

GREEN: REFLECTING ON DYSLEXIA AND ITS EFFECTS ON LEARNING IN REGARDS TO SELF-ESTEEM, IN  
A TECHNOLOGY BASED MAINSTREAM SCHOOL MAINTAINED BY THE LOCAL AUTHORITY IN THE  
SOUTH EAST OF ENGLAND

**Reflecting on Dyslexia and its Effects on  
Learning in Regards to Self-Esteem, in a  
Technology Based Mainstream School  
Maintained by the Local Authority in the  
South East of England**

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Rebecca Green  
Canterbury Christ Church University

**Abstract**

This paper examines dyslexia as a potential cause of stress and concern for students and teachers in schools. It argues that its effects on learning can vary from minor to extreme. In this investigation I want to examine whether the actual learning disability is not just academic but also one of self-concept and esteem. My research on a non-selective technology based school in the south east of England; I will also make reference to another school which is selective and dyslexia friendly. The interrelationship between dyslexia and confidence is key to understanding how to move forward and improve the learning of students with dyslexia. I conclude that the best way to achieve this is by creating safe learning environments, in which students are not afraid to ask to for assistance or help.

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Generally dyslexia is regarded as a 'common' learning disability in many schools; it is a cause of stress and concern for students and teachers. Its effects on learning can vary from minor to extreme; the question is what exactly the consequences are. In this investigation I want to examine whether the actual learning disability is not just academic but also one of the self-concept and esteem. I will be basing my research on a non-selective technology based school in the south east of England; I will also make reference to another school which is selective and dyslexia friendly which is very different and yet there are some similarities. The interrelationship between dyslexia and confidence is key to understanding how to move forward and improve the learning of students with dyslexia. In order to understand and to improve the lives and futures of students with dyslexia I will be looking into studies already undertaken and articles written by those with a key interest in dyslexia and confidence, and how it affects learning.

Dyslexia is a disorder which disrupts the interpretation of words, symbols and letters but does not "affect general intelligence" (Online Dictionary, 2014). A study undertaken by Morgan (1996) highlighted that children who do not have high self-esteem tend to fall behind in their academic studies and therefore create 'inferiority complexes' (Morgan, 1996). It is well recognised by many, that insufficient support for children suffering with dyslexia can have serious consequences. The issue is whether the support required to make a substantial difference is merely academic. A model created by Humphrey (2002a) outlined the concept of the self and showed how 'self-concept, ideal self and self-esteem' are all important factors in regards to a student's wellbeing. What I am interested in is 'self-esteem'; the model emphasises that this is the most important factor (Humphrey, 2002a). Self-esteem according to Coopersmith (1967) is a "personal judgement of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds towards himself" (Coopersmith, 1967, p 4-5). It has been argued by many that where a student does not have the self-esteem in their academic studies they will find other ways of grasping the attention of their peers (Kirk and Reid, 2001, and Scott, 2004). Furthermore Riddick, Sterling, Farmer, and Morgan (1999) agree with Peer and Reid (2001) that frustration in children with dyslexia in most cases can lead to antisocial and deviant behaviour, especially with those who suffer from low self-esteem. Molnar and Lindquist (1989) discuss the possibility that students may specifically misbehave in lessons if they see the classroom and class work as threatening, and therefore use negative attention to protect their self-esteem (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989). The problem with low self-esteem is that it will cause the development of negative and poor self-image; students will start to indulge in a self-fulfilling prophecy model in regards to expectations of failure (Riddick, 1996). Furthermore Morgan and Klein (2001) note that children whose experiences involve being labelled 'thick' or 'dumb' can often lead to life choices which eventually reinforce low self-esteem and confidence. Barrett and Jones (1996) believe it would be foolish and ignorant to assume that dyslexics wouldn't have low self-esteem due to their learning difficulties. There are strong links and ties between low self-esteem, learning difficulties and bullying (O'Moore and Hillery, 1992).

