parental reminiscing style can be modified. Narrative-based and reminiscing-focused interventions have been shown to improve expressive language, memory organisation, and emotional competence in children with learning and language difficulties (Reese et al., 2012). A review of reminiscing interventions highlights benefits across typically developing and high-risk populations, although no reminiscing interventions have been conducted in learning disorder populations (Corsano & Guidotti, 2019). By explicitly supporting narrative structure, emotional labelling, and reflective discussion, these interventions leverage the same mechanisms identified in maternal reminiscing research. As such, integrating narrative and reminiscing frameworks

into learning difficulty research offers a promising avenue for supporting both cognitive and socioemotional development. This integrated perspective underscores the value of shared reminiscing as a naturalistic, relational context in which children with learning difficulties can develop meaning-making skills essential for long-term adjustment.

In summary, the current literature suggests that reminiscing may be an important context for parents and children with learning difficulties to collaboratively construct narratives about academic setbacks or disappointment. However, only a handful of studies exist, and no direct comparisons in reminiscing have been made across typically developing and learning difficulty populations. In addition, no in-depth analysis of reminiscing conversations has been conducted within these dyads to understand the ways in which parents scaffold learning, mindset and meaning-making for their children with learning difficulties. The current study addresses this gap by using a mixed-methods approach to examine both the quality and the thematic content of maternal reminiscing about disappointment with children who have learning difficulties.

Current Study

The current study extends existing research by examining maternal reminiscing conversations with 8-year-old children, specifically focusing on dyads where mothers have identified their child as having a learning difficulty. The overarching aim of the study is to investigate whether mothers' reminiscing approaches vary according to the presence of learning difficulties. By incorporating children with identified learning difficulties into this line of inquiry, the study seeks to broaden current understandings of parent-child reminiscing as a relational process that supports socio-emotional development. The current study utilises data from *Growing Up in New Zealand*, a longitudinal pre-birth cohort. At age 8 years, children discussed a past event with one of their parents; usually the mother. Dyads could

choose to discuss either: (1) disappointment: a time their child didn't do as well as they wanted to, for example at school or in a sports game; (2) a social disagreement, for example, with a sibling or friend; or (3) a time the child hurt themselves a little bit. Given the challenges children with learning difficulties experience in educational settings, we were especially interested in how parents of children with learning difficulties might scaffold conversations about disappointment, and about academic disappointments in particular.

The current study explored disappointment discussions using both a quantitative and qualitative approach. For the quantitative component, we explore whether: (a) dyads where the child has an identified learning difficulty would be less likely to choose to discuss an academic disappointment, compared with dyads where the child does not have an identified learning difficulty; and (b) whether parental elaboration and resolution quality would differ for disappointment conversations for children with a learning difficulty. Existing research suggests that educational contexts are more challenging for children with learning difficulties, however, a lack of specific extant research examining parent-child conversations about academic issues prevented us from positing specific hypotheses.

The qualitative component of the current study involved reflexive thematic analysis of a subset of academic disappointment conversations for children with identified learning difficulties. This analysis will explore how parents' scaffold and support children's emotion regulation and how these disappointments are resolved or managed.

My Positional Statement

My interest in the current study is shaped by my academic training in developmental psychology, by my professional experience working with youth and adults in the Aotearoa New Zealand criminal justice system, and also by my personal experience as a mother trying

to navigate the pathway to assessment and support for a child with possible learning difficulties.

In my professional role, I have observed a high prevalence of learning difficulties, emotional dysregulation, and communication challenges among justice-involved populations, often alongside disrupted educational experiences and long-standing difficulties in social and emotional functioning. These observations are consistent with developmental research (e.g., McGee et al., 2002) demonstrating links between early learning difficulties and later psychosocial vulnerabilities. From an intergenerational prevention perspective, maternal reminiscing conversations represent a relational and strengths-based process through which caregivers can support children's learning, emotional understanding, and self-regulation by collaboratively reflecting on past experiences. This relational focus aligns with Te Whare Tapa Whā, particularly the interconnected domains of *taha hinengaro* (emotional and cognitive wellbeing) and *taha whānau* (family relationships), and reflects kaupapa Māori principles that emphasise the centrality of whānau, relational knowledge transmission, and meaning-making through shared narratives. For children with learning difficulties, who may experience repeated challenges or marginalisation within formal education settings, emotionally elaborative reminiscing may provide an accessible and affirming context for developing narrative competence, emotional regulation, and positive identity. Examining these interactions in middle childhood has the potential to inform early, whānau-centred approaches that build on existing relational strengths and contribute to the disruption of developmental trajectories associated with later marginalisation and justice system involvement. This may then also flow into the more formal educational settings, and assist in informing curricula for children with learning difficulties.

From a personal perspective, I have also experienced the complexity and isolation associated with navigating pathways to assessment, diagnosis, and support for a child

experiencing learning and behavioural difficulties. This process has involved encountering systemic and interpersonal barriers, including the minimisation of concerns by some health and education professionals, limited guidance regarding appropriate referral pathways, differing views within family networks, and significant financial constraints associated with accessing private assessment and therapeutic services. These experiences have highlighted the emotional and practical demands placed on families seeking support and have deepened my awareness of the structural inequities that shape access to timely identification and intervention.

