

Chapter 16

The Human Side of Dyslexia: An Exploration of Children's Self- Esteem and Potential Interventions

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores self-esteem and dyslexia and potential holistic interventions. Despite the increased interest from different scientific disciplines, dyslexia remains a complex construct. Moreover, dyslexia and self-esteem constitute a field of limited research. Evidence suggests that dyslexia tends to negatively affect academic self-esteem, although it may not be necessarily associated with negative global self-esteem. Research has produced mixed findings regarding factors that may affect the self-esteem of children with dyslexia, such as placement and diagnosis. Yet, it has been supported that intervention on self-esteem may improve self-perception and academic performance. In this respect, there is also strong evidence about the positive contribution in the intervention of significant others such as a supportive family, teachers, and peers. Therefore, it is important to supplement literacy instruction interventions with counselling services and socio-emotional support to promote the development of students' self-concept, self-advocacy, coping and emotional regulation skills.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, dyslexia has intrigued the interest of experts from various disciplines such as medicine, psychology, linguistics, pedagogy and social sciences assessing all its different facets (Helland, 2020). However, research has been mainly conducted within the strand of linguistic theory (Uppstad & Tønnessen, 2007) and has focused upon issues of etiology and remediation, neglecting the human side of dyslexia, that is the personal and socio-emotional needs of children with dyslexia (Burden, 2005). In fact, there has been a paucity of research on dyslexia and self-esteem (Burden, 2008; Glazzard, 2010),

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although self-esteem is suggested to play a significant role in children's psychological wellbeing, social functioning and cognitive development (Paulus et al., 2018). Both children's and adults' performance on different tasks (e.g., work, school) tend to be related to their self-perceptions (Cvencek et al., 2018). Education has set the boosting of students' self-concept as a goal and a desirable outcome, since it may act as mediator facilitating academic achievement (Shavelson & Bolus, 1982). Therefore, the intention of the present paper is to discuss the emotional aspects of dyslexia in association with children's self-perceptions. More specifically, the paper will provide an overview of recent literature analysing the notion of dyslexia, the notions of global self-esteem and specific-domain self-concepts, the relationship between dyslexia and children's self-perceptions and feelings towards themselves, as well as proposed interventions.

The Concept of Dyslexia

Although over the last years dyslexia has received increased attention by experts from different disciplines (Helland, 2020), it remains vaguely defined (Paradice, 2001). The field has not managed so far to develop a universally accepted and precise operational definition. Even worse, a variety of related terms have been employed and used interchangeably and synonymously to the term dyslexia (Elliot & Grigorenko, 2014). The discrepancy definition of dyslexia, which was initially employed, argued that there is a distinction between actual reading ability and expected reading ability based on intelligence measures. However, it received criticism because it failed to identify the reading differences between children with dyslexia and children with general learning difficulties and perceived dyslexia solely in terms of poor reading (Snowling et al., 2020). More recently, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-V) of the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013) categorized dyslexia (or specific learning disorder with impairment in reading) to specific learning disorders. More specifically, it defined dyslexia as "an alternative term used to refer to a pattern of learning difficulties characterized by problems with accurate or fluent word recognition, poor decoding, and poor spelling abilities" (APA, 2013, p. 67). DSM-V definition was perceived as progress; the identification criteria provide a detailed report of the difficulties in reading, writing or mathematics and acknowledge that, besides childhood, dyslexia may affect adulthood (Maia et al., 2017). Yet, DSM-V has received criticisms, because it relies on Response to Intervention (RTI) for documenting difficulties and this may lead to late diagnosis or even underdiagnosis in cases of children with dyslexia who perhaps have been working hard and have average attainment levels (Cunnigham, 2021).

Interestingly, most definitions tend to attribute difficulties of dyslexia solely to within-person characteristics. However, dyslexia-type difficulties have become a disability due to the huge emphasis placed upon literacy and the implications of being "illiterate" in modern societies (Riddick, 2001). According to Frith (1999), dyslexia is a neuro-developmental difficulty, but individuals with dyslexia suffer in contexts where literacy is a priority, especially in languages with complex orthographies. The acknowledgment of societal and cultural factors in defining dyslexia would perhaps provide a more holistic understanding and eliminate potential burdens.

Regarding the prevalence of dyslexia, it is considered to be the commonest learning disability among school children; however, the rates are uncertain and existing data is limited and outdated (Barbiero et al., 2012). Although literature suggests dyslexia ranges between less than 5% to 20%, a definite rate may be elusive because of the uncertainty surrounding the cut-off points for identification on the continuous distribution, differences in operational definitions and unreliabilities in the diagnostic processes (Wag-

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