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# Understanding the Socio-Emotional Impact of Dyslexia in the Inclusive Classroom

*Trevor O' Brien*

## Abstract

Much of the literature pertaining to children's experiences of dyslexia points to low self esteem and low self-concept as compared with typically developing peers (i.e. those without dyslexia). While the specific difficulties associated with dyslexia may present challenges for those children, the author outlines how external forces such as the environment, relationships and teacher understanding may contribute to (or alleviate) such negative self perceptions. While children may learn and process information differently, negative feelings are often compounded by a teacher's lack of knowledge regarding this different way of learning in the inclusive classroom. In order to develop truly inclusive practices in schools, it is imperative that contextual issues impacting children are understood and that this understanding is utilised to improve outcomes for all children, including those with dyslexia. It is also contended that children should be at the centre of this process and their views on how they learn best must be considered paramount.

**Keywords:** dyslexia, self esteem, self concept, teacher understanding, multi-sensory

## 1. Introduction

With a chapter focusing on affective issues relating to dyslexia, it is necessary to begin by considering how dyslexia has been constructed. The author adopts the view that dyslexia is socially constructed and the impairments experienced by students results in disabling children, due to a lack of teacher understanding and environmental issues [1]. This disabling may result in children having a lower sense of identity, particularly in terms of self-esteem and self-concept. If dyslexia is socially constructed, then these constructs may need to be identified in order to address the socio-emotional issues impacting young people. These issues, as they relate to dyslexia, are discussed in detail. It is argued throughout that teacher understanding of dyslexia is a critical consideration when aiming to support all children, including those with dyslexia. Listening to the views of children is considered important in this regard. The author concludes by providing the reader with some key insights in improving support in the inclusive classroom, with a focus on the imperative of a multi-sensory approach to teaching and learning.

## **2. The social construction of dyslexia**

While the term dyslexia emphasises literacy difficulties, there is little consensus on a definition, with some favouring that the term should no longer be used and even argue against the very existence of dyslexia [2]. Although controversy surrounds the word and differing views exist, it is contended that dyslexia does exist, although it is socially constructed [3]. The identification of dyslexia along with labelling, assessments and interventions have all been a result of powerful social forces at particular times in history [4]. These forces which have helped to shape dyslexia have emanated from political, cultural and social pressures to adapt to what society considers important [5]. Often catering for the needs of the masses [4], those who do not conform to certain standards, including literacy, are particularly disadvantaged or “disabled”. Children with dyslexia are one such group. It is not argued that these children do not face challenges as a result of their impairments in literacy but this impairment is often regarded as a disability due to society’s lack of understanding of difference and of the full human experience [1]. This human experience is central to the lives of all children with dyslexia, particularly regarding how they perceive themselves as young people [4]. When children begin to view themselves as “lesser” as a result of their impairments and their self-esteem and self-concept are impacted, it may be timely to identify the factors which contribute to this and to seek to improve the outcomes for a group which have already become marginalised.

It is fortunate that the social model of disability has replaced the medical, within child, model as the latter often serves to reinforce negative views of self-worth and self-esteem, resulting in a decreased sense of wellbeing [4]. This model which is tied up with assessments and specialist intervention often ignores the inclusive approach which is about viewing children’s difficulties as differences between individuals. That is not to say that specialist intervention is not necessary at certain times but perhaps the focus should shift to exploring ways to serve the needs of all children where possible, including those with dyslexia [6]. Moreover, the move away from the deficit model to an inclusive model allows more for the possibility of change as educational experiences are often determined by proactive and well planned interactions by adults [7].

The cultural influence in terms of how dyslexia is understood and contextualised is important and some studies have demonstrated how these cultural and structural biases, which focus on children’s difficulties rather than differences, may result in “othering” young people, causing a reduction in self-esteem and self-worth [8, 9]. Understanding how dyslexia has evolved and is indeed a product of social construction [3] may assist practitioners and policy makers to fully comprehend the implications of these social pressures. In a literacy dominated society which, since the Industrial Revolution, has been closely linked to productivity and worth [4], it is clear that those with differences in these key areas would be at a disadvantage [3]. Therefore, the argument can be made that it is only when the construction of dyslexia and all it entails are interrogated, can we reach a point where all children’s needs are met resulting with an increase in self-concept and self-esteem. Socio-cultural theory suggests that a person’s identity and how they view themselves strongly depends on what society deems to be important [8] so, perhaps, it is indeed important to view difference and diversity as critical, which will have an impact on strategies and interventions which can be best used to serve the needs of a range of children in schools.