Method

The current study was conducted as part of a larger longitudinal pre-birth cohort study called *Growing Up in New Zealand* (www.growingup.co.nz). The data collection began antenatally, in 2009, and the participating families were visited approximately every three years to measure how particular developmental domains changed over time. There were six domains included in the study: health and wellbeing, psychosocial and cognitive development, education, family, culture and identity, and societal context including the neighbourhood and environment. The purpose of the larger study is to provide evidence to inform policy which optimizes children's developmental trajectories (Morton et al., 2013). The *Growing Up in New Zealand* study plans to continue until the cohort of children are at least 21 years old. The current study uses data from the 8-year timepoint and focuses on children with whom the parents had identified as having a learning difficulty.

Participants

The participants were initially recruited at the antenatal stage, with invitations extended to all pregnant women due to give birth between April 2009 and March 2010 from three New Zealand District Health Board regions; Auckland, Manukau and Waikato (Morton et al., 2013). The total number of participants initially included 6,848 children.

The 8-year data collection wave (DCW) consisted of 5,012 dyads participating in maternal reminiscing conversations. For the quantitative analysis, the current study utilised a randomly selected sub-sample that had already been transcribed and coded ($n = 1,348$) (Garnett et al., 2023; Swearingen et al., 2023; Russell et al., 2024). Of these participants, the sample was narrowed down further for the qualitative analysis. Inclusion for qualitative analysis were those dyads where the child had been identified as having a learning difficulty,

who chose to discuss an academic disappointment-related topic. This reduced the sample size to a total of 11 dyads for the qualitative portion of the study.

Procedure

The *Growing Up in New Zealand* study received ethics approval from the Ministry of Health Northern Y Regional Ethics Committee (Morton et al., 2013). The current study received data access approval from Growing Up in New Zealand's Data Access Committee (Reference # 24DA001528). The study began with mothers participating in an antenatal interview in which they answered a set of questions about themselves and their family unit, including demographics. Data has been collected at various stages of the mothers' parenting journey, with the focus of the current research being a conversational task at the 8-year timepoint. This task measured maternal reminiscing and involved interviews between the mother and the 8-year-old child in their own home. The child language measure was completed by the child on an iPad during the 8-year home visit.

Measures

Sociodemographic covariates

At the antenatal DCW, mothers self-reported their own ethnicity and their highest completed level of education. Mother's self-prioritized ethnicity was considered at Statistics New Zealand (2005) level 1: New Zealand European, Māori, Pacific Peoples, Asian, MELAA (Middle Eastern, Latin American and African) and Other (Statistics New Zealand, 2005).

Child language

Children's language ability was also considered as a potential covariate. At the 8-year DCW, children completed the NIH Toolbox® for Assessment of Neurological and Behavioural Function Cognition Battery, version 7–17 years. The Picture Vocabulary Test

was used as an indicator of children's receptive language ability for the current study. During the PVT, children are shown a set of four pictures and asked to match the correct picture to word read aloud. The standard scores were utilised in the current analysis.

Child learning difficulty

At the 8-year DCW, parents were asked (via the online parent report survey) "is [child's name] affected by any of the following - learning difficulties". Response options were yes or no. It should be noted that the type of learning difficulty was not elaborated on further and there was no formal confirmation of whether this was an official diagnosis.

Reminiscing conversation

The mother and child were asked to pick one of three topic choices to discuss; a recent time when the child hurt themselves a little bit, a recent time when the child didn't do as well as they wanted to, or a recent time when the child had a social disagreement with another child. The topics were presented on cards along with images that represented the topic. The topics focussed on negative events due to the challenges children face in navigating the emotions that are associated with those events, calling for parent guided conversations to help children develop this skill (Laible et al., 2013). The interviewer ensured the conversations were recorded with informed consent, and did not involve themselves in the conversation.

Quantitative Narrative Coding. The previously transcribed dyadic conversations ($n = 1,348$) had already been coded for elaboration and resolution quality (Garnett et al., 2023; Swearingen et al., 2023; Russell et al., 2024). Parent elaboration quality was coded on a 1-9 scale, reflecting the extent to which the mother scaffolded the conversation through the use of open-ended questions, provision of new information, confirmations, and expansions that supported the child's active participation. Higher scores indicated more elaborative and

developmentally supportive conversational styles characterised by rich detail, collaborative meaning-making, and sustained engagement with the child's perspective (Leyva et al., 2020).

The quality of parent resolution was also coded on a 1-9 scale, capturing the extent to which the conversation moved toward a coherent and emotionally supportive conclusion (Russell et al., 2024). This 1-9 scale was adapted from the resolution/closure scale of Koren-Karie et al.'s (2003) Autobiographical Emotion Events Dialogue coding scheme. Higher scores reflected narratives in which the dyad collaboratively constructed understanding of the event, integrated emotional meaning, and emphasised coping, learning, or positive reappraisal. Lower scores reflected conversations that lacked closure, remained unresolved or negative in tone, or did not support the child in making sense of the experience.

