**Fractured academic identities: dyslexia, secondary education, self-esteem and school experiences**

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Identity construction for individuals with dyslexia is significantly moulded by their transition to and experiences within secondary education. This is an interview-based study with 20 participants living in England. Support-related school experiences, relationships with teachers, societal perceptions about the importance of literacy and academic achievement and the reactions of others around them are the core focus. The findings are theorised using symbolic interactionism and this paper aims to extend Goffman’s notion of ‘spoiled identity’ into a more specialised term for children with SEN (Special Educational Needs), resulting in the alternative term ‘fractured academic identity’, the elements of which are developed throughout this paper from the experiences of learners with dyslexia. The findings revolve around identity development as result of academic experiences, and are mainly aimed at teachers, to inform their knowledge around identity issues and to also inform their practice.

Keywords: dyslexia; identity; young people; education

**Introduction**

This paper examines the effects of educational experiences and societal expectations on dyslexic learner’s identities, in an English setting. To achieve that, symbolic interactionism is brought forward with a more up-to-date, specialised version of Goffman’s notion of ‘spoiled identity’, namely ‘fractured academic identity’. There is a need for further research into the identity formation for dyslexic learners, largely due to the fact that, especially in the UK and the global West, academic attainment is privileged over other forms of achievement, for example practical/creative (Slee, 2011). Research on such issues tends to focus more on primary education and younger children. Consequently, research into student perceptions about their secondary education transition is limited (Akos and Galassi, 2004).

Children are expected to reach specific ‘developmental goals’ (Burden, 2005, p.1) that for those with learning difficulties are harder to achieve (Lackaye and Margalit, 2006). Erikson and Rogers (in Burden, 2005) argue that the only way to establish a strong, positive identity is by achieving these developmental tasks. Importantly, self-concept is made up of different selves, for example intellectual, physical, emotional, social, academic and moral (Burden, 2005). Research consistently suggests that dyslexic children are most likely to have difficulties both in coping with school and socially, putting them at ‘risk of developing distorted or damaged self-concepts’ (Burden, 2005, p.2; Coleman and Hendry, 2002; Wortham, 2006), which was certainly the case with some of the participants. Humphrey (2002a, p.30) suggests self-development is a ‘social learning activity’ and children with ‘special’ educational needs may have problems in this area.

According to Maras and Aveling (2006), having Special Educational Needs (SEN) increases the impact of certain stressors. Moreover, the issue of inclusion in schools needs to be further investigated (Galton et al., 1999; Lindsay, 2007). This is made more important by the number of people with dyslexia in the UK: 10% of the population (BDA, 2017; Dyslexia Action, 2017), with 4% of being severely dyslexic (BDA, 2017). Crucially, many children leave primary schooling without reaching the expected national literacy level, while one in six UK adults have the reading skills of an 11-year-old child (Dyslexia Action, 2017). Such difficulties are not helped by the well-documented attainment ‘dip’ that takes place after transition to secondary school (West, Sweeting and Young, 2010; Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012). These figures make further research into educational experiences of people with literacy difficulties even more important.

Wortham (2006, p.17) argued that ‘classrooms are strange social places, in part because of the discontinuity in relationships from year to year’; especially when starting the first year of secondary schooling when neither teachers nor students know each other, there are no strong models of identity established yet and this will lead both parties to use broader models in order to interpret each other’s behaviour. When individuals enter a new social context, members of that context will automatically try to use any pre-existing information about the new individuals, or to acquire new information about them (Goffman, 1971), which makes the transition period especially important.

**Methods and methodology**

The aim of this paper is to offer participant’s narratives are emphasised in an effort to demonstrate their voices. Specifically, narratives from the older participants helped in understanding identity development throughout school, especially after graduation, which was a very important point for them. Many experiences documented within this paper are negative, in order to point out the detrimental effects some experiences can have on identity construction; those were also the experiences that stood out most to the participants. Many of them also had positive educational experiences that happened mostly after they left compulsory education. Most narratives are not negative because of dyslexia as a Special Educational Need in itself (or a ‘disability’, which is not something to be used here to describe dyslexia); but because of the effects dyslexia had on participants’ educational experiences. Also, the negative feelings are highlighted with the purpose of bringing them to educators’ attention so that they can inform their practice.

The study is based on interpretive, qualitative research that involved in-depth qualitative interviews with 20 participants in an English setting: children, young adults and adults with dyslexia, parents of the younger participants and an education professional. Including the voices of both young people and adults was important for this research, so that a more well-rounded view of the identity development process could be captured. The younger participants were going through the process when the interviews took place and offered the ‘right now’ perception that was needed. The younger adults offered a more complete view of their education process, but were young enough to still experience a developing identity and to be close enough to their schooling years (in fact, some of them were in the final years of their schooling). Although parents were interviewed to provide additional narratives to their children’s perspectives and to explain their own efforts and viewpoints, their narratives are not presented in this paper, as its focus is on the voices of the young people and adults with dyslexia. Because all participants talked about support offered from schools, it was decided that an education professional would also be interviewed so that the processes would be explained and the school perspective would also be represented. The education professional that was interviewed was a very experienced SENCo (Special Educational Needs Coordinator – a role required in all English schools) and covered all the information needed.

