

# **Academic identity development: school experiences and the dyslexic learner**

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This paper examines identity construction for young people with dyslexia, based on their educational experiences during and after their transition to mainstream secondary education. The study is based on interviews with 20 English individuals who contributed their perceptions of how their identity was shaped by their experiences. Some of the most important experiences for dyslexic young people and the main themes discussed here are: experiences of support (or the lack of it), their perceptions around literacy and academic achievement and important others. Symbolic interactionism is used as a theoretical to further understand academic performance in a western society, where this is a highly significant aspect of life for many learners and their parents. In a society where literacy and academic achievement are highly privileged over any other form of achievement, academic identities are ‘fractured’ a notion explored here, alongside other factors that contribute to that academic identity development process.

Keywords: dyslexia, identity, young people, symbolic interactionism, special educational needs

## **Introduction: dyslexia and academic achievement in Western cultures**

In most modern Western societies, individuals are subject to and judged by certain values and regulations and achievements, one of which is completing compulsory education. The role of this compulsory education is to ensure that members of a society possess certain culturally-specific qualities that are desirable for that society during that particular

time, and individuals who do not acquire those qualities can be excluded from schooling (Burden, 2005; Slee, 2011). Importantly, literacy is one of the key abilities learners are expected to acquire (ibid) by the time they finish their compulsory education; the importance of literacy is highlighted even more with recent government developments, such as the literacy drive (gov.uk, 2015) and the Centre of Excellence for Literacy Teaching (Gov.uk, 2018a). Even more importantly, pupil performance in English is routinely monitored and informs the school's position in yearly performance tables, putting both teachers and pupils under pressure (Perryman et al., 2011). Therefore, performance in English can affect a school's position in those league tables, which are part of England's 'performative culture' (Perryman et al., 2018, p. 148) that is informed by government policy and revolves around accountability and affects how schools are managed (Perryman et al., 2018). Therefore, performance in English, (which heavily relies on literacy but can be also be achieved with appropriate support) is necessary for reasons that go beyond functionality for society and the workforce; there can be negative repercussions for low performing schools (West, Mattei & Roberts, 2011). But for dyslexic learners, who are 10% of the UK population and 4% of them are severely so (BDA, 2018), acquiring literacy can take considerable time and effort. According to a recent white paper, 'learning to read is the first and most important activity any child undertakes at school. Having this key foundation unlocks all the other benefits of education' (DfE, 2010, p.43). Yet this same white paper reports that one in five children leave primary school without being able to read and write to the expected level. Crucially, literacy may not be acquired to the level of a typically developing learner, at least while a child is still in compulsory education. In addition to literacy, the education system in England is also aimed towards specific, rising standards (Gov.uk, 2012; Gov.uk, 2016, DfE, 2016) and academic excellence (Francis, 2006), something that can be very apparent

in classrooms (Lucey and Reay, 2002). This paper explores how this highly achievement-driven academic context shapes the identity of dyslexic learners who are often unable to perform according to these societal standards.

Achieving the educational goals set out in an educational system can be 'extremely difficult' for those who have dyslexia (Carroll and Iles, 2006, p.652). As a result, the identity of learners with dyslexia can be influenced by their educational experiences as a result of the value that literacy and education have in modern Western cultures (Humphrey and Mullins, 2002; Burden, 2005; Slee, 2011). Indeed, dyslexia has been found to contribute to the formation of self-esteem (Humphrey and Mullins, 2002; Rowan, 2010); more specifically, Riddick *et al.* (1999) found a strong relationship between low reading performance and low self-concept or self-esteem for school children, which strongly supports the findings of the current study.

Children with low academic performance living within cultures that privilege this type of achievement are likely to experience emotions like anger, envy and self-attack while they are in an academic environment, where only excellence is acceptable (Lucey and Reay, 2002). School transitions can make this situation more difficult, as they influence both children's well-being and motivation (Tuominen-Soini, Salmela-Aro and Niemivirta, 2012), while the emotional experiences stemming from dealing with their difficulties as young people can affect their adult lives (McNulty, 2003). Discussing qualitative studies, West, Sweeting and Young (2008) described transition from primary to secondary education as an experience that greatly affects young people's identities and well-being. They found that learners of lower ability were more likely to have poorer school transitions, something that can apply to dyslexic learners who have not found ways

of coping with their difficulties. Moreover, they found that in cases when lower ability was combined with low self-esteem, the likelihood of a poor school transition became even greater, while higher self-esteem indicated a better school transition.