## **3. Socio emotional issues**

In this section affective factors such as self-esteem and self-concept, as they relate to dyslexia, are discussed. In order to examine the relationship between

dyslexia and socio emotional issues, the terms need to be defined. Burden defines self-efficacy as the level of confidence one experiences when completing a particular task [8] whereas self-esteem may be regarded as “a measure of how far an individual’s perceived self-image lives up to their ideal self” ([7], p. 37). While the two are often considered synonymous, there are differences which need to be clarified.

Much of the research in special education highlights the fact that children with special needs often view themselves in a negative way, resulting in lower levels of self-esteem and self-concept [10]. In fact, strong evidence has emerged that these affective factors are relevant to children with dyslexia and often impact students’ wellbeing [7, 8, 10–15]. In a study by Polychroni et al. [16], it was also found that children with dyslexia demonstrated lower levels of self-concept in literacy and mathematics compared with other children without dyslexia. The children (n32) in the research completed self-reported measures, which showed lower self-confidence in these areas and also the fact that students were less likely to read for enjoyment. This is hardly surprising if the specific impairments associated with dyslexia are not fully understood or addressed. In other studies, it is reported that children with dyslexia in mainstream schools had significantly lower self-esteem compared with those without dyslexia and, interestingly, children with dyslexia in a special setting had higher self-esteem than those with dyslexia in a mainstream setting [10]. These findings are congruent with more recent studies ([14, 15, 17–21]). If socio-emotional elements are lower in mainstream settings, it can be argued that it is the contextual and environmental domains which are responsible for this and not the specific impairments associated with dyslexia. However, if socio-emotional issues as they relate to dyslexia are contextual, then it cannot be assumed that all children with dyslexia will have lower self-esteem than their typically developing peers at all times. It may indeed depend on the quality of support they are provided with, including the use of appropriate resources and teacher understanding at a particular time. There may now be an opportunity for practitioners to consider the socio-emotional benefits of special settings in order to provide an appropriate and educationally rewarding experience for all children, including those with dyslexia [14, 15]. Novita [22] examined the impact of dyslexia on wellbeing and also found that there was indeed a correlation between lower levels of self-esteem and self-concept in the group as compared with classmates without dyslexia. These are referred to as the “secondary symptoms” of dyslexia. Children also exhibited higher levels of general anxiety and lower self-esteem in certain school contexts but not in the general living environment [22]. Novita argues that it is indeed the context or the setting that cause these secondary symptoms, which again raises an important issue for practitioners both in terms of understanding and provision.

#### **4. Teacher understanding**

While the research has shown that many children with dyslexia have a negative experience in school, questions need to be asked why this is the case. It has already been argued that these experiences are often impacted by external factors, such as the way teachers understand dyslexia. While a simplistic approach cannot be applied to a complex issue, there is a growing body of research which highlights the positive effect of teacher understanding and positive student-teacher relationships on children’s self-confidence [8, 12, 14, 15, 23]. While this may be the case, the opposite is also true. Children’s self-esteem may be negatively impacted when they are treated unfairly by teachers or when they are bullied by teachers or other children [12, 14, 15]. In fact, the critical role of teachers is highlighted in much of



literature [12, 14, 15, 24]. The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education [24] note the imperative of teacher understanding in meeting the needs of all learners. The agency contends that it is vital to view learner difference as normal and that all teachers need to be able to listen to views of children in order to appreciate learner diversity. It also acknowledges the pivotal role teachers play in fostering self-esteem in young people by understanding their key challenges and, it is only when learner diversity is fully understood, can teachers appropriately plan and execute interventions and strategies which may benefit all children. The impact of teacher understanding of difference has the potential to include all children and assist them in reaching their potential. The opposite is also true; when children are unfairly treated and ostracised due to learner differences, this may cause a reduction in self-esteem and feelings of disconnectedness.