Qualitative Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis. During reminiscing conversations, interviewers collected the conversation topic (social disagreement, injury or disappointment). The qualitative analysis was focussed on only academic disappointments. Therefore, the recordings for all disappointment conversations (n = 785) were listened to, and coded as either an academic or sporting disappointment. From there, only the conversations of those who discussed an academic disappointment and had been identified as having a learning difficulty were transcribed (by the writer) for the purposes of qualitative analysis. This resulted in 11 transcripts to focus on for the current qualitative study.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis

A chi square analysis was conducted to examine whether there was a difference in conversation type (social disagreement, injury or disappointment) for children with or without a learning difficulty. Independent sample t-tests were then conducted to examine whether there were differences in elaboration or resolution (across conversation types) for

children with or without a learning difficulty. Two regression models were then conducted to examine the relationship between conversation type, child learning difficulty and elaboration or resolution quality during the conversation. Covariates (maternal ethnicity and education and child language) along with disappointment conversation, child learning difficulty and the learning difficulty*disappointment conversation interaction were entered. One model predicted elaboration quality and the other model predicted resolution quality.

Qualitative analysis

The 11 transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). Reflexive thematic analysis was considered particularly appropriate for the current research as it enabled an in-depth exploration of patterns of meaning within maternal narratives, while recognising the socially situated and interpretative nature of reminiscing conversations and the researcher's active role in meaning-making. Analysis began with familiarisation, whereby the researcher repeatedly read the transcripts and made initial notes to gain an in-depth understanding of the data. Initial codes were then generated inductively across the dataset, with attention paid to both semantic content and underlying meanings relevant to maternal support, learning experiences, and emotional responses to disappointment.

Codes were subsequently examined and collated into potential themes by identifying patterns of shared meaning across transcripts. These themes were reviewed and refined through an iterative process to ensure coherence within themes, clear distinctions between themes, and alignment with the research aims. Themes were then defined and named to capture their central organising concepts. Throughout the analytic process, reflexivity was maintained, with the researcher engaging in ongoing reflection regarding how their academic training and professional experience informed interpretation.

The final phase involved producing a coherent narrative account of the themes, supported by illustrative data extracts, to demonstrate how mothers engaged in reminiscing conversations with children with learning difficulties in relation to academic disappointment.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

Across the whole sample, 375 children were identified (via parent report) as having a learning difficulty (7.93% of the current 8-year sample). Descriptive statistics for conversation type for children with learning difficulties and those without are shown in Table 1. A chi square was conducted to examine whether there was a difference in conversation type chosen for children with and without learning difficulties. There was a significant difference ($\chi^2 = 10.87, p = 0.0043$): children with a learning difficulty were significantly less likely to discuss disappointments compared with social disagreements or injury topics (refer Table 1.)

Overall differences (across all three conversation types) in elaboration and resolution quality were examined by conducting independent samples *t*-tests, where parent elaboration (1-9) and resolution (1-9) scores were compared for children who had learning difficulties compared with those who did not. There was no significant difference in elaboration ($t = 0.19, p = 0.85$) for children with learning difficulties ($x = 2.87$) compared with children without learning difficulties ($x = 2.89$). There was no significant difference in resolution ($t = 0.41, p = 0.68$) for children with learning difficulties ($x = 6.00$) compared with children without learning difficulties ($x = 6.05$) (refer Table 2).

Table 1

Conversation Type Discussed by Dyads as a Function of Whether the Child has a Learning Difficulty

	Social disagreement <i>n</i> (row %)	Disappointment <i>n</i> (row %)	Injury <i>n</i> (row%)	Total <i>n</i>
Learning difficulty	71 (24.06%)	39 (13.22%)	185 (62.71%)	295
No learning difficulty	928 (25.38%)	746 (20.40%)	1982 (54.21%)	3656
Total	999	785	2167	3951

Table 2

Parent Elaboration and Resolution Scores; Children with Learning Difficulties Compared to Children Without Learning Difficulties.

	<i>t</i>	Df	<i>p</i>	Mean: children with a learning difficulty	Mean: children without a learning difficulty
Elaboration	0.19	93.6	0.848	2.89	2.87
Resolution	0.41	103.6	0.681	6.05	6.00

Potential differences in elaboration and resolution quality were then examined using hierarchical regression models. Two separate linear hierarchical regression models were developed: one for elaboration and one for resolution. Potential covariates were entered together at Step 1 (child language; maternal education, dummy variable University education or not; and maternal ethnicity, dummy variable European ethnicity or all other ethnicities). These covariates were selected based on previous research with the *Growing Up in New Zealand* reminiscing data (Swearingen et al., 2023). Whether the child had a learning difficulty or not and whether they discussed the disappointment topic or not (as well as their interaction) were entered at Step 2.

The overall elaboration regression model was significant ($F(6, 1171) = 5.63, p < .0001$), as was the overall resolution model ($F(6, 1249) = 11.38, p < .0001$). Overall, both maternal university education and discussion of the disappointment topic were uniquely associated with higher elaboration and higher resolution, however, the interaction of learning difficulty with conversation type was not significant. This suggests that, after controlling for covariates, there was no difference in elaboration or resolution quality for children with a learning difficulty who discussed disappointment versus other conversation topics (refer Table 3 and 4).