The tables below are do not include every participant who was interviewed; they are brief participant portraits of every participant mentioned in this paper.

***Table 1: Children participants***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name and occupation at the time of the interview** | **Age** | **Area** | **Additional Information** |
| **1. Cody**  Year 8 pupil | 12 | Berkshire | Happy with secondary schooling, was able to work through her dyslexia-related difficulties. |
| **2. Emma**  Year 8 pupil | 13 | West Midlands | Not very confident with secondary schooling but was improving her grades. |
| **3. Gabriel**  Year 7 pupil | 12 | London | Not always happy with his schooling experience. Was negatively affected when he did not receive exam concessions and was struggling to come to terms with dyslexia-related difficulties. |
| **4. George**  Year 7 pupil | 12 | Shropshire | Happy with his secondary school educational experience |
| **5. John**  Year 7 pupil | 12 | Shropshire | Happy with his secondary school educational experience |
| **6. Katrina**  Year 7 pupil | 12 | Greater Manchester | Happy with secondary schooling but extremely unhappy at primary school. |

***Table 2: Younger adult participants***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name and occupation at the time of the interview** | **Age** | **Area** | **Additional information** |
| **1. Erica**  College student | 18 | Essex | Received strong support from her parents |
| **2. Jeremy**  Entrepreneur | 19 | West Midlands | Part of his education was home schooling and vocational training |
| **3. Matthew**  Architect | 26 | London | Had a very positive schooling experience. Staff members were understanding and supportive. |
| **4. Melanie**  College student | 17 | Essex | Had a generally positive educational experience |

***Table 3:Adult participants***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name and occupation at the time of the interview** | **Age** | **Area** | **Additional information** |
| **1. Jack**  Architect | 47 | London | Studied Architecture and earned his first degree, but did not complete the post-graduate study needed for full qualification. |
| **2. Josephine**  University lecturer | 41 | Essex | Schooling experience was negative but University was very positive. |
| **3. Kimberly**  Secondary school SENCo | 46 | Shropshire | Very experienced education professional. She also acted as a gatekeeper and offered access to young learners from her school (John and George). |
| **4. Mark**  Driver | 54 | West Midlands | Left secondary education as soon as he could, due to dyslexia-related difficulties. He took a driver’s apprenticeship instead. |

Some participants were purposefully selected, although most of them were volunteers who responded to published requests for participants. However, there is a purposeful selection element in all participants, since they had to either have a diagnosis of dyslexia or to be the parents of children with such a diagnosis. The experiences were analysed via thematic analysis and have been explained using a symbolic interactionist framework. Thematic analysis was chosen because unlike other similar analysis strategies (like discourse analysis), it is not bound to a specific theoretical framework or epistemological approach, it is flexible enough to allow the researcher to seek patterns within data items (from just one interview or within the entire data set) (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and it allows the researcher to develop themes and a thematic code (Boyatzis, 1998). This was very important for this research, as the aim was to both capture participants’ voices and to seek patterns and themes affecting identity development across the data set. It is important to explain that symbolic interactionism was only used for the theoretical analysis of the interviews and not as a methodology.

Utilising symbolic interactionism helps understand this identity formation in two ways: first, it explains how cultural context can contribute to identity construction. Second, the issues symbolic interactionism utilises are very relevant to educational experiences: important others, self-perceptions, societal norms and expectations, the importance of the social setting and identity formation (Goffman, 1971; 1990). The constant struggle to succeed (Lucey and Reay, 2002) experienced by children in the modern UK educational system can magnify educational difficulties and fears of educational ‘failure’. All the above themes are very important for this research and symbolic interactionism was chosen after the initial interviews were initially analysed, because it suited the emerging themes very well.

**Findings and discussion: Effects of secondary education on dyslexic learners’ identities**

The themes presented below are findings from this study that are related to identity constructions. They are presented because they were the strongest themes and not only important to participants, but also linked to school practices in England.

The main idea to emerge from this analysis was that of a ‘fractured academic identity’, which was also used throughout the analysis. Goffman’s (1990) notion of ‘stigma’ is applied on a modern social environment, focusing on educational experiences as significant contributors to ‘spoiled’ identities as a direct result of educational experiences for dyslexic learners. All this is presented through the words of their participants, so as to illustrate their feelings. The themes presented below are briefly explained here to introduce some of their context.