In Glazzard [12] study, children reported feeling humiliated and ostracised when unfairly treated and reported that certain teachers did not really understand them. Incidents of teachers bullying children were provided, where teachers used to shout at children and use names such as “stupid”. There were also accounts of teachers encouraging class mates to laugh at a particular child. This lack of understanding, on the teachers part, of the difficulties associated with dyslexia, is noteworthy. In the same study, it was reported that the exclusion felt by some children severely impacted their self-esteem as teachers refused to accept their spelling difficulties. Many children with dyslexia will have difficulties with tasks which contain too many words and the speed it takes to process information. Teacher understanding of these issues is imperative and one needs to be mindful of the anxiety it may cause a child when they are unable to access a particular task. A teacher in this study used the word “rubbish” in relation to the child’s efforts, which undoubtedly had a negative impact on their self-esteem and self-concept [12].

Another study which highlighted the importance of teacher understanding when working with children with dyslexia is that of O’ Brien [14, 15]. Children reported being told to sit at the back of the class when they were unable to attempt a particular task and being quite upset. In this study, the students highlighted the school context which impacted their self-esteem and wellbeing, with one student commenting that they liked attending a special school because, unlike in the former, mainstream school, they did not get stressed due to the teachers’ understanding of their impairments. It is important to note, that while students self-worth was negatively impacted by negative experiences, they were also able to identify positive contributions from teachers, which contributed to their sense of well-being. This support and understanding was welcomed by the children who needed additional assistance. Children made reference to increased self-esteem, self-confidence and the fact that teachers gave freely of their time when striving to support children in accessing tasks [12, 14, 15]. In the case of O’ Brien [14, 15] study, the children mentioned the lack of pressure applied by the teachers in the special setting. This pressure to keep up is often cited as a difficulty for children with dyslexia. If learner difference and learner diversity are understood, it is probable that children’s educational experiences would be improved and that, consequently, their levels of self-concept and self-esteem may increase. The important and positive attitudes of teachers cannot be underestimated and these attitudes have the potential to include, affirm and motivate children.

Teachers who understand dyslexia are cognisant of the challenges with phonological awareness, working memory and rapid naming. It appears that students appreciate the use of explicit teaching techniques, the slower pacing of work and

re-teaching of certain concepts [3]. The importance of direct and explicit teaching is highlighted by some authors as key when striving to meet the needs of children with dyslexia [25]. However, it must be stated that strategies which could be employed to support the needs of children with dyslexia could indeed be used to support all children [6, 26]. In other words, evidence based strategies used to work with students with dyslexia could be utilised with all students, thereby fostering self-esteem. Understanding the differences in way children learn is a key principle in effective pedagogy and understanding the different ways children with dyslexia learn is no exception.

According to some studies, it is noteworthy that the words teachers use are considered important and impact self-esteem and self-concept [7, 12, 14, 15]. Therefore, the language of inclusion is also worth noting as words matter and have the power to include or, indeed, exclude [27]. Adopting a person first approach (eg person with dyslexia as opposed to a dyslexic person) may appear trivial but educators have the power to communicate messages through language which may impact feelings of self-worth and self-concept. These messages may be communicated without teachers being aware of them so perhaps there may be an opportunity for educators to reflect on the language used when aiming to support the needs of all children.

While it is not intended to address the contested and topical issue of labelling in detail in this chapter, it should be noted that many children value the label as it helps them and their teachers to understand the associated challenges. The label of dyslexia has drawn much debate in recent times [2] but it is clear that children have reported that having such a label may impact how they view themselves. Riddick [7] asked children how they felt about having dyslexia and some of the responses included the ways it helped them to understand why they could not keep up with their peers and also that they no longer considered themselves “thick” having received the diagnosis.

Riddick’s findings are in line with Glazzard [12] who reported that most students in the study stated that their self-esteem had increased when they received an official diagnosis of dyslexia. This may also have aided teachers’ understanding of the students’ related impairments.