The participants' stories showcase different approaches to their education experiences, with most developing negative feelings about themselves and others being determined to succeed in the goals they set for themselves. Even in participants without direct negative feelings about themselves, there was a lot of negativity around their educational experiences, which also affected their identities. Negative experiences from childhood, painful even, are not easily forgotten and can influence adult life (Nalavany, Williams Carawan and Rennick, 2011), which makes school experiences crucial for young people's development. The aim of this paper is to bring those voices forward, so that they can be considered by both academics and teachers during their practice. Critically, identity construction is an on-going process throughout childhood and beyond, but this paper focuses on the transition to and experiences at secondary education. It illustrates the various ways in which the research participants were affected by their educational experiences in terms of their identity. Their experiences were very heavily linked to the perceived support they received, mainly within but also outside school, which significantly influenced their identity construction.

### **Research process**

This research is a qualitative project involving interviews with 20 English participants, focusing on the experiences of dyslexic children who transitioned from primary to secondary education. The study involved dyslexic individuals (children in secondary education, young adults and older adults), parents of the dyslexic children participants

and an education professional, who added both her views on dyslexic learners and professional and practical context to school processes. The researcher was an outsider in all cases, as there were no previous relationships with any of the participants, who were mainly recruited via advertising the research project. All participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions and some factual questions about the participants. The prepared questions were mainly used as a guide because additional topics that came up during the interviews were also discussed and the aim was to also allow all participants to discuss the issues that were important to them. Participants were interviewed using the open-ended interview schedule that was designed to provide a deeper understanding of the young people's education experiences, while the education professional provided context from the professional's point of view and experience. The main focus was the voices of the dyslexic people, while parent interviews further enriched data from the younger participants. Interview data was analysed using thematic analysis, yielding multiple themes as dictated by the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Symbolic interactionism was selected for its flexibility and its independence from theoretical and epistemological position (Braun and Clarke, 2006), since it is 'not wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework' (*ibid*, p. 81). The approach to coding was led by the stories of the participants; therefore, it was an inductive method, rather than a theoretical one (Braun and Clarke, 2006) meaning that it was the content of narratives that led the coding process. The driving reason for that was a key aim of the research was to bring out participants' voices, to be led by the meaning their narratives, not by a particular theoretical perspective.

After the initial code was created, the interview data analysis was aided by the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, since it explains how people interact with each

other and how individual identities are influenced by the social context and the perceptions of others within that given context (Cooley, 1971; Goffman, 1990; Blumer, 1998). It was the above elements of symbolic interactionism that were used to aid the data analysis, as it was not used as an overall methodology. It was the theory that helped decode the themes and to explain participant experiences within the social context. There were three main themes that emerged very strongly throughout: school transitions, support (mainly from school and from home) and its absence, and identity development as a result of educational experiences. Data saturation (Morse et al., 2002) was reached in 12 interviews but it was decided to include more participants to get a higher number on each category (children, parents, adults) and to keep exploring the area.

## **Presentation and discussion of findings - focus on school experiences and dyslexia**

### ***Theme 1: Reluctant learners***

According to symbolic interactionism (Cooley, 1971; Goffman, 1990; Blumer, 1998), and in agreement with Burden (2008), young people's sense of competence and well-being is affected by comparisons between them and others around them and the way that they understand other people's perceptions of them. School enjoyment for dyslexic people can be severely affected by their dyslexic difficulties. Self-esteem, perceptions about their dyslexia (Rowan, 2010) and school experiences can affect future occupation aspirations and choices, since if children have continuous negative experiences, further education may seem like a heavy burden (Undheim, 2009). The above can also affect young people's approaches to learning (Rowan, 2010), while aspirations can influence learning, academic motivation and achievement (Young, 1998). Experiencing academic 'failure' in a public context, like the classroom, can induce feelings of shame and humiliation in dyslexic children, who can also feel self-conscious about their learning

difficulty (McNulty, 2003). Lack of understanding from others can also add loneliness to those feelings (*ibid*).

According to Ingesson (2007), children with dyslexia often protect themselves by avoiding academic subjects at school and choosing occupations where they do not have to face their difficulties. It is also likely that students ‘learn their place’ through their positive or negative school experiences, find their ‘academic identity’ and ultimately their ‘occupational identity’ (Slee, 2010, p. 138). Their identities develop and are influenced by their experiences with others around them (Mead, 1967), like peers and teachers. Multiple relationships with such individuals develop in a school setting, where academic competence and achievement are central (Burden, 2008). Therefore, identities are partly shaped by the young person experiencing his/her self from other individual’s standpoints (Mead, 1967), which can have negative consequences if they are not academically proficient. Many participants explained that they were anxious about going to school and some developed negative self-perceptions. According to symbolic interactionism, a culture outlines desirable characteristics and most members want to acquire them. Being unable to acquire those characteristics, in this case academic performance and literacy, can cause discomfort and stigmatisation. The participants evidence this below:

#### *Effects on school enjoyment*

‘I didn’t want to go in when I was really behind and I didn’t understand things so I kind of used to take a lot of sick days. You know, just to avoid it. [...] I was avoiding school and I didn’t feel that brilliant about myself but once I got the support I needed I felt much better.’ (Faye, 26)

‘I always went to school but I never wanted to. It was one of those things that always, like, you’re made to do but I’ve...if I could’ve not gone, I wouldn’t’ve.