*Ability grouping* is a practice used by most English schools. All participants were significantly influenced by relationships with *significant others*, including teachers, and this is also an important theme within a symbolic interactionist framework. *Negative teacher behaviour* had a significant effect on the participants who experienced it; some were scarred, others reacted in more positive ways. Similarly, *good experiences with teachers* were another turning point for many participants: good teacher’s comments significantly affected learner identities. *Acquiring a diagnosis* had a significant impact on all participants and many described it as a significant turning point in their identity development. *Academic comparisons* are an unavoidable part of schooling experience, and were often very difficult for the participants, many of whom had *negative self-perceptions* at some point of their educational lives. Finally, *self-esteem and school performance* were strongly linked for the participants of this research.

***Ability grouping***

A very immediate and significant impact on dyslexic children’s identity and secondary education career is the well-documented for most children ‘dip’ in educational attainment (West, Sweeting and Young, 2010). However, streaming is what can have a significant effect on self-perceptions, as the narrative below demonstrate. In the United Kingdom, ability grouping (streaming/setting) is very common (Hallam and Parsons, 2013), especially in secondary schools where streaming is commonplace. This can be distressing for learners with dyslexia. Josephine, for example, found multiple classification confusing. She discussed the varying teacher expectations and how they made her feel about herself:

‘When I went there [secondary education], I was placed in the bottom division for maths and English. But they put me in the top division for the sciences and art [...] and music. […] It was really disorientating, actually […] because I was never quite sure what was expected of me, you know, one minute they seemed to be expecting me to be intelligent and ok and the next minute they seem to think that I was really stupid and didn’t know how to do things and […] it also meant that I was always being put with different students, so it was difficult to make friends. And that was another thing, which I found quite difficult.’ (Josephine, 41)

Alternating between classrooms and classmates was difficult for her and it could have also been affected by her difficulty with organisational skills. On the other hand, according to Kimberly (a SENCo), such changes can help children hide the fact that they are attending a learning support class, aiding those who are embarrassed about being different. Therefore, identity development can be either positively or negatively affected, depending on how the child experiences it.

***Significant others***

According to symbolic interactionism, many adults, especially those who are important figures, can affect learner identities (Hewitt, 2007). Teachers are important others in the lives of children who attend school (Humphrey, 2003; Glazzard, 2010) and positive or negative comments from them can influence the way learners with dyslexia perceive themselves (Glazzard, 2010) and the subjects those teachers teach. Pre-existing uncertainties dyslexic learners have about themselves can be aggravated by others (Ingesson, 2007). However, this does not mean that teachers as a group can be blamed for possible low self-esteem of dyslexic learners, but merely that some of them, either consciously or unconsciously, can affect it through their comments or actions. This is related to the culture of schooling, where excellence is the desirable outcome (Lucey and Reay, 2002; Rogers, 2007; DfE, 2016) and pupils who do not achieve those expectations are only tolerated (Rogers, 2007).

As confirmed by the data from this research, teachers undoubtedly affect learners’ self-perceptions. Arguably, teachers’ relationships with dyslexic learners can have positive or negative effects, depending on how teachers react to dyslexia-related difficulties (Hellendoorn and Ruijssenaars, 2000; Glazzard, 2010). According to symbolic interactionism, other people’s positive or negative reaction to an individual’s performance can significantly impact on the emotions an individual experiences, which in turn affects identity formation (Turner, 2013). Comments made by teachers and peers can affect learners with dyslexia and if the effect is negative, it can act against positive parental support (Glazzard, 2010). Therefore, teachers can also improve the way that learners with dyslexia feel about themselves (Singer, 2007).

The participants experienced both positive and negative effects from teachers:

‘My parents were told that my brother and I, and my brother is also dyslexic, were too stupid and we needed to go to a special needs school.’ (Josephine, 41)

The narratives reveal that some participants felt ‘stupid’ because of difficulties they experienced at school and this type of narrative came from most participants, highlighting stigmatisation:

‘So I just thought I was stupid, I thought I was stupid the entire time I was at school.’ (Josephine, 41)

‘I thought I was stupid, basically [...] I think that especially in the first years of school I felt like I was quite stupid. ‘Cause I wasn’t at the same level as everybody else. [...] [This changed] towards the end of school, where I was getting like the highest marking for coursework in my class [...] out of everybody and it was quite nice to be able to say, “well, I’ve got a learning difficulty and I’m still at the top, so it can’t be too bad!” ’ (Erica, 18)

Through the above narratives it is apparent that some participants had low self-perceptions, which concurs with Humphrey’s (2002b) research, who found that one-third of their dyslexic participants who attended mainstream education felt ‘lazy, stupid or thick’. Similarly, Zambo (2004, p. 87) found that many children with dyslexia felt ‘stupid’ or ‘lazy’. Poor academic performance can indeed lead a person to believe that they are not intelligent (Kloomok and Cosden, 1994). This can partially be linked to activities that seem easy for their classmates but are difficult for those with dyslexia (Burns, 1982; Alexander-Passe, 2006), which can make them feel anxious (Alexander-Passe, 2006).