Table 3

Regression Model: Covariates, Conversation Type and Child Learning Difficulty Predicting Parental Elaboration.

	<i>Beta</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Maternal university education	0.272	0.059	4.645	3.79
Maternal ethnicity	0.001	0.006	0.284	0.7766
Child language	0.003	0.002	1.482	0.1385
Learning difficulty	0.065	0.126	0.516	0.6058
Disappointment topic	0.151	0.074	2.045	0.0411
Learning difficulty*disappointment	0.175	0.316	0.554	0.5795

Table 4

Regression Model: Covariates, Conversation Type and Child Learning Difficulty Predicting Parental Resolution Quality.

	<i>Beta</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Maternal university education	0.405	0.071	5.728	1.27
Maternal ethnicity	0.003	0.012	0.274	0.7842
Child language	0.003	0.003	1.039	0.2991
Learning difficulty	0.153	0.155	0.990	0.3221
Disappointment topic	0.489	0.090	5.419	7.18
Learning difficulty*disappointment	-0.701	0.381	-1.841	0.0658

Qualitative Analysis

A sub-sample of 11 mother-child conversations were transcribed and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The data consisted of dyadic reminiscing conversations focussed on a recent disappointment experienced by 8-year-old children with a parent-reported learning difficulty. The analysis considered how parents (in this case, mothers) scaffolded children's emotional understanding, guided narrative development and supported coping, with attention to elaboration, resolution and interactional style. As such, this analysis followed both a deductive approach (informed by existing knowledge and theory related to both reminiscing and parenting children with learning difficulties) and inductive approach (whereby the researcher is open to new patterns emerging from the data) (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The codes, sub-themes and themes were organised and reviewed in the form of a Miro board (see Appendix A). Seven overarching themes were identified, each comprising two to three subthemes that captured distinct but related patterns across the dataset. Themes are presented below.

Table 5*Themes, Subthemes and Codes for Thematic Analysis*

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
1.Mindset	Fixed Mindset	Child rejects parent's solutions
	Growth Mindset	Focus on effort rather than result
	False Growth Mindset	Idea that problem will improve or resolve, without a plan proposed
2.Emotion Discussion	Identification and Labelling	Disappointed, anxious
	Dismissive or Repetitive Responses	Uses humour, avoids emotion discussion, repeats e.g. "yeah", "okay"
3.Parent Takes the Lead	Elaborative Emotion Exploration	Open questions, suggestions for emotion identification
	Assertive Communication	Guides with suggested emotion labelling, phrasing as open questions
4.Sensitive Guidance and Validation	Agressive Communication	Provides answers, talks over child, interrupts child
	Validation	Confirms emotions, rationalizes
	Reflection	Sympathises, relates to own experiences
5.Comparison to the Norm	Guidance	Helps to label emotions, comes up with possible solutions
	Negative Comparison	Repeated failures, comparison to peers
	Reframing Achievement	Linking achievement to practice rather than talent, improving self
6.Future Implications	Solution Focussed	Providing plans to develop child's abilities
	Home or Familial Level	Home based supports, practice with parent
	School or Educational Level	Extra resources, tuition, adjusted workload
	Social or Cultural Level	Flow on effect for behaviours outside of classroom

Theme 1: Mindset. This theme captured how the mothers' conversational language revealed implicit theories about the child's abilities and coping capacity. Mothers and children varied in whether they conveyed a fixed, growth or false growth mindset when helping make sense of the disappointment.

1.1 Fixed mindset. Some mothers framed the disappointment as stemming from stable, inherent limitations (e.g., "...*Sometimes you're a bit of a perfectionist, aren't you? You get upset when it doesn't work out?*"). This type of framing may have inadvertently reinforced the child's self-appraisal of inability. These comments sometimes curtailed elaboration and emotional exploration, leading to abrupt or shallow resolution of the disappointment.

1.2 Growth mindset. Other mothers scaffolded a developmental view of ability (e.g., "*Give yourself a bit more time hmm? Then you won't feel so bad hmm? You might get them all right next time? You might get one wrong next time?*") and ("*Well why don't we...is that in one of your books, that test? That I could have a look at? And then I could find out the words that you didn't do so well at and we'll practice them and then we'll get the teacher to test you again?*"). This approach potentially encouraged children to reflect on effort, strategy, or learning potential. Within conversations, this style appeared to support richer elaboration and tended to sustain the child's engagement in the narrative.

1.3 False growth mindset. In some conversations, mothers used specific growth-mindset language (e.g., "*Sometimes you need to practice and practice and practice, don't you?*") and:

Parent: "Why did you feel you didn't do well in your work?"

Child: "Because I did bad at writing."

Parent: "And do you think you can make that better?"

Child: "Yup."

However, this language did not seem to be supported with guidance, reflection or problem-solving. These comments appeared well intentioned, encouraging children to adopt a perspective of hope and optimism. However, the relative absence of strategies for *how* to manage a situation differently in the future may mean that children were left feeling unsupported or unheard. Interestingly, children's responses to this type of parental conversation tended to be superficial and brief agreement, for example, ("*Okay*"), ("*Yes*").

