

# The School's Role in Creating Successful and Unsuccessful Dyslexics

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** This paper investigates school-based trauma and the life-long post-school effects of such trauma, creating successful/unsuccessful individuals in society.

**Method:** Three studies were investigated: (1) A study of N=20 successful dyslexics, many in business and the charity sectors, (2) A study of N=29 dyslexic adults, many indicating depressive symptoms; (3) A study of N=88 adults using a screening measure to indicate severity, looking at gender, degree-education, with profiles created to aid understanding.

**Results:** School-trauma was a found in all. Successful individuals enjoyed higher parental-child support, sports and non-academic subject success. As adults they were more willing to take risks, saw failure in a positive light, and frequently were self-employed, allowing a focus on strengths rather than weaknesses. Unsuccessful adults were prone to doubt their own abilities, self-blaming, pessimistic and getting upset when things go wrong.

**Conclusion:** School is a crucial environment that is the melting point of a young dyslexic's life, an environment in which they learn how society works and whether they can succeed or fail, setting them on a path for life. Both successful/unsuccessful dyslexics agree that their educational experiences were mostly terrible and in most cases traumatic, but each have taken different lessons from their time at school.

**Keywords:** Dyslexia; School trauma; Success; Successful; Unsuccessful; Post-traumatic growth

## Introduction

This paper researches the experience of dyslexics at school and how these experiences can either positively drive them to success or negatively drive them into helplessness and possibly crime.

The nature vs nurture argument has a long history; from John Locke [1] in 1690 arguing that humans begin in a 'blank state' and that we are the product of our environment and experiences. Of course Darwin [2] and Galton [3] should not be discounted in this discussion, and this argument is summarized in Pinker [4]. Locke, Darwin and more modern thinkers have argued that we are the product of our environment, and all human experiences are placed into the mixing pot to create the individuals we are today. Thus in the case of dyslexics, who experience 10 or more years of hardship at school, where learning in classrooms is not differentiated to their needs, and by teachers that do not recognise they have different learning needs and requirements.

It is argued that some teachers have perceived un-identified dyslexic children as 'lazy and 'stupid' through: (1) a lack of dyslexia/SEN awareness; (2) a lack of understanding of dyslexia/SEN; and (3) a lack of training to identify and differentiate to engage all learners in their classrooms, creating a lack of educational opportunity.

If success breeds success, then failure must also breed failure, thus it is argued:

- Successful dyslexics are a product of using failure in a positive way (resilience) and more success reinforces this positivity
- Unsuccessful dyslexics are a product of using failure in a negative way (learned helplessness) and more failure reinforces this negativity

## Literature Review

This paper uses a broad empirical review to introduce the reader to different aspects of a dyslexics journey through education and in the

workplace, and theories to understand their post-school experience. Sections include: dyslexia, school experience/emotional coping in dyslexics, social exclusion, defining success, successful dyslexics, unsuccessful dyslexics, the disability paradox, dyslexia and depression/mental health, and post-traumatic growth.

## Dyslexia

**Definition:** *Dyslexia (specific reading disability) is defined as a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities. It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points. Co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor co-ordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation, but these are not, by themselves, markers of dyslexia. A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds or has responded to well-founded intervention [5].*

Elliot and Grigorenko's [6] recent influential but controversial review of literature argued that the term dyslexia poorly defines a condition that affects not only reading, writing, spelling, but also short-term memory, balance, organisation, visual difficulties. There are also difficulties with no single model of diagnosis, with diagnosis

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being made through the recognition of difficulties in a range of skills with various assessment measures, thus diagnosis is made of 'dyslexic type difficulties'. The literature also argues that no two dyslexics have the same range of difficulties, a view supported by UK Government's report, which might explain the delays and/or confusion gaining diagnosis in schools [5].

It could be argued that there are two main perspectives concerning dyslexia, one looking at the root causes, be it through hereditary or damage in early childhood, with a focus on the deficits that such a condition brings and how it can be overcome through remedial educational interventions. The second perspective looks at the emotional and psychological effects of having a different learning style than that of their friends, family and peers.

This paper is concerned with the second perspective, looking at both the emotional effects of school, and how dyslexic individuals use such effects in both their child and adulthoods to bring about positive change.