Crucially, research consistently indicates that dyslexia can lead to varying feelings of inferiority (Arkowitz, 2000; Hellendoorn and Ruijssenaars, 2000; Alexander-Passe, 2006; Ingesson, 2007; Singer, 2007; Eissa, 2010) and many learners with dyslexia feel ‘stupid’ (Humphrey, 2002b; Zambo, 2004; Ingesson, 2007; Singer, 2007; Eissa, 2010), as did many participants in this research. Importantly, those who experience educational ‘failure’ can interpret it as a personal ‘failure’ (Dale and Taylor, 2001) reinforcing feelings of inferiority and stigmatisation. Such self-perceptions can be linked to dyslexic learners having lower academic attainment than their peers (Humphrey, 2002b) and memories of being laughed at by other children, fear of giving wrong answers in class and other’s perceptions that those children are ‘on the thick side’ (Dale and Taylor, 2001, p. 1000).

This type of learned helplessness can happen with people who have dyslexia (Thomson, 2003), especially when their sense of ‘failure’ is very strong (Burden, 2008). It is important for children to have a positive self-image in front of peers (Demetriou, Goalen and Rudduck, 2000). It is also important to sustain learner’s motivation (*ibid*) and therefore comments about dyslexic children’s writing or reading need to be made in a way that does not discourage them. From the narratives it can be understood that participants who believed they were ‘stupid’ or had many corrections and comments about their literacy skills, were discouraged from attending certain classes and in some cases were apprehensive towards attending school.

***Negative teacher behaviour***

The narratives below demonstrate inappropriate teacher behaviour, which shows that learners with dyslexia can have negative experiences with individual teachers. Such relationships are well-documented in existing research (Hellendoorn and Ruijssenaars, 2000; Dale and Taylor, 2001; Glazzard, 2010; Nalavany, Williams Carawan and Rennick, 2011). Negative relationships do not only involve dyslexic learners, but also occur in the general school population (Gorard and See, 2011). They can either depress children’s ambition (Gorard and See, 2011) or have the opposite effect (McNulty, 2003), which is discussed in Melanie’s narrative below. According to Singer (2007), teachers must be careful how they treat those with dyslexia in front of their peers and raise dyslexia awareness within their peer group. Ultimately, negative teacher behaviour can be imitated by students, which can lead to bullying (Dale and Taylor, 2001). However, it does not mean that teachers are the only ones who affect this aspect of identity construction for people with dyslexia.

A number of participants (Josephine and Melanie) received negative comments from teachers that were very personal. Melanie’s negative interaction with a teacher at her primary school initially affected her identity, but ultimately she reacted to it in a positive manner. She was unsure why that teacher behaved in such manner but believed that it was affected by her being a poor child at a school with children from predominantly wealthy families.

‘When I was at primary school, my, my headmistress of my primary school decided to tell me, quite nicely, that I was an idiot and I’d never amount to anything, so that really helped for the self confidence [...] I just thought I’ll prove you wrong [...] I’ll never forget that day, when she was terrorising me...’ (Melanie, 17)

Melanie’s reaction is echoed in McNulty (2003), who found that such conflicts with others can provide significant motivation for dyslexic learners, who try to prove them wrong. Indeed, according to reflected appraisals, when a person who is considered undesirable offers an appraisal, it can push one’s self-views towards the opposite direction (Sinclair *et al*., 2005). This does not come without drawbacks, since it can cause significant concerns or denial from people with dyslexia, who may even refuse useful resources (McNulty, 2003).

Melanie’s case, confirms Humphrey’s work (2002b, p. 5), who found that half their dyslexic participants, especially before an official diagnosis, ‘had been persecuted’ by teachers who did not believe that their problems were dyslexia-related. It is also noted that in mainstream schools, children can be perceived by others or even themselves as not trying hard enough (Zambo, 2004). Such experiences can cause learners to adopt those beliefs about themselves and strengthen existing ones. Teachers may also have negative expectations of students because of their dyslexia label and the stigmatisation it can lead to (Riddick, 2000). Thus, while learners with dyslexia are in mainstream education their self-esteem and self-concept levels can suffer, creating unhelpful ‘emotional baggage’, but it does not always influence learner’s perceived competence in all subjects (Humphrey 2002b, p. 5).

For Melanie, this belief was strong during primary education and although it improved during secondary, it still existed. She explained how she felt when she could not cope in the classroom:

‘I went to lessons, like, I enjoyed...I went to English, I didn’t go to Maths, didn’t like Maths, I just didn’t understand it, and I just felt like a bit of an idiot, not being able to understand it, and it, like, my whole class understood it and we’d move on and I’d sit there thinking “yeah, I really don’t get what you’re on about” so I didn’t enjoy maths for that reason so I just didn’t go in the end.’ (Melanie, 17)

Her perceptions changed when she started improving her skills, as evidenced below:

‘My volunteerin’ and obviously getting help with my dyslexia and stuff like that, my confidence and stuff built, and the fact that I, you know, I slowly began to realise that I wasn’t an idiot and I could actually do this stuff, I just needed to...the help to write it down and read it and stuff like that.’ (Melanie, 17)

Although Melanie was diagnosed early, she was unaware of her dyslexia, because both her parents and school officials withheld this information from her. Importantly, it was her right to be informed about both being assessed and the outcome of her assessment. As evidenced in her narratives, not knowing she had dyslexia contributed negatively to her confidence and academic attainment. Finding out about her dyslexia positively impacted her self-esteem, since she realised that many of her difficulties were dyslexia-related and not caused by a lack of intelligence (which for many children is a stigmatising characteristic). Awareness also enabled her to learn about dyslexia, understand it, learn how her brain works and how she could address her difficulties (Zambo, 2004). Arguably, teaching deliveries unsuitable for dyslexia could also contribute to the learning difficulties (Humphrey and Mullins, 2002), further ‘spoiling’ the identity development of dyslexic learners.

***Acquiring a diagnosis: labelling***

A diagnosis can provide relief, or in some cases shame, to dyslexic people (Ingesson, 2007; Hellendoorn and Ruijssenaars, 2000) but here, none of the participants expressed shame about their dyslexia. This demonstrates that for those participants, dyslexia was not a stigmatising characteristic as Goffman (1990) described it; to them, this label was a positive experience. Indeed, a diagnosis can help learners understand why they experience difficulties (Ingesson, 2007; Glazzard, 2010) and although they could internalise their label (Singh and Ghai, 2009) it still helped them understand why they experienced another perceived stigmatising characteristic, that of academic ‘failure’. Research suggests that for some children, labelling can lead to stigma but it can prove helpful for others (Riddick, 2000). Glazzard (2010) concurs with the positive effects a diagnosis can have on self-esteem, with the diagnosis having a much more positive effect on self-image than other factors, such as teachers or peers. For the participants of this research, the stigma experienced was a perceived lack of intelligence, which disappeared after a dyslexia diagnosis, rendering the diagnosis as a crucial part of identity development. Labelling can also aid dyslexic people to overcome their difficulties after seeking information about it, like Melanie did. Her narrative illustrates the importance of support for learners with dyslexia, since her confidence began to increase after she received the support she needed.

***Academic comparisons***

Even when children are not labelled, they tend to do it for themselves when they come into contact with other children. Comparing their work to others’ contributes to that. Gabriel (12) also talked about his confidence increasing when his work was better than others’ (in subjects he was performing well in). Crucially, he was very happy when he was able to complete tasks correctly, but when he made mistakes his confidence was reduced again. He was also confused about his dyslexia and being different from others lowered his confidence. At the time of the interview, he was in the process of understanding his diagnosis and finding out about dyslexia, since he was diagnosed in Year 6. Although Gabriel did compare his work to that of his classmates, he did not compare his handwriting. Similarly, Matthew only compared his performance with others in areas he was confident in, ignoring areas he was not performing well in.

‘[I] almost subconsciously, deliberately failed to compare myself in what I was bad at.’ (Matthew, 26)

The data suggests that this would be a good defence mechanism for children who tend to compare themselves to others, since literacy is a crucial part of schooling and comparisons in it could act negatively for their self-esteem, stigmatising the dyslexic learner. For example, Emma compared her work to that of others in her year with negative outcomes for her self-perception:

‘They’re really good at something and I’m comparing myself to them and I’m thinking “Oh, I’m rubbish at that and everything”. ’ (Emma, 13)

Comparing work to that of classmates commonly happens and Kimberly (SENCo) believed that it would be strange if it did not. The narratives suggest that comparing can act both positively and negatively, depending on children’s approach to it and how they use it. For Mark (54), the most important difficulty for his identity construction was being aware that he could not read and write as well as everyone else, which did not only affect him during compulsory education but throughout his life. He was frustrated, especially with individuals who perceived people with dyslexia as ‘stupid and thick’, where in fact as he said they only need to find themselves.

***Good experiences***

Teachers can also increase student confidence; Josephine had a positive experience within secondary education. It was with a teacher who helped her increase her confidence in English, a subject that she struggled with. She considered choosing English for A-level only because she deeply enjoyed reading, but was not confident that she could perform well. But during a lesson, students started asking the English teacher how she thought they would perform if they chose English for A-level. This led to the teacher discussing how she thought each person in the class would find the assessment:

‘The only thing that I remember that made me feel good about myself was [...] she went around the class and said, you know, “you’ll find it difficult, you’ll find it easy” or this and she came to me and she said “oh, you’ll find it a breeze, Josephine!” And I was SO shocked! Really shocked! Because I’d been in the third division for English, I wasn’t expected to pass my O levels or anything like that, so I couldn’t believe that she thought I’d find it easy to do. And what she realised was that I could understand, that I understood things but I wasn’t very good at writing. [...] And I remember that, because I just thought yeah, “oh she’ll say oh, you’ll really struggle, you’ll find it difficult” and you know, “you’re not good at writing and you can’t spell” and all of this sort of stuff and she says “oh, you’ll find it a breeze”. And I liked English from that point onwards, I really enjoyed it.’ (Josephine, 41)