Theme 2: Emotion Discussion. This theme describes how mothers either facilitated or restricted emotional processing through their discussions of feelings. Patterns appeared to vary based on emotional specificity, openness and elaboration.

2.1 Identification and Labelling. Several dyads engaged in explicit emotion labelling (e.g., "Did you *feel disappointed?*") and:

Parent: "...And that makes you?"

Child: "Unhappy."

Parent: "Or worried?"

Child: "Yeah worried."

This approach may have assisted children to differentiate emotional states; a skill particularly relevant for children with learning difficulties who may struggle with emotional vocabulary and retrieval (Fujiki et al., 2002).

2.2 Dismissive or Repetitive Responses. Some mothers shifted away from emotion talk:

Child: "Um my not very good writing." (Sad tone to child's voice).

Parent: "So I can see that she's a bit upset about her writing." (Parent speaking to researcher and conversation was ended by parent).

Some mothers gave minimal, repeated responses (*e.g.*, “*Yeah, yeah, mmm*”). This approach tended to limit the depth of emotional exploration. In these dyads, the emotion discussion remained surface level and resolution was typically incomplete or externally imposed (*e.g.*, a possible solution was deferred to someone else, such as a teacher).

2.3 Elaborative Emotion Exploration. Some mothers appeared to adopt a style consistent with existing literature of emotion elaboration (Fivush et al., 2006; Reese et al., 2011). These mothers expanded on the child’s emotional cues, considered causes and consequences of emotions, asked clarifying questions and made contextual links:

Parent: “Was it because you were upset with yourself because you didn’t do too good at your test?”

This approach appeared to enable co-constructed meaning (*i.e.*, where both the mother and the child worked together to develop a shared understanding of multiple perspectives) and richer emotive narratives (*i.e.*, where the causes and consequences of emotions were explained, rather than just emotions labelled).

Theme 3: Parent Takes the Lead. This theme captured how mothers directed the conversation, ranging from constructive leadership to potentially more controlling or intrusive guidance.

3.1 Assertive Communication. Assertive leading involved mothers gently shaping the narrative while leaving room for the child’s input:

Parent: “So that one actually turned out to be a much better result than you’d thought, didn’t it, once we actually read the meaning of the result on the certificate?”

Child: “Yeah.”

Parent: “So then did your feelings about that change?”

Child: "Yes I felt a bit more proud."

Parent: "Oh that's great."

These dyads essentially appeared to 'take turns' working towards a solution - both contributing to the final solution.

3.2 Aggressive Communication. A few mothers dominated the conversation through directive or corrective statements:

Child: "Um let's see, my uh, presentation, uh, the one about..."

Parent interrupts: "The recent one, The one about your enquiry?"

Child: "The other one, the one when I..."

Parent interrupts: "Last week?"

Child: "I had to perform in front of the whole class..."

Parent interrupts: "So not your persuasion one?"

Child: "Um why?"

Parent: "Was it from your passion project?"

Child: "No, why, I'm not doing bad?"

This style appeared to function to reduce the child's opportunity to contribute. These patterns were often associated with a child's withdrawal, minimal elaboration or avoidance of the topic being discussed (e.g., changing topic or to another part of the topic).

Theme 4: Sensitive Guidance and Validation. This theme captures how mothers balanced emotional responsiveness with support for interpretation and coping.

4.1 Validation. Some mothers acknowledged the legitimacy of the child's feelings:

Child: "... I should have a positive attitude, but I'm still a bit nervous when it comes to tests."

Parent: "It's hard isn't it? And I didn't like tests when I was your age either, and I still don't really like tests, they make me feel worried and stressed and some people just don't like tests! And that's fine too."

This helped to normalise disappointment and reduce self-criticism. Validation appeared particularly effective when combined with reflective listening or guidance (below).

4.2 Reflection. Reflective comments (e.g., *"So you felt a little bit disappointed?"* and *"It's hard...isn't it?"*) model emotional insight and support children to label and organise internal experiences. Such emotionally validating talk has been shown to promote children's emotion understanding and regulation (Gottman et al., 1996; Fivush et al., 2006). For children with learning difficulties, reflective scaffolding may be particularly important, as expressive language and emotional communication challenges can make it more difficult to articulate internal states independently (Fujiki et al., 2002).

4.3 Guidance. Some mothers moved from validation into gentle guidance (e.g., *"So see, it's kind of different for everyone right?"* and *"So it doesn't matter and we don't have to compare ourselves to other people...we just worry about ourselves."*). This supported coping and emerging resolution. When guidance occurred without prior validation however, children sometimes resisted or disengaged altogether.

Theme 5: Comparison to the Norm. This theme illustrates how mothers contextualized the child's experience relative to peers, expectations or typical development.

5.1 Negative Comparison. A few mothers invoked comparison that highlighted deficits (e.g., *"Why don't we talk about this one how you talk a lot about how at school....and not doing as well as you want at school...and being worried about being dumb at school?"*). This may

have sometimes intensified the child's disappointment or reduced willingness to discuss emotions.