Scott (2004) argues the best way to combat low self-esteem is through improving a student's ability in literacy. He believes the core problem is that students feel separated and different from their peers (Scott, 2004). By bringing them to the same level we will alleviate any issues or differences students at the moment feel and notice between each other (Scott, 2004). Riddick et al (1999) argued "the powerful meditating effect of literacy performance on how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others" (Riddick et al, 1999, p.241). Riddick et al (1999) suggested that failure in literacy can lead to a distortion of one's perceived self. Furthermore, Thomson and Hartley (1980) and Humphrey and Mullins (2002) all investigated students suffering with dyslexia. The students seemed to have the perception that reading 'well' and literacy are the key to happiness and ultimately define one's level of intelligence (Thomson and Hartley, 1980 and Humphrey and

Mullins, 2002). Furthermore, in their research they found that as a result of this perceived definition of intelligence students felt that they would be ignorant and unhappy until they could read. Burns (1982) noted that children have to feel in control of their own intelligence and destiny or else they give up (Burns, 1982). Butkowsky and Willows (1980) used the term, 'learned helplessness', where students learn how to appear helpless academically and as a result are treated as such by the school and their teachers. Butkowsky and Willows (1980) found strong links of 'learned helplessness' in students with dyslexia. Pumphrey and Reason (1991) argued that students used 'learned helplessness' as a form of protection and a way for dyslexics to 'cope' at school.

Thomas and Hartley (1980) suggest that specialist units or schools dedicated to children with dyslexia can actually improve their self-esteem (Thomas and Hartley, 1980). Humphrey (2002a) noted that the experience of children with dyslexia has a real negative effect on their self-concept and self-esteem (Humphrey, 2002a). Humphrey (2002b) undertook a series of experiments which involved students from a mainstream school with and without dyslexia and students with dyslexia from a unit school (specialist). His experiment showed that there was some evidence that students in units benefited more than those students with dyslexia in mainstream schools (Humphrey, 2002b). However the experiment did not show achievement academically, it only looked at confidence and thus found that students with dyslexia in mainstream schools will need more attention and confidence boosting (Humphrey, 2002b). Humphrey (2002b) found that students in the units felt 'valued' and 'cared for' (Humphrey, 2002b). Most importantly, Humphrey's (2002b) experiment involved the actual teachers of the students filling out the surveys rather than the students; this can be a positive and a negative. In theory having a voyeur fill out a survey about the students can mean more information is passed as they notice things which are key for a researcher, however on the other hand they could be receiving mixed signals. Furthermore Humphrey (2002b) outlines that teachers are better qualified and more experienced to spot confidence and low self-esteem problems in their students due to dyslexia than any of the teachers at mainstream schools (Humphrey, 2002b).

According to Gilroy (1995), students who have had previous negative experiences will be scarred emotionally and this will lead adults with dyslexia to create a poor self-esteem and self-concept of themselves (Gilroy, 1995). Gilroy (1995) organised an observation conversation. She spoke to a group of dyslexic adults spontaneously without set questions. As part of this she noted down certain phrases the participants said which were negative, for example, 'hopeless at' was stated seven times; 'useless at'-five times; 'could never'-three times; 'typical me'- twice; 'never been good at'- twice and 'mess' was also repeated twice (Gilroy, 1995). Gilroy emphasises that from this impromptu conversation she could gauge how specific words such as; 'typical' and 'never' showed real deep rooted poor self-image linking to childhood. Furthermore Gilroy (1995) noted that after speaking to four of the five dyslexic students post experiment, this revealed that they 'often felt that they were thick' (Gilroy, 1995). Additionally, Osmond (1994) discovered a child stating that he did not actually think he was 'dumb' but that the system and what is expected of students at school made him look 'dumb' (Osmond, 1994). To take this further, Riddick (1996) interviewed a mother whose son was dyslexic who claimed it was 'traumatic' for her son and that he refused to go to school, so much so she claims she had to pull him down the road all the way to school (Riddick, 1996). This leads to the question, is it perhaps the classroom, peers and teachers who make the experiences for dyslexics an issue? The general consensus is that students with dyslexia who do not receive a certain amount of support are left scarred and suffer with behavioural and emotional issues. Furthermore Battle (1992) emphasises the problem which many face, which is that once an individual or child's self-esteem is ingrained into its self-concept it becomes very difficult and challenging to alter, and it will remain stable and certain (Battle, 1992). Therefore he argues that