### School - emotional coping in Dyslexics

Scott [7], Edwards [8] and Alexander-Passe [9-11] found young dyslexics commonly experience adversity as children, both educationally in school and socially through exclusion and bullying from peers due to their learning differences. Snowling [12], Hulme and Snowling [13] and Thomson [14] note that dyslexics, due to their difficulties in phonological processing, spelling, grammar, reading and writing are at a distinct disadvantage in mainstream education. Dyslexia Action [15] reported that teachers lack the skills to effectively differentiate for dyslexic and other different learners in their classes, highlighted through the lack of special educational needs (SEN) training for new teachers and infrequent continual professional development (CPD) of current teachers.

Humphrey and Mullin [16] and Humphrey [17] comment on the low self-esteem in dyslexics, especially school-aged dyslexics, with Scott [7] and Alexander-Passe [9,11] arguing that bullying by both teachers by their lack of differentiation/understanding and peers through ostracising and exclusion can lead to depression, withdrawal, self-harming and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result.

Lackaye and Margalit [18], Morgan et al. [19] and Alexander-Passe found dyslexics/those with reading disabilities can suffer from low self-concept, self-efficacy, engagement and other emotional coping that can have a significant bearing on a child's motivation. Many conceal/camouflage the true nature of their reading difficulties from their teachers and underachieve as a result [20].

Fitzgibbon and O'Connor [21], Armstrong [22], Morgan and Klein, [23] and McLoughlin, Leather and Stringer [24] argue that for too long the main focus has been on the causes of dyslexia, with little understanding of the emotional effects of having such a long-term disorder (their experiences/secondary effects), especially in adults.

### School - Social Exclusion

*How was your time at primary school?* I always felt left out, on the outside. *By your teachers or peers?* I felt I did not fit, I felt they were doing things I could not do. So it was like a two way process, if I felt I could join in, I would, and thus if I did not join in they just left me alone. Teachers generally tended to be rather supportive without really understanding what the problem was. (George, in Alexander-Passe, [9]).

*When you are at primary school, did you feel you fitted in due to your learning difficulties?* No, I never felt normal, I have always felt 'other' really, that is from beginning to end (of my school life) and to now. *You were talking about being different to your peers, did you think you liked being different?* I appreciate it much more now. *So you liked being different now, but not growing up?* I was happy to be different but I did not like the reactions it caused. ... I was upset that my not liking what they liked, caused me to be ostracised and bullied and that sort of thing. *Were you being physically bullied?* Yes, a couple of times. *You did not fight back?* I am four foot, nine inches now, so no. (Kirsty, in Alexander-Passe, [9]).

Dyslexics like other groups who are unable to fit into the socially accepted 'norm' of school, or even their own families of linear thinkers can feel excluded by society [9], a view also found by Morgan and Klein [23] and Scott [7]. Research into families of dyslexic and non-dyslexic siblings interesting supported the view that unless one parent was dyslexic (especially the mother), the dyslexic child can develop a low self-image and question their place in the family unit [25]. Unfair sibling comparison can be extremely painful for dyslexics, creating anxiety and stress in addition to that from their low academic output.

### Defining success

*How each of us define success is deeply personal. We each have our own definition of success, for some success is about what we accomplish for others it's who we're becoming and still other it's what we own. The central issue is not what your definition of success contains or if it's right or wrong. Instead the central issues is have you created your own personal and organisational definition of success?* [26].

Success is highly subjective and success to one is not the same to all, as noted by Krakovsky [27], success is an extremely hard concept to research. Success is context based, so can differ when talking about success in engineering to success and success in trialling a new pharmaceutical drug [28,29].

To summarise the above definition one could conclude that success is accomplishing an aim or goal, and in many ways it is aligned with fame, wealth and social status. This will be the basis of this paper.

### Adults - successful dyslexics

Logan [30-32] investigated the frequency of dyslexics amongst corporate management and entrepreneurs. Her conclusions based on a small response rate (43% in the UK study and 7% in the US study) of undiagnosed dyslexics (a screening questionnaire was used) found more self-diagnosed dyslexics as entrepreneurs (from an N=30 US sample). However due to the sample size, response rate and that no evidence of dyslexia diagnosis was required to participate, these findings should be taken with caution.

Logan and others argue that self-employment allows dyslexics the ability to work in their own way, concentrating on strengths, rather than suffering huge amounts of paperwork in middle-management. Success also came through the delegation of paperwork and other tasks, so they could concentrate on what they do best, talking to people and coming up with novel/divergent answers to problems. Fitzgibbon and O'Connor [21] support Logan's conclusions that dyslexics are less likely to thrive in a corporate structured environment.