Similarly, Gabriel had a conversation with his teachers that increased his confidence:

‘[My confidence] It’s increased because, like, I’ve been told that I’m good at it, like, I had [a] parents evening, on Thursday and, like, I was told that was good at the subjects I was good at, so...so that’s what boosts your confidence [...] when someone tells you that you’re good at it.’ (Gabriel, 12)

Taking this and the previous narratives into account, encouragement by important others such as teachers can significantly improve dyslexic learner’s belief in their selves. Importantly, Singer (2007) had dyslexic participants who relied on parents and teachers to feel better about themselves, something that further strengthens the importance of significant others. How feelings about themselves are constructed does not stop there. Research suggests that dyslexic learners can attribute their successes to external factors, not their abilities, indicating that they do not feel in control of their learning (Humphrey and Mullins, 2002; Glazzard, 2010). Nevertheless, this notion does not come unchallenged; other research supports the idea that dyslexic learners believe that effort leads to academic success (Burden and Burdett, 2005). Importantly, there can be truth in both views.

For Matthew (26), experiences with teachers varied, with individuals with negative attitudes in the final years of his primary education but understanding ones in secondary education. Some of his primary education teachers perceived his dyslexia as a ‘problem’ rather than ‘an opportunity’, which is linked to Jeremy’s (19) viewpoint about his dyslexia, which was positive. Naturally, people with difficulties appreciate and remember teachers who were good with them (Hellendoorn and Ruijssenaars, 2000). Young people’s identities are also affected by the way others see them and the way they encourage or discourage them. Those who can affect how young people see themselves are those who are considered important by the young people and their opinions are valued. Parents and teachers can therefore significantly affect identity formation.

***Negative self-perceptions***

Kimberly discussed dyslexic learners in general and how they feel about their dyslexia:

‘I think it [dyslexia] does upset them. And sometimes you get kids who just become very tearful when they think about it. But usually they will avoid thinking about it as much as possible. And then you get the other way, you get kids whose parents have built them up so much...we have got students like this, who...it’s like...well, learning isn’t important, you can’t do it, it doesn’t matter. And they are actually really bolshie in the classroom. And really, quite unpleasant to try and help, ‘cause they won’t take any help we invite on. Especially for teaching assistants who they perceive as having less status than teachers. [...] If their parents have said, you know, it doesn’t matter, you’re never gonna be any good at it anyway, or you’ll be fine when you leave school, [...] [they’re just] resistant. Or even obstructive sometimes, from the get go, really. A lot of it is down to parents. There’s very few parents who see dyslexia as a challenge to be overcome. Whereas many of them will either see it as...as their child is a victim, and therefore school is bad or they will see dyslexia as making their child special and so [...] normal rules don’t apply. And then when the normal rules don’t apply, the normal rules don’t apply to them here and they’re just getting into trouble all the time, ‘cause they won’t do anything.’ (Kimberly, SENCo, 46)

This also relates to the narratives that were presented earlier, where the importance of other’s support for dyslexic people’s identities was highlighted. Josephine was never confident while she attended school and George had problems when he could not understand lessons:

‘I was a very unconfident child, you know, I didn’t have any confidence or any self-esteem and I...I found it difficult to talk to people, and all sorts of things. I was just very lacking in confidence, very shy, and didn’t really interact very well and just kind of lived in my own little world most of the time, and the friends I made, I made very slowly and then they became very good friends, I wasn’t somebody who made loads and loads of friends. I think eventually I became verbally much more able, I was able to communicate better talking.’ (Josephine, 41)

‘Sometimes in Maths, ‘cause...I really don’t get it and feel like I can’t do it and break down. So...this happens from there sometimes if...I don’t get it and break down. [...] But most of the time I’m actually ok. [then when asked, he stated that he didn’t think about his difficulties too much]’ (George, 12)

Mark faced negative experiences from individuals who could not understand him. As in Dale and Taylor’s research (2001), there were people in the classroom who perceived him as ‘thick’. He was not diagnosed with dyslexia while he was at school and did not receive any support at the time.