‘Cause I just didn’t feel like it was for me at all. I think that dyslexia had a big impact in it, because I felt that it was so, like, draining, like, each time that I went in, I was having to try and remember everything that I’d done, which I found difficult. And re-write stuff and do essays within an hour. I found it quite difficult so I think that’s what had a big impact on it.’ (Erica, 18)

‘So at school I was just...I was just really shy, unconfident, felt really stupid [...] So yeah, I didn’t enjoy school. I didn’t enjoy school at all.’ (Josephine, 41)

Clearly, reluctance to attend school was related to dyslexia-related difficulties for the participants, which is also supported by existing research (McNulty, 2003). The participants quoted above demonstrate their internalisation of societal desirable characteristics and it is possible that the reluctance to go to school was linked not only to purely doing something that was more difficult for them, but also their perceived inability to perform to the desired level. In view of the extra effort many dyslexic learners have to put in order to engage with literacy activities, research concurs with Erica’s narrative about finding the schooling experience ‘draining’. Nalavany, Williams Carawan and Rennick (2011) found that dyslexic people need more time and energy to manage their lives, including school, which can be exhausting for them. The narratives revealed that the participants found certain school activities challenging to perform. This is confirmed by Demetriou, Goalen and Rudduck (2000), who found that avoiding situations that seem threatening, where they fear that they will ‘fail’, is a coping strategy that young people develop so that they can maintain a positive self-image, both towards their peers and for themselves. Avoidance of something that is perceived as frightening can also be caused

by anxiety (Alexander-Passe, 2006). It can act as a self-protection strategy for dyslexic people (Ingesson, 2007; Undheim, 2009), since by avoiding activities at which they are not performing well, they also avoid negative feedback (Undheim, 2009) or teasing and bullying from their classmates (Singer, 2007).

### *Avoiding difficulty*

Two participants, Faye and Melanie, avoided certain subjects that they did not understand or were not performing well in. The vast majority of Hellendoorn and Ruijsenaars's (2000) research participants, who were all dyslexic, developed negative coping strategies for their difficulties. Similarly with this research, avoidance was one of those strategies. Avoidance can be used by dyslexic children as a method of diverting attention from their difficulties, but teachers can perceive it as laziness (Alexander-Passe, 2006).

In the other narratives presented here, a strong desire to avoid schooling is apparent although the participants did not actually avoid school. Instead, their identities were often protected by avoiding activities that made them feel inadequate. However, when learners avoid school or certain aspects of it, it means that they miss parts of the curriculum. Tobbell (2003) argues that this leads them to become disadvantaged on those aspects of the curriculum and that disadvantage is aggravated as they become unable to follow lessons. Realising that they are unable to follow lessons can lead students to lose their sense of achievement. Yet maintaining a sense of achievement and confidence as learners is important in secondary education (Demetriou, Goalen and Rudduck, 2000). Therefore, it is crucial for schools to support those who avoid subjects and are left behind.

## *Difficult classroom experiences*

Reading aloud in front of others caused anxiety for most participants. Indeed, dyslexic people can experience it as traumatic (McNulty, 2003) and react by trembling and sweating (Alexander-Passe, 2008). When individuals could not perform a culturally privileged task that was easy for others around them, this caused feelings of inadequacy. In a similar vein, Kimberly talked about how it feels for children with learning difficulties to be at school, where reading and writing are a key part of the day:

‘I think it [dyslexia] probably bleeds further into their private lives as well. But it’s easy to avoid at home, isn’t it? If you’re not very good at something, at home, you just don’t do it. Whereas [at school], there’s very little...I’m constantly amazed at how amenable many children with dyslexia are. Because they spend five hours a day doing something they can’t do. [...] But it’s not just dyslexia, it’s, you know, anybody with *any* learning difficulty, really. And certainly, students with dyslexia, there *will* be parts of the timetable or the curriculum that they find easier. [...] It’s [dyslexia] part of their identity, and hidden away in there is gonna be all the tears and frustration, I find it very difficult to see that it’s gonna be a happy part for them. [...] If you’ve got *any* learning difficulties, school’s just a terrible time, it’s a toxic time for a lot of kids.’ (Kimberly, SENCo, 46)