Like in Riddick’s study, the students no longer perceived themselves as “thick” with responses involving issues of bullying and feelings of alienation before the diagnosis. Children were in agreement that the label changed the way they viewed themselves and they considered the label as almost empowering. These children’s views regarding the label is a useful way for teachers to understand the students’ perspective, even if teachers are not in agreement with labelling in general. Children’s views highlight the importance of teacher understanding, the relationships between children and teachers and how these have the potential to affect how children view themselves. Children’s wellbeing appears to be positively impacted by having the label of dyslexia. However, as mentioned, the general issue of labelling is contested and not clear-cut so perhaps a robust discussion on this should be left for another time.

Finally, in a section on teacher understanding, it is important to note that teachers are well educated professionals who perform an exemplary job in often difficult conditions. Therefore, the differences associated with dyslexia can often be addressed by adopting interventions which are evidence based and are informed by the views of children. In doing so, the psychological harm to children with dyslexia may be reduced and the deficiencies in self-esteem and self-concept may be addressed [4]. This leads to the next section which interrogates the issue of student voice in education.

## 5. Student voice

There has been a growing body of research in special education which focuses on eliciting the views of children on issues which matter to them [28]. It is argued that this process of listening to students should aim to transform practice or impact change in some way [29] as without change, there may be no point in the process to begin with. Moreover, promising to listen to children without actually hearing what they have said has the potential to further increase isolation and disconnection [23]. It should also be acknowledged that the invitation to children to speak about topics which are important to them is now a fundamental human right and not just something considered commendable [14, 15, 30].

Eliciting the views of students may be regarded as a powerful way to include students in decision making processes [31] and to ultimately improve outcomes for all children. Inviting children's participation may provide an opportunity to give ownership to participants and to increase children's sense of worth [28]. Researchers and practitioners do, however, need to be mindful of avoiding over interpretation of children's words or "adulterating" what they have said [32]. Are these really the child's views or is this what I have interpreted as their views? This process requires careful consideration of the sensitive power dynamics which exist between children and adults, particularly when discussing topics which may be of a highly personal or sensitive nature. When formulating questions, it may be beneficial to consider "how do I listen to children?" and "how do I speak to children?" [33, 34]. These reflections may help researchers to be aware of their own biases and their potential to lead questions. As children with dyslexia may already be considered part of a marginalised group, it is especially important to be aware of how I position myself in relation to children and how they position themselves in relation to me. Children's wellbeing needs to be a critical consideration, especially when they are speaking about affective issues such as self-esteem and self-concept. Much of the research regarding dyslexia and socio emotional issues is conducted from purposefully listening to children's stories and experiences [7, 10–12, 14, 15]. However, some studies have examined the relationship between groups of children with reading difficulties and those without such difficulties, ignoring "within group" issues. In doing so, the differences between the children in the group is not always clear [7]. Although commonalities exist between children with dyslexia, there must be a continued effort to listen to individual voices, which will more accurately inform policy and practice.

## 6. Multi-sensory learning in the dyslexia friendly classroom

This section will focus on the importance of creating a dyslexia friendly classroom by adopting a multi-sensory approach to teaching and learning. The benefits of such an approach have been documented in the literature and may serve to address affective factors associated with disabilities, including dyslexia [25, 35–40]. While it is not contended that this is a panacea for all children with dyslexia, a multi-sensory approach may alleviate some negative feelings associated with dyslexia and may indeed improve the sense of connection with peers. As children learn in different ways depending on the context as well as individual learning profiles [40], resources should be presented in a multi modal manner where children choose ways to access particular tasks. The adoption of a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach gives children this flexibility when attending to tasks.

Giving the child a level of autonomy may reduce anxiety and enable them to understand and process the task in hand in their own way and in their own time.



This element of choice is critical to support children who may have difficulty with print rich resources, as an accompanying visual representation may help them to scaffold the task (or make connections) with prior knowledge. Children with dyslexia are able to access tasks more effectively if the task is multi-sensory [41] and Smith and Barr [39] recommend using a “connective pedagogy” which helps students to make connections between what is presented in school and what they have experienced in their outside environment. While a multi-sensory approach is advised for students with dyslexia, this should not be confused with the promotion of various learning styles, which have largely been discredited.