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unless we tackle confidence and low self-esteem at a young age with students suffering from dyslexia we will unintentionally be setting a precedent for the rest of their lives.

Evidently, from many social studies we can assume that those children who are attended to and helped with their confidence are more likely to achieve both academically and socially. According to Riddick et al (1999) children who suffer from dyslexia but have been nurtured, have higher self-esteem and are therefore more likely to achieve and succeed in regards to their ability (Riddick et al, 1999). To combat low self-esteem and prove its importance, Burton (2004) undertook a project involving secondary students from a school in Winchester. The study was based on a similar study by Borba (1989) called the 'Esteem Builders Complete Programme' (Borba, 1989 cited in Burton, 2004). The programme focused on five aspects, security, selfhood, affiliation, competence and mission (Burton, 2004). Burton (2004) claimed evidence of success was from the school's teachers and headmaster who explicitly stated how they could see the improvements in the students' peer relationships and their general behaviour (Burton, 2004). Furthermore a programme initiated in Edinburgh called the Flying Start Programme also followed similar traits. The main aim was to improve self-esteem and self-confidence in its participants. The programme only lasted a week at the Leigh Academy in Edinburgh but according to Dodds and Houston (2004) evidence of success was not only seen by the organisers but the very positive comments made by the students themselves (Dodds and Houston, 2004). Furthermore Dodds and Houston (2004) concluded that the entire programme was a powerful source of support for the 84 students involved (Dodds and Houston, 2004), therefore hinting that perhaps concentrated programmes and activities could seriously improve self-esteem and students' academic achievement.

The technology based school in the South East of England (School A) is not labelled a dyslexia friendly school. In fact it does not label dyslexic children at all. After speaking with the SENCO, they explained to me that students, when entering the school, are all given the same literacy test which does not necessarily highlight which students are dyslexics and which are not, instead it looks for poor literacy and numeracy skills in general. Students who suffer from dyslexia and those who just have poor literacy skills are all lumped together in the same category and therefore are not given specialist support and care. Students are not helped specifically with their learning difficulty and are not given one to one support. According to the school's policy, students are meant to be included in all activities, teachers are supposed to plan activities and tasks which will include all students of all abilities. Furthermore the policy actually states that students have a right to an opinion on what support they can have and need. However at no point while I was at the school did any students make a contribution or even know that they could request extra help. The school is under staffed due to budget cuts and therefore this could have reflected why there was little attention given to students with dyslexia, for example the staff in control of literacy improvement went from four to now just one member of staff. However, according to the policy, every teacher is a teacher of special or additional needs, therefore stating that all teachers should be aware of the learning difficulties of all their students. Yet when I asked some teachers if they could tell me which of their students were dyslexic, they could not answer me and told me to check on SIMs (a program used to log and monitor the progress of pupils in regards to academic, social and behavioural). While at the school I made a habit of only using dyslexia friendly PowerPoints, when I spoke about this to other teachers they had no idea what a dyslexia friendly PowerPoint even was. The school takes on students with a range of abilities, some of these being students with English as an additional language and visual impairments. This could be argued to explain why support for students with dyslexia falls short; teachers are focussed on their other less able students.