‘I always knew there was something...but you could never say “it’s that” or “it’s this”. You know, because, everyone thinks “oh, you’re rather thick, stupid” or whatever. Or idle, ah, and that’s not necessarily true. It’s a fact that I don’t see things in the same way that everyone else does. [...] I’ve never honestly thought I’m thick. Which is probably...a lot of dyslexic people do think “oh, there’s something”...you know, they’re thick and stupid and all the rest of it. And I don’t, um, I’ve never thought I’m thick, [...] I’m stupid. The only thing I do know for definitely is that it’s held me back career-wise.’ (Mark, 54)

‘I was diagnosed in primary school but no one bothered to tell me. [...] It wasn’t until I went to senior school. So you thought it was your fault and it was your...I just thought I was an idiot. [...] And I was diagnosed quite early but, um, I don’t know, the school never bothered to point anything out like that to me.’ (Melanie, 17)

Jack had a similar experience, although he was at primary education when he was diagnosed. Before his diagnosis, he was aware that he was somehow different from others:

‘I just think...I didn’t know what’s going on. Before I was tested had no idea...I knew there’s something wrong but I didn’t...you know, had no idea why.’ (Jack, 47)

This feeling participants had, that there was something ‘wrong’ with them, is supported by McNulty (2003), who found that those feelings can result in low self-esteem and in some cases can feel traumatic. This feeling of being different, shared by many of the participants, is supported in Rowan’s (2010) work, where dyslexic participants felt different from others. Feedback and reactions from others can either reinforce or weaken this identity perception. This is influenced by children trying to improve or change their performances in a specific role (Turner, 2013), in this case their school performance, which is very important in a child’s life, whose main social role is to be a learner and achieve in school.

***Self-esteem and school performance***

This section investigates how school achievement influenced self-esteem for the participants. Self-esteem can be affected by dyslexia (Rowan, 2010), although dyslexia did not affect this aspect of identity in all participants. Most of them did experience a change in their self-esteem, albeit temporary. However, for some it had a profound effect, as documented above by Josephine’s and Erica’s narratives.

Ability groups (in her case, setting) used in her secondary school affected Emma’s (13) confidence negatively, since she had to be in some low ability groups because of her difficulties. Contrary to those who were put off by ability groups, these groups were not viewed negatively by all learners in this research. George (12) and John (12) were happy there because of the additional support they received. Interestingly, although Emma was in some low ability groups, she believed that she could improve, and so did Cody (12). According to Lackaye and Margalit (2006), when individuals have a belief in themselves, it contributes to the effort they invest towards their goals.

‘I’ll always try and get higher every time with my levels...’ (Cody, 12)

Her narrative indicates that Cody put great effort towards improving and believed that she could achieve her goal, confirming Lackaye and Margalit’s (2006) finding. Matthew also experienced ability groups in secondary education and was part of the ‘gifted and talented’ groups in mathematics and science, which increased his confidence to the point where he became, as he said, arrogant in those subjects. He was not in such groups during primary education, which he attributed to the different learning style. He explained that in primary school, learning was based on memorisation, whereas secondary education focused on applying knowledge, which increased his achievement. He was self-aware and was only confident within his comfort zone and not in subjects he was did not perform well in:

‘I knew sort of verbally in class, [...] in the maths side, I was pretty good. I mean I knew I was crap at, you know, English and French. And I didn’t really have a problem with that ‘cause that wasn’t really where I [...] wanted to go. I knew I needed to be up to sort of an acceptable standard to sort of get through...’ (Matthew, 26)

The only part of secondary education he did not enjoy was the learning support classes for his dyslexia, since he believed he was not approached in the right way and struggled in his relationship with his specialist teacher.

For Katrina (12), secondary education was a positive change. Her self-esteem improved significantly because she was not constantly repeating the same lessons and learning outcomes, which happened while she was at primary. It is important that learning difficulties and self-esteem issues are addressed as well as possible during compulsory education because otherwise they persist after learners graduate and attend university (Riddick *et al.*, 1999). Dyslexic participants from the research by Riddick *et al.*, who all attended university, still felt the effects of the negative experiences they remembered from their time at school on both how they felt and on how they performed when engaging with literacy tasks (*ibid*, p. 241). The narratives demonstrated how positive or negative reinforcement can affect children’s identities and how their emotions motivate them to commit to certain roles (Mead, 1967; Turner, 2013). How individuals adopt cultural expectations and try to perform according to those expectations (Goffman, 1990) was also demonstrated in children’s attempts to improve their grades and general academic performance. Participant narratives have so far demonstrated a fractured academic attainment, as a result of their difficulties and educational experiences.

**Conclusion**

Dyslexia has a profound effect on identity construction, since it fractures academic attainment, which is a cultural expectation. All the above signify that it affects self-perceptions and for some participants those self-perceptions were only improved after they left compulsory education. Since school days revolve around literacy and academic attainment, those who are not performing according to expectations can feel they are ‘defective’, which is a stigmatising trait. Such feelings not only stem from their own self-evaluations, but also from where they perceive themselves within the school community. Since certain abilities like literacy and academic attainment were considered highly significant within the school society, children could evaluate their attainment level against other pupils’ and what was desirable by their school. The participants seemed aware of their position within the class in terms of attainment, which relates to the above analysis regarding comparisons.