While educational research does not support the idea of learning styles [38], there is still overwhelming support among teachers that teaching to a child's learning style improves learning [37]. However, it appears that the opposite may actually be the case. As it has no basis in educational research, teaching to a child's dominant learning style could lead to a decrease in effort and performance [38]. Although Reid [42] emphasises that children with dyslexia should be aware of their own style of learning, perhaps a broader understanding is required; that children are aware of the various ways they learn in different situations and at different times [36–38, 43]. As mentioned, it may be preferable to provide opportunities where children are able to make sense of various tasks presented to them in a multi-modal manner [40].

Reid [42–44] asserts that all learners with dyslexia can be taught to read initially through their learning style and maintains that children construct knowledge in their own ways according to the dominant style of learning. It should be acknowledged that children do indeed learn in different ways but perhaps this could be attributed more to their interests, backgrounds and abilities rather than to learning styles [43]. There is also a contention that children with dyslexia may learn better when their learning style is understood [42–46]. As there is significant research addressing specific differences associated with dyslexia, what is needed is attention to the differences associated with dyslexia rather than a blanket approach to learning styles, which is in effect placing children in categories [43]. Also, there may be a danger that children who are labelled as having one dominant style may be reluctant to take on tasks which they may perceive to include other learning styles, which may result in a loss of self-esteem and self-efficacy [37].

Even a proponent of learning styles such as Mortimore [46] offers a word of caution when it comes to matching learning styles to teaching methods as there are so many constructs of learning styles and “very little agreement” (p. 145). What does seem to be agreed upon is that all children learn differently and external factors may account for this. There is also the belief that if one does not agree with learning styles theories, then they are propagating that all children are the same, which is not true [43]. It is not disputed that children do learn differently at particular times [35–38, 43]. However, this is determined by other factors such as the environment, interest, subject and previous knowledge rather than an innate learning style [36]. Some children may learn visually in one context while kinaesthetically in another [36, 43]. This learning “preference”, rather than style may be understood by identifying the actual differences between children [36–38, 43] and this preference for learning should not be confused with a learning style [35]. The strategies which teachers use may indeed influence how a child engages with the subject and Reid [42] considers it “logical” to appreciate individual learning styles when planning these strategies. However, others have put this logic to the test and have been unable to find any support for the connection between learning styles and effective teaching [35–38, 43]. In fact, there does not appear to be any evidence to prove that teaching tailored to individual learning styles improves learning [38]. What is important, however, is that practitioners understand how all children



learn in different ways and in different contexts, which may require a return to the originators of educational theory, such as Piaget and Rousseau [36, 38].

It is considered necessary to find effective teaching and learning strategies for students with dyslexia who experience such a complex variety of learning differences [47]. However, rather than focusing on one mode of learning for each child, it may be beneficial to consider their prior knowledge and issues from the environment as these may be more indicative of how new information should be presented [38]. Furthermore, to incorporate a multi-sensory approach for all children may be more effective in terms of including all children [40]. This may be more appropriate, as meaning and understanding are constructed in different ways and not as a consequence of teaching to one sensory domain [37]. When this multi-sensory approach is used, children may be more likely to access tasks presented to them, which may result in improved self-esteem and self-efficacy.

## **7. Conclusion**

In this chapter, the social construction of dyslexia has been briefly discussed as it is important to appreciate the origin of disability and how it has evolved over time. It has been argued that this construction has, in some way, contributed to negative self-perceptions that children with dyslexia have reported. The key topics of self-esteem and self-efficacy have been considered, with an acknowledgement of the lower levels of these affective factors for children with dyslexia compared with their peers without dyslexia. It has also been acknowledged that children who attended special settings were happier and felt more included than they had in mainstream schools. This presents teachers and researchers with an opportunity to explore the key benefits of specialised settings when planning effective provision. The centrality of teacher understanding, as discussed in the literature, provides the reader with some insights when reflecting on the important nature of student-teacher relationships. It is contended that listening to children on matters which impact them is a useful way to support this understanding and to increase children's feelings of self-worth. While there are several evidence based interventions which could be used to support children with dyslexia, the chapter concludes with a section on the cruciality of a multi-sensory approach to teaching. This may help children to benefit from tasks, ultimately leading to a more rewarding and fulfilling experience for all children, including those with dyslexia.

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### **Author details**

Trevor O' Brien  
Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

\*Address all correspondence to: [trevor.obrien@mic.ul.ie](mailto:trevor.obrien@mic.ul.ie)

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