Whilst dyslexic organisations herald well-known dyslexic businessmen (e.g. Richard Branson, Charles Schwab) as role models, are these realistic?? Biographies of such men suggest they delegate all menial tasks (note-taking, reading and writing emails, and checking

financial forecasts), the tasks dyslexics are typically not good at. This frees them up to think creatively/divergently, to sell ideas to other, and risk-taking; skills dyslexics can excel in. Gatewood, et al. [30], Stewart and Roth [31], Logan [32] argue that such skills are essential for entrepreneurship. Branson and Schwab have built global empires that are built on them acting autonomously - thus they are the brand.

Fink [33] investigated N=60 successful men and women with dyslexia (e.g. doctors, lawyers, educationalists, filmmakers, computer programmers, writers, administrators). It aimed to understand how diagnosed dyslexics had attained in prestigious careers whilst battling with literacy problems. Results found that: (1) they pursued passionate interests - subjects they were happy to read about and thus improve reading ability with; (2) development of persistence and empathy - to not give up in the face of struggles/problems and to empathise with others with similar struggles; (3) mentors were important role models and supporters in struggling times; and (4) denial of access to chosen careers by others - being discouraged reinforced motivation to overcome barriers.

Goldberg et al. [34] findings from a 20 year longitudinal study of successful and unsuccessful adults with learning disabilities (a similar term for dyslexia in the US as defined by Elliott and Grigorenko's influential study [6]) with N=47 participants. Participants were classes as successful by clinical judgement on six domains (employment, education, independence, family relationships, community relations/interests and crime/substance abuse). Those judged successful had the following variables correlated with success (Perseverance 0.88, Proactivity 0.90, Goal-setting 0.75, Self-awareness 0.69, Emotional stability 0.55, Lack of support systems -0.84, Emotional instability -0.78, Reactivity -0.70, Lack of goal setting -0.70, and lack of self-awareness -0.58). These would support Logan's [32,35] data.

Tulip Financial Group's [36] study of N=300 UK millionaires found that 40% were dyslexic, that people with dyslexia *don't do failure, they redefine it. Failure for them is a learning experience that will enable them to be even better. If they fall over, they just come straight back up again* [37].

Scott, et al. [38] found a main difference between successful and unsuccessful people with dyslexia was that successful individuals had at least one person who believed in them (mostly their mother) and encouragement of talents and hobbies [14,23]. Thomson also noticed that successful people with dyslexia were commonly those who 'got by' by being highly intelligent, but were often under-achievers, failing to attain their potential and sometimes suffering a lifetime of frustration.

### Adults - unsuccessful people with dyslexia

Morgan and Klein [23] argue that many undiagnosed children/young people with dyslexia leave school without any formal qualifications resulting in job opportunities being generally limited to unskilled work. Gaining an interview for most jobs in the current market requires many skills which adults with dyslexia find extremely challenging: registering for unemployment benefit by completing forms and attending job centres on specific days and at specific times, reading hundreds of job advertisements, requesting and completing application forms, writing personal statements.

The shortlisting process for most jobs requires the application form and personal statement to be checked for grammar, spelling [39] and If short-listed the applicant will be required to attend at a specific day and time by navigating transport networks, completing on the spot questionnaires about abilities, and to be able to recall competently

their previous experience in a stressful interview setting. Adults with dyslexia commonly fail shortlisting from grammar and spelling errors on forms, along with their lack of academic qualifications, and if luckily gaining an interview they may turn up on the wrong day or time for the interview, or unable to recall their past experiences making them look like they *appear to have* lied on their application form. Whilst disability legislation is in place in the UK [40,41] and US, many adults with dyslexia are reluctant to disclose dyslexia on application forms for fear they will not be shortlisted [42,43].

Disclosure of dyslexia is a common dilemma for adults with dyslexia. In the UK and US legislation is in place to put in place technology and other assistance to help them in the workplace, however many do not take up such facilities due to the perception that their promotion prospects will be limited. Morgan and Klein [23] suggest many adults with dyslexia may turn down career promotion than disclosure their reading and writing difficulties, which would be highlighted in more managerial roles.