This narrative is echoed by the earlier ones, where participants described how dyslexia-related difficulties made school life difficult and how they disliked being at school. From the above narratives it is apparent that learning difficulties reduced school enjoyment. For pupils, school performance is a strong source of feedback about their

abilities and positive feedback is considered to contribute to their school satisfaction (Verkuyten and Thijs, 2002). This is because a perceived sense of competence creates links between performance and school satisfaction; an example of that would be a child who considers himself/herself as intelligent because he/she is good at certain school subjects and good grades provide the satisfying feeling of academic competence (*ibid*). Considering how important education and academic excellence are in Western cultures (Lucey and Reay, 2002; Burden, 2005; Rioux and Pinto, 2010) and how central education is in the lives of children (Russell, 2003), it is not difficult to link the sense of academic attainment with satisfaction about one's self and abilities.

### ***Theme 2: School-related anxiety***

The issue of anxiety was also discussed by the participants, as indicated here:

‘I was nervous more [about my] work and my grades. But as soon as I was diagnosed it was such a relief to me.’ (Jeremy, 19)

‘When I’m at home I feel like, all the pressure goes off, ‘cause from tests and things, and I just relax doing, um, what I enjoy.’ (George, 12)

Riddick *et al.* (1999) support these narratives in their findings, where dyslexic pupils had significantly higher levels of anxiety about their academic work than non-dyslexic participants. This is also confirmed by Carroll, and Iles (2006) and by Eissa (2010), who found both anxiety and depression was higher in poor readers. The anxieties participants discussed could be related to their inability to cope with the higher academic level of secondary education, which can be a stressor for learners with academic difficulties (Safer, 1986). Also, learners with dyslexia tended to take on heavy workloads

to compensate for their difficulties, which could cause them to be more stressed than other children (Undheim (2009). Emma felt anxious and annoyed during reading and writing tasks:

### *Stressed learners*

‘I felt stressed because if I’m doin’ like an essay, and...and mum went through it with me, I get like annoyed because I’ve done it all...like...loads of it wrong and...it was all actually in the wrong tense and stuff.’ (Emma, 13)

As she got older, her interview taking place at Year 8, she found that her anxiety diminished somewhat and she was not as nervous as she was in Year 7. Similarly, Cody was occasionally anxious about her homework:

‘Sometimes I felt a bit stressed from having a bit too much homework. And, um, I had quite a lot sometimes and I had to do it over...like...I went to bed quite late doing homework, but, and, I think that was kind of...the bit that I got a bit stressed about. [...] I wasn’t, like, scared, but I knew if I hadn’t done it, then it was over my shoulders. And I keep on telling myself, “you know you’ve got to do this homework” and then I’d say “no, no, I won’t till later”. So...it was a bit like...I had to do it at that time, ‘cause...out of my head.’ (Cody, 12)

Apart from completing her homework on time Cody was not anxious at school, except for days when she undertook examinations. She explained that the reason she was worried about examinations was that she wanted to perform well in them. However, being performance-oriented in school can lead to preoccupation with ‘failure’ and cause

burnout for pupils (Tuominen-Soini, Salmela-Aro and Niemivirta, 2012). From her narrative Cody seemed performance oriented, which is linked to feelings of anxiety (Linnerbrink, 2005; Daniels *et al.*, 2008) similar to those she described.

*'I Hated school'*

Specifically, Daniels *et al.* (2008) found that having high-performance goals increases a learner's susceptibility to anxiety. Even in primary education, Cody was worried about people laughing at her because of her difficulties. This fear is also found by McNulty (2003), whose participants found such experiences traumatic. Although her fear did materialise, she believed that in secondary school her dyslexia was not as important because most classmates, especially her friends, understood her situation. She enjoyed school, was happy to attend and always looked forward to the next day, but this does not always happen for people with dyslexia. Difficulties that vulnerable learners face during secondary education are not only due to the new environment, but also because they are finding it difficult to cope with higher anxiety levels (Safer, 1986). Other participants did not enjoy school at all because dyslexia-related difficulties had a profound impact on their feelings about school:

'[I was stressed] all the time. I hated it. I mean...to say that I hated school is an understatement. I really-really hated it. I've never been back and, I just...no, didn't like it at all. Not at all.' (Josephine, 41)

'I hated school, full stop. [...] Just hated it. Probably because I was frustrated and couldn't do anything.' (Mark, 54)

Similarly, Jeremy said that there was nothing he enjoyed about school, apart from having a backpack for his personal items, carrying non-school-related items that he enjoyed using (e.g. his games console), which could offer some rest and escape from school experiences he could not tolerate. From the above narratives it is clear why leaving school can be a relief for dyslexic people.