5.2 Reframing Achievement. In contrast, some mothers used positive comparison to affirm capability (e.g., *“And you don't have to find everything at school easy 'cause also there will be kids who when you guys are doing artwork, they think 'gosh I'm not very good at doing artwork' and you're so good at artwork”*, and *“It only matters how well you do for you and for you feeling like you're making progress and that you, or we, all learn things in the time that we're supposed to learn them and it's different for everybody, don't we?”*). This style may reinforce coping and individual progress, and support a more hopeful narrative.

5.3 Solution Focussed. Some mothers used comparison not to evaluate but to orientate towards strategies:

Child: “Well I feel confident about, like, when it comes to Quick Ten and when I look at the other people in my class; how theirs is, and how easy mine is...”

Parent: “Mmm you mean how Mrs [Name] gives you one sort of slightly different so it suits where you're up to better?”

Child: “Mmm.”

Parent: “But that's good 'cause then she's trying to build your confidence.”

This approach appeared to maintain validation while promoting problem solving.

Theme 6: Future Implications. This final theme concerned mothers' reflections on the child's disappointment and how the learning derived from it connected to broader developmental or contextual considerations.

6.1 Home or Familial Level. Some mothers linked the event to future routines or supports within the family, for example, *“Maybe if we practice them, if I could get the list, we could*

practice them at home and you might find that you can do them a bit better. What do you think?". These reflections often appeared to open pathways to collaborative coping within the family unit.

6.2 School or Educational Level. Other conversations highlighted academic or social implications within school settings:

Parent: "And what do you think we can do to make the test better?"

Child: "Just focus more on English class."

Parent: "Okay well yes, we're doing that we're seeing [Tutor's name] aren't we? And she's going to help you with your reading."

This approach may be particularly salient for children with learning difficulties, whose challenges often intersect with school structures.

6.3 Social or Cultural Level. In some cases, mothers addressed broader norms around effort, fairness or belonging within social and cultural groups:

Child: "...They would give some; they would do something good if you got most of it right."

Parent: "Oh yes and you missed out?"

And

Child: "I got really upset and mucked it all up."

Parent: "Yeah and then what happened, you also got angry at your friend didn't you?"

Child: "Yeah."

Parent: "What happened?"

Child: "[Name] stopped being my friend."

These reflections extended the narrative beyond the specific event and positioned the child's experience within wider social frameworks.

Summary

Across the qualitative sub-sample, mothers varied considerably in how they scaffolded narrative structure, emotional processing and meaning-making. The seven themes illustrate the complex interplay between mindset language, emotional coaching, leadership style, listening skills, validation, comparative frameworks and future oriented guidance. These findings highlight the diverse ways maternal elaboration and resolution emerge in reminiscing conversations; particularly for children with learning difficulties who may require additional scaffolding.

Discussion

The current study sought to explore the nature of maternal reminiscing conversations with 8-year-old children who have an identified learning difficulty, with particular attention to how conversations about disappointment may support children's learning, emotional understanding, and emotion regulation.

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative findings indicated that dyads in which the child had a learning difficulty were less likely to discuss a disappointment and were instead more likely to choose to discuss events involving social disagreements or physical injury. This pattern may suggest that setbacks are less frequently constructed as shared narrative topics within these families. One possible interpretation is that academic difficulties occur frequently and may be experienced as routine rather than discrete events. Alternatively, caregivers and children may avoid revisiting academic disappointment due to its emotional salience or the potential for

such conversations to reinforce feelings of frustration, inadequacy, or failure. Research on emotion socialisation suggests that parents sometimes limit discussion of highly distressing experiences, particularly when these events evoke strong negative affect or perceived threat to the child's self-concept, which may inadvertently reduce opportunities for emotional processing and meaning-making (Fivush et al., 2006; Laible, 2011). Given evidence that reminiscing about negative experiences is especially important for the development of emotional understanding and regulation, reduced discussion of academic disappointment may represent a missed context for supportive maternal scaffolding (Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Sales et al., 2003).

From a developmental perspective, this pattern is noteworthy given that academic challenges represent a central and recurring experience for many children with learning difficulties. If these experiences are less frequently explored through collaborative reminiscing, opportunities for emotional processing, meaning-making, and supportive reinterpretation may be reduced (Peterson et al., 2025). McCabe and Bliss (2003) emphasised that children's narrative conversations about emotionally significant events provide an important context for organising experience, constructing meaning, and developing coping-oriented interpretations of difficulty. Maternal reminiscing about academic setbacks may represent an important relational mechanism for supporting children's emotional adjustment and coping, but one that may occur less often than for typically developing children. However, further research is needed to explore this hypothesis. The current study reflected a single conversation, with an interviewer present. Future research could ask dyads about the frequency of different topics of conversation at home, and also observe multiple conversation topics within the same dyad, rather than comparing group differences.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings highlighted themes in maternal reminiscing style that were both (a) consistent with existing literature (e.g., individual differences in elaboration and sensitive guidance and validation) and (b) provided new information about reminiscing with children with learning difficulties. In particular, themes related to mindset and comparing the child's performance to the 'norm', may have particular implications for parenting children with learning differences.