Morgan and Klein [23] go on to note that children with dyslexia are often given 'well-intentioned but misguided advice' (p.100) by teachers advising 'office work' to those who have not performed well at school, but these are 'one of the least suitable options for dyslexic people' (p.100). This is due to guidance given based on written language skills and academic qualifications, based on the 'commonly held assumption that success at school is necessary for success in the workplace' (p.102). It therefore is no surprise that Kruse [44] found that 35% of long-term unemployed adults that attended a job centre in Sunderland UK (N=75) were screened as either dyslexic and/or had ADHD. This supports the view made in the UK Parliament [45] that 40% of unemployed adults using UK government job centres were dyslexic.

A high percentage of individuals in UK and Swedish prisons with reading difficulties or dyslexia (30-52% of all prison inmates in tested prisons ) would suggest that many leave mainstream education unable to find gainful employment and are forced to use illegal means to support themselves and their families [46-51]. Some individuals with dyslexia (depending on educational and severity) may find it very difficult, if not impossible, to learn to read, write or do mathematics [52]. Frequently, adults with dyslexia find they lack not only adequate academic and emotional skills, but also interpersonal communication and social skills as well - putting them in a greater risk of a continual cycle of failure. Projects by Hewitt-Mann, [53] suggest that such success does not occur for some dyslexic prison groups due to various unknown causes, however a lack of early identification and intervention seems evident.

More recently, UK research highlights the frequency of dyslexia in UK prisons. Rack's [54] study in eight Yorkshire and Humberside prisons suggested dyslexia was three to four times more common amongst prisoners than in the general UK population, with an incidence of 14 -31%. He found that 40 - 50% of prisoners were at or below the level of literacy and numeracy expected of an 11-year old (Level 1), 40% of whom required specialist support for dyslexia. He concluded that dyslexia is three to four times more common amongst offenders than amongst the general population, Herrington [50] reported that the Basic Skills Agency Initial Assessment recorded 60% of prisoners had a reading ability equivalent to or less than that of a 5-year old child. Lastly, British Dyslexia Association and HM Young Offender Institution Wetherby [48] indicated that problem behaviour amongst young people with dyslexia was often evident before *they were* identified as dyslexic, thus it could be argued that their adverse behaviour was the manifestation of undiagnosed learning difficulties.

Tanner's [54] study of adults with dyslexia makes use of a 'conundrum of failure' model to explain a typical negative adult dyslexic experiences:

- System Failure – this is explained to manifest when inappropriate educational opportunities are given to children with dyslexia at school resulting in 'academic or school failure' [17,55,56], argued to result in low expectations, insensitive teaching, ignorance, no or misidentification of needs and a weak curriculum. Thus the traditional educational system has failure and this has a knock-on effect in adulthood through reduced career prospects.
- Constructed failure – In the UK there is no mandatory screening of dyslexia or disabilities when a child enters school, thus a child is required to fail educationally for many years before identification and interventions are considered [57]. Thus as failure is a mandatory element of the diagnosis of an invisible disorder, with failure being condoned.
- Public Failure – Scott [7] and Fink [33] discuss and support the concept that in school and in the workplace the inability of adults with dyslexia to perform basic tasks (literacy and numeracy) makes their failure public. This can lead to humiliation and teasing as a result, and many choose to avoid tasks rather than give additional demonstrations to their inabilities.
- Family failure – Dyslexics in families with non-dyslexic siblings can feel they are unable to fit in to their family norms and society, and that they are failing their parents in their inabilities to perform at school, as 'strong literacy skills are believed to be the key to academic success' [7].
- Personal failure – Raskind, et al. [58] in a 20 year longitudinal study found that individuals with dyslexia/LD found that many with dyslexia experience continued failure and a fear of learning and new/unknown situations [55]. This personal failure to achieve according to family and society norms can be self-perpetuating causing lifelong self-doubt.

### The disability paradox

Researchers have begun to question why many individuals despite having disabilities become successful, enjoying a good standard of life. Rather than withdrawing and being ashamed of their disabilities e.g. being in a wheelchair, having depression, suffering from MS, or a life threatening illness, they are thriving. Levine et al. [59], Lerner et al. [60] argue the paradox is that many looking at them they might imagine a poor life satisfaction, living an undesirable existence, however current research suggests the contrary.

Albrecht and Devlieger's [61] qualitative study of N=153 individuals with serious and persistent disabilities, found 54.3% reported an excellent or good quality of life, suggesting the paradox. The research found that after the initial shock of disability (e.g. losing limbs in a car crash); their ability to bounce back came from looking at positives, reassessing life's goals, and finding religious faith.