The school employs teaching assistants; they play particular attention to students with autism, visual impairments and English as an additional language. Students with dyslexia, therefore in these classes do not get the attention they need. Students, as mentioned earlier are not tested for dyslexia and as

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a result they are not given the necessary support that they need. However, school A does give generalised support which can be helpful for those suffering with dyslexia. School A uses a program called 'Lexia'; it's a program specifically for students with dyslexia. It encourages students' literacy skills and understanding of the English language. The staff employed to monitor student's progress on 'Lexia' apparently keep an eye on students and those who do not complete level 5 by the end of year 7 will continue it until they do, furthermore if a student is really struggling, sometimes they will organise help in the form of one to one. This help however is just for the program and not actual mentoring as such. There is a social worker and a pastoral care worker at the school, in theory students who are struggling or lacking confidence in themselves could perhaps go in search of help. However, these services are really advertised as care for students with more extreme problems such as serious issues at home.

In comparison, at a dyslexia friendly school (school B), also in the south east of England, students with dyslexia are given, on numerous occasions, specific support and are placed on a programme of progression. Students are actually given different work to the rest of their class and there are also teaching assistants in the classroom with a focus on these specific students. Furthermore students are provided with one to one support once a week. This can seem like the ideal school for dyslexic children as students are mentored, they are given work which suits them and they feel supported. However one cannot ignore the fact that these students still lack confidence. In many situations students refused to contribute and asked the teacher if they could be left out of activities as they did not want to 'embarrass' themselves. Furthermore the students actually appeared to label themselves as 'dumb', which leads to questions about the actual support they are being given. Students are given separate work, therefore highlighting to their peers that they are 'different'. Furthermore the constant hovering teaching assistant causes them to sit back and not bother, they feel that those around them assume that they are incompetent and therefore become the self-fulfilling prophecy the school has tried so hard to abolish. Butkowsky and Willows (1980) were therefore correct with their theory of 'learned helplessness' as students at this school with dyslexia are not motivated, this reflects the policy as it assumes children are enthusiastic to learn, whereas students who struggle will obviously be willing to shirk a chore when given the opportunity. However compared to school A, these students seem better supported and achieve better grades. Students therefore at school A are not being treated the same and are not being allowed to achieve their full potential; this perhaps is a question of inclusion.

Inclusion originates from the idea that students with learning difficulties and disabilities should be included with those who do not have disabilities. The importance of inclusion is recognised internationally and as UNESCO (1994) stated "every child has a fundamental right to education...those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs" (UNESCO, 1994). In the UK parents are given the option of sending their children to mainstream or special schools under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001. According to OFSTED in 2006, provisions are made available for students with special educational needs in both special and mainstream schools (OFSTED, 2006). Furthermore the National Curriculum in 2004 defined inclusion as "providing effective learning opportunities for all pupils" (cited in DfES, 2004). In theory this means that every student should be motivated and encouraged to improve, this does not necessarily mean that students all get the same work but are given work which will give them the opportunity to progress and grow in confidence. This is the same for any student whether they are gifted and talented, physically or mentally disabled or have a learning disability.

School A, has interpreted inclusion in the sense that students without disability should be included in the activities or programmes of those with learning disabilities. Originally the program 'Lexia' was