Patterns observed across the data suggested that the level of elaboration within maternal reminiscing was associated with different opportunities for emotional processing and meaning-making around academic difficulty for children with learning difficulties. More elaborative conversations appeared to provide a relational context in which mothers and children could collaboratively interpret setbacks, regulate emotional responses, and construct more adaptive understandings of challenge. Future research could examine these potential associations within a large sample of children with learning difficulties, coding reminiscing conversations and including independent measures of child outcomes.

In highly elaborative interactions, mothers used open-ended questions, validated the child's perspective, and discussed causes, strategies, and future coping. Academic difficulties were often framed in terms of effort, learning, and the possibility of improvement, as seen in the *Mindset* theme. This growth-oriented meaning-making may be particularly important for children with learning difficulties, who are at increased risk of developing fixed ability beliefs following repeated academic challenges (Dweck, 2006; Gunderson et al., 2013). By normalising difficulty and highlighting progress, elaborative reminiscing may support more adaptive beliefs about the malleability of ability and sustained engagement with learning.

These conversations also tended to emphasise the child's individual experiences rather than comparison with peers or normative standards, as seen in the *Comparison to the Norm*

theme. Mothers frequently acknowledged the child's specific challenges while highlighting effort, strengths, or improvement over time. This individualised framing may buffer the negative effects of social comparison, which has been linked to lower academic self-concept and increased emotional distress among children experiencing ongoing difficulty (Harter, 2012; Marsh & Craven, 2006). Through validation and responsive engagement, such interactions may support the development of a more positive learner identity.

From a holistic wellbeing perspective, these relational processes may also support broader dimensions of development. Elaborative and emotionally responsive conversations may contribute to *taha hinengaro* through the development of emotional awareness and regulation, while strengthening *taha whānau* through supportive relational engagement. Te Whare Tapa Whā, a Māori model of health developed by Durie (1998), conceptualises wellbeing as the balance between interconnected domains of spiritual, mental, physical, and family wellbeing. Although the present study is not grounded in a kaupapa Māori framework, this model provides a useful lens for understanding how everyday relational interactions may contribute to multiple dimensions of wellbeing within the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

In contrast, less elaborative conversations provided fewer opportunities for collaborative meaning-making and emotional exploration. These interactions relied more on closed questions and factual recounting, with limited discussion of emotional experience, causes, or coping as seen in the *Emotion Discussion* theme. Academic setbacks were more often described in outcome-focused terms, offering fewer opportunities to emphasise effort, strategy, or learning. For children with learning difficulties, such patterns may increase the likelihood that difficulties are interpreted as reflecting stable limitations (Dweck, 2006).

Some dyads referenced performance relative to age expectations or peers as seen in the *Comparison to the Norm* theme. Given that children with learning difficulties often

experience themselves as performing below others, this comparison-focused framing may reinforce feelings of difference or inadequacy. Over time, limited emotional processing combined with outcome-focused evaluation and normative comparison may contribute to more negative academic self-perceptions and reduced self-efficacy (Harter, 2012; Marsh & Craven, 2006).

A substantial body of research has shown that elaborative and emotionally supportive reminiscing is associated with children's development of emotion understanding, autobiographical memory, and self-regulatory capacities (Fivush et al., 2006; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Reese et al., 2010). Within the context of learning difficulties, where repeated academic challenges place children at heightened risk for negative academic self-concept and reduced self-efficacy (Humphrey & Mullins, 2002), elaborative reminiscing may provide an important relational context for fostering emotional regulation, growth-oriented interpretations of difficulty, and a sense of competence. In contrast, less elaborative interactions may represent missed opportunities for emotional scaffolding and adaptive meaning-making, potentially reinforcing more negative self-perceptions over time. From a developmental and intergenerational perspective, these patterns are significant. Children with learning difficulties are at increased risk of school disengagement, behavioural difficulties, and disrupted educational pathways, although outcomes are strongly shaped by relational environments (Aro et al., 2021; Mallett, 2016). Maternal reminiscing represents one everyday context in which protective processes may operate. Emotionally supportive conversations may help children make sense of challenging experiences, regulate emotions, and develop more coherent and positive self-narratives, potentially buffering the cumulative effects of academic frustration and marginalisation.

From an Aotearoa New Zealand perspective, these findings have relevance for strengths-based and family-centred approaches to child development. Some parents

highlighted growth mindset and discouraged comparisons, focussing on the child's individual efforts. Rather than positioning learning difficulties solely as individual deficits, strengths-based approaches emphasise identifying and building on children's existing abilities, interests, and cultural resources, supporting agency, resilience, and a growth-oriented view of learning (Harkness et al., 2022; Ministry of Education, 2023). Within learning support practice, this perspective enhances the mana of the learner and their whānau by focusing on potential and future development rather than deficit or limitation.