### *Discovering coping strategies*

Although not every participant said that they ‘hated’ school, they were still happy to leave when the time came. Similarly, other dyslexia research also presents leaving school as a relief (Undheim, 2009). Importantly, Ingesson (2007) suggests that the first six years of schooling are the most difficult for dyslexic people’s self-esteem and well-being. This research clearly shows that primary school was not always a good experience for the participants. It could be because during those first years dyslexia begins to become apparent, while the challenge for a child to learn to read is at its peak (Arkowitz, 2000). After the first six years in primary education, dyslexic people may find ways to succeed (Eissa, 2010) and make themselves feel better (Ingesson, 2007).

As children grow older they tend to find ways to cope with their difficulties:

‘I think as I got older [...] I learned to understand it, and I sort of learned how to deal with it. Yeah, I mean, like, being dyslexic is frustratin’ at times, you know, trying to write things down and stuff like that. But...it’s not frustrating now [that] I understand it...’ (Melanie, 17)

### *Positive schooling experiences*

On the other hand, there were participants who enjoyed attending school, like Katrina, John, George and Cody. Melanie was somewhere in the middle, since she did not 'hate' school, but also did not find it to be an experience she would want to revisit.

'I had fun [at school]. I enjoyed it. Obviously it wasn't that bad 'cause I made it to further education, so yeah. Would I want to go back to school? No.' (Melanie, 17)

Participants demonstrated a difference between age groups, with the youngest participants having a more positive outlook towards schooling, in contrast to Ingesson's (2007) findings. This could be because they had not had a complete experience; after more years in the education system their perceptions can change.

For John, his dyslexia-related difficulties caused mistakes in his reading, writing and also his understanding of school subjects, which was frustrating. Despite his difficulties he enjoyed school from the beginning and looked forward to going there, while he also enjoyed reading books. Indeed, dyslexic learners can become engaged in reading interesting books and enjoy the experience even when they find it tiring (Fink, 1995).

Although dyslexic people can enjoy reading or writing, like some participants did, there are problems associated with literacy that need to be addressed in secondary education: important others believing that behaviour issues, not dyslexia, are behind a

child's behaviour in class can upset children (Hales, 2001). Josephine's difficulties disturbed her sense of self:

'All my time growing up, I always felt like my point of view, my way of life, my way of thinking was unacceptable to other people.' (Josephine, 41)

Her narrative is clearly associated with Goffman's (1990) stigma, since she always felt different and did not fit into her school's cultural norms. Losing interest in one's studies can happen after transition (Anderson *et al.*, 2000; Burden, 2008). Melanie had a similar reaction to Josephine, but she began to skip classes she found difficult and as she got older this behaviour became worse. She explained that as she got older and her understanding improved, her way of coping with dyslexia also improved. In addition, becoming mature and proactive enough to explain to others what she could not understand, helped her cope better.

### ***Theme 3: Distressing experiences, distressed learners***

A combination of factors can contribute for a learner to become a shut-down learner, which some participants experienced. Factors include discouragement and disconnection with school, core 'deficiencies' in reading, writing/spelling, minimal gratification from school, dislike of reading/writing and anger with school (Selznick, 2009). These stem from basic 'deficiencies' in the child's learning that have not been addressed or even detected, which is aggravated in secondary education when the amount of school work and school demands increase considerably (*ibid*). Gabriel reacted to his difficulties by becoming annoyed and frustrated, especially when he felt that teachers ignored him and did not choose him to answer questions in class. He admitted being impatient, which led

him to 'call out'. Nevertheless, he was able to reflect on his actions and was unhappy with his behaviour. He was also 'annoyed' with his reading, as well as his handwriting, which he described as 'terrible'. Indeed, powerful feelings can arise in children who have dyslexia, including feeling annoyed (Burden and Burdett, 2007) and angry (Ashton, 2001).

'I just find it really annoying, that my brain works differently and like, I have all these problems with everything, and it just really annoys me, like, when I'm reading occasionally, a word would flip over if I'm using my green thing [overlay], but...it just really annoys me [...] when I don't have my green [overlay] with me and, like, when I lost it, [...] reading is just so annoying.' (Gabriel, 12)

Emma also felt annoyed when she felt that she could have performed better in school tests. These feelings of annoyance relate to Hellendoorn and Ruijssenaars's (2000) research, who found that dyslexic people can have problems with aggression and stress. Annoyance is not aggression, but it is linked to it (Denson, 2009). Likewise, Singer (2007) found that many of her participants felt angry at school, but the majority did not reveal their feelings in the school context and tried to hide them from their peers. Lucey and Reay (2002) agree that when individuals are not performing according to cultural expectations they can experience anger. Josephine had problems with school officials who could not understand her difficulties and stopped trying to explain her subject knowledge to teachers:

*Difficulty in demonstrating knowledge*

'I was really bad in my [music] lessons but if I was on my own I was fine. And I suppose in a way that describes my whole school life [...]. I suppose in hindsight

because I couldn't express myself and I couldn't do what they wanted me to do, I couldn't produce what they wanted me to produce, I gave up trying [...]. So I used to just do things for myself and I didn't use to do things for other people 'cause it didn't see the point.' (Josephine, 41)

This has similarities to the learned helplessness described in other work and is about not trying to improve academically (Burden, 2008).