Those who felt they had a poor quality of life manifested defeatist tendencies and a detachment from life. Albrecht and Devlieger concluded that those who perceived a high quality of life, whilst having a disability, identified a 'secondary gain' occurring. They *'adapted to their new conditions and made sense of them, finding enriched meaning in their life secondary to their disability, and reinterpret their lives and reconstitute personal meaning in their social roles'*. They *'understood*

*their condition, took control, and introduced an order and predictability in their lives. They also learned what is and isn't possible, and developed a value set that helped them make sense of their disability, and harness support and other (support) networks'* (p. 986). In essence they were empowered rather than dis-powered by their disabilities, finding the resolve to improve the world, and identify a role for them in society. Interestingly the difficulties and scars *from their trauma* came from their discrepancies: what they would like to do *compared* to what they could do, what they used to be able to do and what they can now do.

This paradox highlights the importance of personal experience with disability, in defining the self, one's view of the world, social contexts, and social relationships. Lys and Pernice [62] suggesting a negative bias of attitudes and expectations by the public and health care workers towards persons with disabilities. Connally [63] also found negative public perceptions of life for individuals with disabilities, understood by the work of Stiker [64] that disability introduces chaos, ambiguity and unpredictability into the social world of the individual and community. Albrecht and Devlieger suggests that *'disability shatters preconceived expectations and norms, and calls accepted values and notions of well-being into question'* (P. 980). Antonovsky [65], Lundberg [66] concluded that individuals with disabilities have the capacity to find meaning, value and motivation to persist in the face of adversity, thus meaningfulness.

### Dyslexia and depression/mental health

There is very little research that actually supports a depression correlation with dyslexia; the majority of empirical references are based on observations [7,67-69], rather than actual studies. Two such studies exist which investigated depression with dyslexic children and teenagers. Boetsch et al. [70] found that the reports of depression by parents and teachers with primary school children, were not confirmed by children's own self-reports of depressive symptomatology. The second study, by Alexander-Passe [71] used the Beck Depression Inventory [72], The Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations [73] and The Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventory [74] measures with N=19 teenagers with dyslexia. Results strongly suggested gender differences, with females using more emotional and avoidance based coping, resulting in lower percentile scores in general and academic self-esteem with moderate depression. Males tend to use more task based coping, resulting in normal percentile self-esteem levels and minimal depression.

Leonova [75] in her review of dyslexia and depression noted that different measure and samples are commonly used and many ignore the importance of gender and educational establishment factors. Three studies were seen as robust [71,76,77].

Alexander-Passe [9] found that qualitative evidence strongly suggests that difference and negative interactions with society were the triggers that led dyslexic individual's suffering into depression and other manifestations. One participant (Jean) noted that she felt unable to fit into perceived 'normal' stereotypical images and the pressure to fit into such images was highly damaging. As discussed earlier, participants felt different to their peers and dealing with this on a long term basis was emotionally damaging. The need to fit into society stereotypes; is great and when one cannot, the realisation is huge. Depression comes from that realisation that they are different, judged by others as inferior and that they are helpless to change their situation.

Scott [7] hypothesises that many with dyslexia either internalize or externalize the psychological effect of having dyslexia, with the former more likely. Support comes from Grigorenko [78] suggesting *'internalizing, effects include stress, depression and anxiety and, on*

balance, are those most widely associated with learning disabilities'. Scott concluded that externalising (aggression) strategies were more common in dyslexic males, and internalizing strategies such as depression and withdrawal were most commonly found in dyslexic females. Riddick [79] speculated that the levels of self-blame, sensitivity to others and over-perfections of others amongst dyslexic females made them particularly vulnerable to adjustment problems. Duane [68] and Fawcett [80] note 'in terms of emotional stability, her study suggests a threefold increase in psychiatric diagnosis in children with dyslexia, in particular of conduct disorders and depression'. Fawcett suggests that such problems are a natural sequence of years of school failure [80].

Alexander-Passe [9], Scott [7], and McNutty [55] agree that dyslexia is camouflaged in adulthood, due to advanced coping strategies allowing a sense of normality to be projected. Adults with dyslexia are very conscious of their differences, so create a secondary persona to operate in the wider community [7,9,10]. Whilst this persona works the majority of the time; however when it cracks can be highly embarrassing, demonstrates how vulnerable they can be, and confirms their abnormality compared to their peers.

Depression is a frequent complication in dyslexia, according to Ryan [67], Burden [81] and Scott [7]. Although most individuals with dyslexia are not clinically depressed, children with this type of learning difficulty are at higher risk of intense emotional feelings of pain and sorrow.