By focusing on everyday parent-child interactions and existing relational strengths, maternal reminiscing may offer a culturally adaptable and non-stigmatising pathway for support. Although such conversational processes cannot address broader structural inequities, they may represent a small but meaningful relational context through which cumulative risk is either mitigated or compounded over time. Overall, the present findings highlight maternal reminiscing as an everyday relational context through which children with learning difficulties may make sense of academic challenge and develop beliefs about their competence, emotions, and capacity to cope. While learning difficulties are associated with elevated risk for educational and psychosocial difficulties, the findings underscore the importance of relational processes in shaping developmental pathways. Elaborative and emotionally supportive conversations may foster emotional regulation, adaptive meaning-making, and a more positive learner identity, whereas less elaborative interactions may represent missed opportunities for such support. Although conversational practices alone cannot address the structural inequities that influence outcomes, strengthening relational meaning-making within families may represent a feasible and strengths-based pathway for supporting wellbeing and resilience for children with learning difficulties in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study should be considered in light of several limitations. First, the sample size for the qualitative analysis was small and focused on a specific subset of dyads who discussed academic related disappointment. While this allowed for in-depth exploration of conversational processes, the findings may not be representative of the broader population of families of children with learning difficulties. Second, the cross-sectional and observational design of the quantitative analysis limits causal interpretation. Although associations were identified between reminiscing style and the ways in which academic experiences were constructed, it cannot be concluded that conversational style directly influences children's emotional or developmental outcomes. Third, the study focused exclusively on mother-child dyads, which does not capture the diversity of caregiving contexts within families (Reese et al., 2019).

Despite these limitations, the findings have several implications for research, practice, and policy. The results highlight maternal reminiscing as a potentially valuable focus for early, family-based intervention for children with learning difficulties. Supporting caregivers to engage in more emotionally elaborative and reflective conversations may provide a low-cost, accessible, and strengths-based approach to enhancing children's emotional understanding, self-regulation, and resilience. Such approaches could be integrated into existing learning support services, parenting programmes, or school-family partnerships without requiring intensive or highly specialised resources.

The findings also have implications for practitioners working with children with learning difficulties - including educational psychologists, learning support specialists, and other professionals. It would be interesting to examine educator-child reminiscing conversations to understand whether similar themes emerge (Neale & Pino-Pasternak, 2017). Children with learning difficulties experience elevated rates of emotional and behavioural difficulties, highlighting the importance of addressing socioemotional functioning alongside

academic support (Aro et al., 2021; Mugnaini et al., 2009). Interventions that incorporate caregiver–child interaction, emotional language, and reflective dialogue may help support emotional regulation and adjustment (Fivush et al., 2006; Salmon & Reese, 2016). This is particularly relevant within inclusive education settings, where emotionally responsive and supportive learning environments can buffer the negative effects of repeated academic difficulty and social comparison and promote a stronger sense of belonging and competence (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2015).

From an intergenerational prevention perspective, enhancing emotionally supportive parent-child interactions in middle childhood may have longer-term developmental significance. Evidence from reminiscing-based parent interventions indicates that conversational style is modifiable and responsive to relatively brief training. A review by Corsano and Guidotti (2019) found that coaching parents to use more elaborative and emotionally supportive reminiscing techniques was associated with improvements in children’s autobiographical memory, emotional understanding, narrative coherence, and aspects of self-regulation across both typically developing and ‘at-risk’ groups. These findings suggest that reminiscing represents a practical relational mechanism through which caregivers can support children’s cognitive, emotional, and social development. Further research is needed to understand how reminiscing is associated with independent measures of child functioning within learning disorder populations, before translation into intervention. However, given the overrepresentation of individuals with learning difficulties and disrupted educational histories within the criminal justice system (Mallett et al., 2023), early relational supports that strengthen emotional regulation and positive self-beliefs may contribute to reducing longer-term psychosocial risk. While conversational practices alone cannot address structural or systemic inequities, they may represent one meaningful pathway through which relational strengths can be fostered and cumulative risk mitigated.

Future research would benefit from examining reminiscing across more diverse caregiver configurations, including fathers, grandparents, and other significant caregivers, and from longitudinal designs that examine how conversational patterns relate to children's developmental outcomes over time. Further work is also needed to explore how cultural values and practices shape reminiscing within Aotearoa New Zealand, and how these processes may be incorporated into culturally responsive and strengths-based interventions.

Conclusion

The present study used a mixed-methods approach to examine maternal reminiscing with children with identified learning difficulties, combining quantitative coding of conversational quality with qualitative reflexive thematic analysis of how academic disappointment was discussed. Although quantitative analyses indicated few differences in elaboration or resolution based on topic alone, the qualitative findings revealed meaningful variation in how mothers and children constructed academic difficulty, particularly in relation to emotional support, growth-oriented meaning-making, and the positioning of the child relative to expectations.

Together, the findings suggest that everyday reminiscing conversations represent an important relational context in which children with learning difficulties may develop emotional understanding, self-beliefs, and narratives about themselves as learners. For children who experience ongoing academic challenge, elaborative and emotionally responsive conversations may support adaptive coping and a more positive sense of competence. While maternal reminiscing cannot address the broader structural factors that shape educational and life outcomes, strengthening relational meaning-making within families may represent a feasible and strengths-based pathway for supporting wellbeing and developmental resilience in children with learning difficulties in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Appendix A

Thematic Analysis Coding on Miro Board