'I did understand things but [...] the problems I had was explaining what I understood to other people. [...] I used to give up trying to explain that I understood so, you know, somebody would say something, I'd think 'oh, yeah, I get that, I understand that' and then when I'd hand in an essay, everything would come back as wrong.' (Josephine, 41)

Josephine also talked about giving up trying to explain her knowledge in Physics, which was a subject she could understand. Ultimately, this altered her perception of schooling and hurt her grades, since she believed that she had the potential to perform much better, but could not do so without support. Melanie had the same problem in expressing her knowledge, which caused anxiety.

Identity in dyslexic learners can be affected by in-class experiences and relations with others (Lithari, 2018). Worrying about making mistakes in the classroom can be a serious, anxiety-provoking issue for them:

‘I don’t think they realised I was dyslexic and I said a word wrong and they all [classmates] thought the word was funny and they laughed. [I felt] quite upset. But, [...] I know now that if I laugh along with them they might not think it’s funny and stop laughing.’ (Cody, 12)

The feelings Cody expressed are understandable (although she did not have problems with other in-class activities, like answering questions) and apprehension to reading out loud in the classroom is something many participants shared. Similarly, Emma was uncomfortable with reading at school because she was aware that she was not at the same reading level as her classmates and her reading did not sound ‘right’, which worried her. In Cody’s school, students had to read paragraphs out loud, in front of the class; in order to feel ‘safe’, she tried to read ahead and prepare for her turn so that she could avoid mistakes. When Cody’s classmates laughed she was upset but managed to hide it by laughing along with them, a strategy to discourage this behaviour. Likewise, Jack described reading out loud at school as ‘awful’, and was ‘embarrassed’ and ‘scared’ when he had to do it.

George mentioned ‘breaking down’ because he felt that he could not understand or do Mathematics, but this did not happen often and did not affect his school enjoyment. These examples demonstrate how inability to perform certain tasks in class is a public ‘failure’ that is a very negative experience for dyslexic people (McNulty, 2003; Burns and Bell, 2011). George was still happy with his school and enjoyed it and felt that he could perform well if he focused, which is why he felt confident in the classroom. He looked forward to attending school, especially when he felt bored at home. His mother supported his statements, saying that he was always in good mood and not easily upset,

never perceived his difficulties as a problem and his position about it was to try his best. George's personality helped him with his self-perception, because he was a happy and positive person. He was also popular at school and very sociable, which he utilised to his advantage, not being afraid of asking for help or shy about receiving additional support. However, the difficulties the youngest participants perceived as not upsetting could be considered as such in the future. This could explain why older participants were much more negative in their comments about their schooling experience.

#### *Working harder than the average learner*

School enjoyment for dyslexic learners is also affected by the fact that they have to work harder to achieve their goals, since they have to learn at the same level as their classmates, while dyslexia-related difficulties hinder their abilities and progress. Indeed, children with dyslexia (Hellendoorn and Ruijsenaars, 2000) and those with other learning difficulties (Lackaye and Margalit, 2006) often believe they have to work harder than others which was also discussed by participants later in this research. The additional effort they need to invest can cause pupils to become tired (Nalavany, Williams Carawan and Rennick, 2011). All this makes their ability to concentrate on what they have to learn more difficult since they have to overcome their learning difficulties at the same time. The most straightforward example of this is the difficulties participants faced when they had to write for a test or for school work. They simultaneously concentrated on the act of writing and structuring their answers, which was not always possible. Without support their understanding would not always be articulated on paper, which was reflected in their grades. The same can happen with reading.