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only provided for students whom they deemed 'needed it', however in order to prevent certain students constantly missing the same lesson, school A decided to make 'Lexia' mandatory for every student in year 7, therefore including everyone with and without disability and removing an element of discrimination. Furthermore there are also teaching assistants in every year 7 class as they are larger, meaning students get more attention. Additionally as an intervention style lesson, certain students who are struggling with their literacy or numeracy go to a lesson called the 'golden curriculum'. This class is set up to raise the standards of these students, although yet again their focus is not dyslexia, just general poor literacy and numeracy. As dyslexics are very visual and prefer lateral thinking, for them it is just a case of explaining things differently. Instead these students are lumped into a group of children who perhaps could force them into a self-fulfilling prophecy, 'learned helplessness' and/or a complete loss of confidence and esteem. Students who are made to go into 'golden curriculum' are labelled by their peers as 'dumb'. I do not think that students have to be dyslexic in order to have complete confidence loss; it is the labelling by peers and teachers which can do this to any child, which is why it is so important to eradicate poor self-esteem in any student. However it could be argued that at school A their lack of labelling means that students are not compared to their peers and are not labelled 'different' in regards to dyslexia. Students are treated equally and at no point did I witness a teacher using a humiliation technique. This is where a teacher purposely picks on a student they know will not know the answer in order to embarrass them into wanting to work harder and therefore save themselves from future embarrassment. School A strictly did not use this technique in fact the school's style appeared to be more focused on using positive sanctions such as merits in order to motivate students to improve and progress. Personally in my own lessons I also used praise and merits and in one class I issued prizes for students who had kept to the rules of the classroom. I used dyslexia friendly PowerPoints and hand-outs so that everyone received the same, but subtly providing students with dyslexia the much needed specialised resources without highlighting their learning disability. The school is oversubscribed and in recent years has received students of lower ability and therefore their results and statistics show accordingly. However the school still has a SENCO and for example VI (Visual Impairment), HI (Hearing Impairment), ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), BESD (Behaviour Emotional and Social Disorder), AEN (Additional Educational needs), EAL (English as an additional Language) units and more, they provide provisions such as overlays and printed hand-outs for students. The school is not purposely failing to provide for dyslexic students rather I felt that they were unaware of the wider issue, which is the self-concept and esteem of their students. As they have not been diagnosed or stated, students are unaware of the things they can do to improve and progress and consequently teaching assistants are unaware that specific support may be required or certain ways of explaining tasks may be required.

I do not think that the idea of the self-concept and self-esteem associated with dyslexia is a new topic; this has been an ever growing conversation which still has not been targeted in schools. Students are bullied and made to feel 'worthless' in our education system where help is not readily available. As I have mentioned when comparing a non-dyslexic friendly school to a dyslexic friendly school they both have their merits and their negatives. The way to utilise these merits is to take a serious review of what works. Students need to feel valued whether they have special educational needs or not. The effect confidence and one's self-concept have on learning are real factors that need to be recognised and acknowledged. Teachers and senior staff in schools need to realise that it takes more than just changing the work or explanation of tasks when it comes to children with dyslexia. My own personal experiences of dyslexia growing up are similar to those I am still seeing today; I have seen little change and attempt to change attitudes. The school's policy speaks of inclusion yet makes little attempt or reference to actual confidence building in those who lack it and as this paper has outlined, confidence is a key aspect of a student's ability to learn and progress. In order to progress we need to recognise that it is easy to praise those who achieve or are the so

called gifted and talented and forget to praise those who succeed in regards to their personal challenges, such as spelling a word correctly which they normally do not do. Success and achievement are words which many associate with grand and large achievements but for some, the achievement can be something small but still important to the individual.

I have outlined the arguments and evidence that raising a student's confidence and self-concept of themselves has a real effect on a student's learning ability. By focusing on confidence and self-esteem students will be more readily available to reach their potential. With reference to the two different schools, evidence of the benefits of labelling and lack of labelling are clear, students need to feel valued and understood but at the same time do not need to be seen by their peers as 'different'. However as I have outlined the lack of labelling causes students to label themselves as 'dumb', and therefore causes the dilemma that without support students are quick to label themselves negatively. As Battle (1992) stated, once students have chosen their self-concept it is very difficult for anyone to alter this. It is why it is so important that confidence and the self are tackled head on at the beginning of a student's learning process. This is not just for children with dyslexia; all students have a right to feel valued. The problem is that some students are felt more valued than others and this is what I would wish to change. I want all students to feel valued and that they all have the potential to progress and succeed. The best way to achieve this is by creating safe learning environments, in which students are not afraid to ask for assistance or help. For those who need intervention, one to one support is a must. We need to recognise that students are desperate for support and that they need to feel that they can ask for it. Dyslexia can have a serious impact on learning if it is not handled well, with a real focus on poor self-esteem and self-concept.

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