The above self-evaluations, along with those from teachers and parents, contributed to children feeling ‘defective’ and stigmatised with a ‘spoiled identity’ (Goffman, 1990). The notion of fractured academic attainment in relation to academic experiences is strongly demonstrated in the narratives. This is apparent in multiple ways, in terms of impaired academic achievement. For example, Gabriel (12) struggled but managed to learn his lessons but had problems writing during assessment. Emma (13) also had significant difficulties learning but persevered, despite her difficulties (which included migraines) and Jeremy (19) was unable to cope with the teaching methods at his school. Collectively, the notion of fractured academic attainment leads to the notion of ‘fractured academic identity’, since pupils become confused about their abilities, which vary considerably depending on subject and context. Institutional support, classroom environment, peer and familial support all influence individual’s academic identities, contributing to such variations. Students with dyslexia have to come to terms with ‘failure’, apparent and real, and often with achievements that vary across the range of subjects taught, creating confusion about their ability. Consequently, individuals can be unsure about where they belong within a classroom. Contrasting views of pupils as ‘bright’ or ‘poor’ contribute to their ‘fractured academic identity’.

Participants often had to repair their sense of self. While there were many participants who constructed healthy identities, it mostly happened after they left the education system. For example, Jeremy (19) rapidly rose above his difficulties, ‘repairing’ his identity and changed from being a distressed and overwhelmed child to being a young person with a healthy sense of self, without negative self-perceptions or embarrassment about his difficulties. Other participants also experienced this process, however for most it took at least a few years to reach that stage. For Jeremy it happened much earlier and his transformation was more intense. Interestingly, he was removed from school early and it could be argued that he had a healthy identity construction so early because he did not spend as many years in an environment that fractured his identity. A similar case of a confident participant was Matthew (26), although he did not experience the difficulties that Jeremy did. Again, it can be argued that Matthew was happier while he was at school because he received more meaningful (Lithari and Rogers, 2016) education.

The notion of ‘fractured academic identity’ adds to Goffman’s ‘spoiled identity’ because it is a similar concept to utilise for children with dyslexia (or other SEN) in education settings. It is an up-to-date, specialist version of ‘spoiled identity’ that fits well with current educational practices, particularly with children who have SEN. According to symbolic interactionism, interactions between members of a culture (school and/or family) define the dyslexic person to himself/herself and cause him/her to make indications to himself/herself and react to those indications (Blumer, 1998). Such indications could also be influenced by the comparisons mentioned above and individual’s perception of their position within their class, causing dyslexic learners to negatively perceive themselves because they cannot achieve culturally-specific academic expectations. Due to the prevalent performance-oriented culture, their difficulties are constantly highlighted and can be the centre of their school lives, since both support practices and achievement expectations concentrate on what many dyslexic learners are not able to do, contributing to those feelings. Importantly, with the right support those difficulties are overcome, however it takes both time and effort and young people can still become stigmatised both in their peer and school communities. Arguably, in a society where academic attainment is not privileged, dyslexic people’s self-perceptions would be higher; as according to Riddick (2001), cultural norms around literacy determine the degree to which dyslexia-related difficulties become a disability within a given cultural context. Similarly, if English was phonologically transparent, dyslexic learners in England would face significantly fewer difficulties (*ibid*).

By leaving school, they leave behind a time of their lives where literacy and academic performance are at the centre of daily activities and find relief when those norms and the struggle they entail cease to be the focus of their activities. According to Cooley’s (1971) looking-glass self, by leaving school children’s self-evaluations are also freed from teacher’s perceptions. They no longer live in a context where they are judged by their academic attainment and their perceptions of teacher’s thoughts about them are no longer as significant because they have left that community. Interestingly, most participants were able to positively develop their identities after leaving compulsory education.

Critically, according to the symbolic interactionist framework, multiple societal interactions influence identity formation (Hewitt, 2007). Interactions with teachers and parents cause children to evaluate themselves. If they are met with contempt due to their difficulties (Riddick, 2001), those perceptions can be internalised and form part of the self. Such societal interactions can be with other children, teachers and parents. However, evaluations from others who are considered as most important matter most (Gerth and Mills, 1971). Young people’s reaction to their school performance was influenced by cultural norms and expectations. Those expectations are also communicated by important others, who are crucial in identity construction (Mead, 1967; Hewitt, 2007). Discrimination and social barriers are still present in Western societies (Russell, 2003; Rogers, 2010; Richards *et al.,* 2012). If other’s perceptions do not change, then dyslexic people’s identities are going to be negatively influenced, potentially inducing feelings of extreme distress and negative self-perceptions. These relationships, and their effect on young people, are very important for teachers to consider for their practice.

Schooling and culture are linked, while the privileging of academic attainment is clearly visible in the schooling system. Dyslexic learners experience stigma related to their academic attainment and literacy because of cultural norms, which are reflected in school practices. Their fractured academic attainment is highly apparent during schooling and can negatively affect their self-image. Although this can be alleviated when they graduate, negative feelings can persist. This further highlights the importance of a meaningful education for all children (Lithari and Rogers, 2016), one that celebrates all kinds of achievement.

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