Some participants refused to use reading and writing aids at school, especially visible ones which highlighted their learning difficulties. This signifies that these aids were considered stigmatising. Importantly, Gabriel felt lucky he was in a special literacy programme at his school but also felt he had to work much harder than other learners. This is related to a previous comment from Erica, who accurately described having dyslexia and being at school as ‘draining’. In the same vein, Jenna also talked about how much her daughter had to work to improve her grades and levels:

‘She works really hard, she’s constantly revising, so, I know that she’s not [not] putting effort in, she’s always trying to put the effort in, but, it’s just really difficult, ‘cause I think the amount of effort she puts in, she should actually be getting [...] in some circumstances higher levels. She’s done really well in her Science but that’s because she’s revised and revised. So that’s how she moved up there. [...] Funnily enough her Maths isn’t really affected by it at all. The Maths is good. But it’s just the literacy side, which...you know, the literacy kind of feeds into everything so she’s only got to misread a question and that could scupper the whole answer, really.’ (Jenna, parent, 42)

John’s mother, Mary, also stressed that if he overcame his reading and spelling difficulties, he would also improve his overall performance:

‘I’m concerned, [...] you know, once you can understand and read...well, then everythin’ else will come I think, you know. But it’s...if he can’t understand or can’t read it, then it’s holding him back, isn’t it? Which is where it is with John. I think.’ (Mary, parent, 49)

Emma had already improved her grades from the previous academic year and aimed to improve even more, which she attempted with constant work. It was a difficult task, since she suffered headaches if she read for longer than 20 minutes and migraines if she looked at a whiteboard for long periods of time. Because of these difficulties it is clear how challenging it was for her to constantly revise and move up another level in Science, a subject she enjoyed. Cody was also aware that she worked more than her classmates although she did not always notice it, a perception that was reinforced by her mother:

‘I do work a bit more because every time my mum keeps telling me, “You might not think you’re working harder than the average person, but you’re actually working harder than the average person because you’ve got to take in more information and then go round it, and then it comes out with the answer.” So I do work a lot harder, yeah.’ (Cody, 12)

The concept that dyslexic people have to work harder than typically developing learners has been highlighted in existing research (Hellendoorn and Ruijssenaars, 2000; Lackaye and Margalit, 2006, Burns and Bell, 2011).

### *Dyslexia and being ‘different’*

To return to an earlier point, children with dyslexia tend to feel different from others (Hellendoorn and Ruijssenaars, 2000; McNulty, 2003; Eissa, 2010; Nalavany, Williams Carawan and Rennick, 2011) and Kimberly explained how children feel when their difficulties are highlighted to others:

‘I still find that kids don’t want to have it [dyslexia]. But I think largely that’s to do with not being different. I think, you know, if you have anything that’s different, even like the wrong trainers or the wrong coat, they don’t want that. [...] I don’t think it’s really seen as a stigma. [...] I think *they* see themselves in a negative way because they can’t read and spell. But in their head it’s not necessarily dyslexia that’s the issue, it’s they can’t read and spell.’ (Kimberly, SENCo, 46)

Kimberly’s description of how children feel can be explained using symbolic interactionism. Despite her rejection of the term, Goffman’s notion of stigma (1990) is exemplified in Kimberly’s description: the cause of children’s negative feelings because they cannot do what others can, especially when it is culturally privileged. Even when they may not see it as stigma *per se*, they experience emotions associated with it. Research suggests that children’s self-esteem is ‘very vulnerable to feelings of being different’, especially in the first years of schooling and in matters as important as reading and writing (Eissa, 2010, p. 21). Kimberly’s narrative is supported by Riddick (2000), who found that dyslexic people internalised negative evaluations because of their reading and spelling difficulties, not because of their dyslexic label. Similarly, Jeremy believed that being different and standing out was not received well by his classmates:

‘The unfortunate thing about let’s say school students and peer groups, is that it is a very-very unforgiving environment and if...if you are different, you’re in trouble, basically.’ (Jeremy, 19)

Perceiving one's self as different and being seen as such can create social problems in a school environment (Hellendoorn and Ruijsenaars, 2000). Learning difficulties can cause young people to struggle (Nalavany, Williams Carawan and Rennick, 2011) or feel alienated socially (Lackaye and Margalit, 2006), which is reflected in Jeremy's narrative but did not happen with the majority of my participants. Other research also suggests that the difficulties dyslexic young people have can negatively influence their peer relations and cause bullying (Eissa, 2010). Learning-disabled children can be perceived as less acceptable than other children and can be rejected by peers (Yu, Zhang and Yan, 2005).

According to Barton (1993), when disability is perceived as inability to function, it can lead to unfavourable identifications of those who have it, considering them problem people. However, it does not mean that people with disabilities always feel different from others (Watson, 2002). Reluctance to be seen as different is the reason why many of the participants were not comfortable with using reading and/or writing aids, being taken out of class or receiving visible in-class support. Interestingly, it made them stand out from the other learners, which they wanted to avoid. Kimberly explained that as children grow older, their need to be the same as everyone else disappears and they therefore start to accept help, look for it and are glad to receive it, which does not necessarily happen at the beginning of their secondary education. She believed that delays in their desire to receive help, because they do not want to be different, acts negatively since bad habits become more established with time, making them harder to 'un-learn'.

*Escape routes*

The data from this research suggests that having multiple difficulties at school can lead children to seek escape from their difficulties. Josephine found multiple 'escape routes' to help her with her frustration while she was in full-time education. She started with play while at primary school, continued with excessive reading (even though she read slowly), and by playing music on her own. As she got older, her coping mechanisms escalated into negative behaviour:

'I found it very difficult (being at boarding school). I used to self-harm when I was at school. 'Cause I used to get so upset about things, I used to cut my hands or stuff, and...by the time I was in the sixth form I was anorexic, because that was...I felt I could control [...] that. But yeah. I didn't...I didn't like anything about school, I just...I hated it.' (Josephine, 41)

After graduating from school, anorexia, excessive reading and exercise were her continuing escape routes. Her perpetual frustration while she was at school led her to harming behaviour, which she overcame in her life. Thus, she developed harmful aspects in her identity because she was constantly distressed. Josephine's case highlights the need for support for dyslexic young people, as argued in previous research (Humphrey, 2003; Alexander-Passe, 2006). Even if school culture and society perceptions do not change, and dyslexia is still perceived as stigmatising, small support actions can make a difference in children's lives since they can aid them with their difficulties. According to Stryker, emotions are indicators of adequacy for performance in certain roles (Turner, 2013); and participants who found their performance unacceptable developed negative feelings about themselves, for example Josephine.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored some of the feelings that educational experiences evoked for dyslexic participants; the main aim of publishing these stories, is for those to reach teachers in order to inform school practice by making these perspectives known. Most participants stated that they could not enjoy their time at school simply because they had significant difficulties in coping with school demands. Since acquiring the required skills was such a difficult task for them, tiredness and constant struggling were what participants had to face. In cultures that privilege literacy, there is continuous pressure for children to conform to those cultural expectations, especially in a school environment where every day revolves around literacy (Burns, 1982). Children also have to conform to parental expectations (Coleman and Hendry, 2002; Lucey and Reay, 2002). The narratives from this research portrayed extreme feelings of anxiety (Safer, 1986; Riddick et al., 1999; Carroll, and Iles, 2006; Eissa, 2010) and dissatisfaction with their schooling experience, although there were some participants who could still enjoy school despite their difficulties. These experiences link to the feelings described in the second part of this paper, where the experiences dyslexic learners had are further explored in terms of how they affect identity construction and self-esteem.

From this research, it was clear that dyslexic learners want to protect their self-esteem and feel good about themselves, not 'stupid' (Singer, 2007, p. 329). The narratives from this research portrayed both extreme feelings of anxiety and feelings that they are 'stupid', as well as cases of young people who did not want to go to school. On the other hand, there were participants who enjoyed their schooling, therefore not everyone had a completely negative experience as a result of dyslexia. Pupils can be ridiculed for their

reading and spelling difficulties and feel very bad about themselves for not being able to do what others do; other children can also stigmatise them for their difficulties (Riddick, 2000). The above is explained using symbolic interactionism, according to which cultural norms (Goffman, 1990; Sets and Burke, 2003) and important others (Burns, 1982; Coleman and Hendry, 2002; Hewitt, 2007) significantly influence identity formation. Interestingly, negative mood, academic attainment and belief in one's abilities can contribute to their effort in school (Lackaye and Margalit, 2006). These narratives could influence school practice in terms of incorporating practices to improve these feelings and self-perceptions, which is a priority aim for this research. It is within children's rights for their education to develop their personality (UNCRC, 1989-article 29) and, arguably, self-perceptions and self-esteem are a significant part of personality. This becomes even more important considering the current mental health initiatives being incorporated in English schools (DfE, 2018a) and the significant role schools now have in preventing, identifying and supporting children's needs in that area (DfE, 2018b). This mental health drive is promising and could be the beginning of a significant practical change in schools. However, the goal of this research is to demonstrate that educational experiences themselves can significantly affect people's wellbeing *outside* the clinical spectrum; and that there is a plethora of small in class and whole school changes that can have great impact in supporting children, which will still fall under the wider mental health umbrella.

The findings confirm the notion of spoiled identity. Multiple expectations from parents, teachers and children themselves impact how those children perceive themselves in relation to their academic attainment. The cultural norms regarding academic achievement are so valued and prominent that 'failure' creates a stigma that 'spoils' children's identities. Children who are unable to reach the required standards in all

subjects, because their needs and difficulties were not addressed to the required level or with meaningful support, achieve fractured levels of academic attainment. The result of the dynamics between support and identity development lead to a fractured academic identity (Lithari, 2018), which begins as a result of dyslexia but is established by the lack of meaningful support.

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