### Post-traumatic growth (PTG)

**Definition:** the term refers to positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances [82].

PTG is a relatively new term introduced by the American Psychiatric Association in [83,84], and whilst examples of PTG have been documented from the last century e.g. Roosevelt renewed empathy when being struck down with Polio and becoming President of the USA, cancer sufferers who have been moved to have a renewed love of life and focus, and lastly Holocaust survivors who have been moved to share their traumatic and life changing experiences on a worldwide stage. Linley and Joseph [85] argue that 30-70% survivors of trauma have said they have experienced positive change in one form or another. The term has recently been used to trigger new research to understand the growth gained through trauma and adversity [86,87], as a related positive psychology stance [88].

Tedeschi and Calhoun [89] argue that major life crises typically result in unpleasant psychological reactions, however PTG happens when attempts are made to adapt to highly negative sets of circumstances that can engender high levels of psychological distress. Tedeschi and Calhoun after reviewing available literature, argue that growth is more frequent than psychiatric disorders following high levels of trauma, however note that growth and personal distress often coexist, and stories over the centuries point to growth from distress e.g. Christianity: after Jesus's death his disciples whilst traumed go onto create a powerful new religion; Islamic: Mohammed's suffering is instrumental to his great work.

Examples of PTG have been documented in those surviving/suffering from:

- Bereavement [90]
- HIV infection [91]

- Death of a child [92,93]
- Heart attacks [94]
- Sexual assault and sexual abuse [95]
- Combat [96]

It is argued by Tedeschi and Calhoun [89] and Schoulte, et al. [97] that the following PTG are typical manifestations:

- positive psychological change [98]
- discovery of meaning [99]
- positive emotions [100]
- positive reinterpretation [101]

Tedeschi and Calhoun define the growth part of PTG comes not as a direct result of the trauma, but the individual's struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma that defines if PTG is occurring. They use the metaphor of an earthquake, in that it is not the shake that causes the psychological trauma, but the effects of the shake in the building, loss of life, the change from predictable to unpredictability of life, and changes to their regular life pattern which cause the trauma. Wright [102] suggests that PTG is the consequence of psychological survival to coexist with the trauma. McFarland and Alvaro [103] argue that most people have positive life changes without a trauma; however Tedeschi and Calhoun [104] counter that those who have experienced PTG have higher levels of personal change.

It is argued with PTG that it is not a return to baseline levels of activity that defines whether an individual has PTG or not, but the improvement that is experienced, and that it is more common in adolescents and adults than children because PTG implies an established set of values changed through trauma.

Joseph and Linley [105] aimed to understand the activity of PTG, by categorising it as person-centred 'organismic valuing theory', in that trauma causes a break down in self-structure (personal concepts of themselves and their place around others) and that people are intrinsically motivated towards processing new trauma-related information in ways to maximise their psychological well-being.

The metaphor of a shattered vase is used: imagine that one day you break a vase by accident. You can either try to piece it together to badly re-form the original shape, or you use the pieces to create a beautiful new mosaic. If your perspective is to bin the pieces and give up, or try and rebuild in entirety as the original vase - an impossible task as it will still be fractured, vulnerable and prone to break again. But if you take on board that a return to the original will be impossible and that you need to create a new use for the pieces - then you are more realistic and a new use can be considered.

Gunty, et al. [106] and Zoellner and Maercker [107] question PTG the weak correlation between the actual and perceived growth, and that the growth is maybe illusionary as a way of coping with distress needs a *bit more explanation*. Peterson and Seligman [108] with before and after studies have demonstrated that growth occurs, the measure constructed to date rely on biased non-medical and somewhat biased personal opinion (e.g. The Psychological Well-Being Post Traumatic Changes Questionnaire-PWB-PTCQ by Joseph, et al. [109]).

In the case of those with dyslexia, there is very little to find. Alexander-Passe [9,11] argue the concept of the two condition coexisting in a study of N=29 adults with dyslexia. It is argued that a

pre-school dyslexic child is normally taught through multi-sensory activity e.g. play and hands on learning with the need to read or write. Thus when a dyslexic child enters school, they come with an established set of rules (a belief system and assumptions about themselves in the world, which has guided them successfully to this point) about learning and believe themselves to be normal learners, thus at the point that reading and writing is introduced, there is a change that they may or may not be able to develop with as per their peers. The first trauma takes place in that they see their peers understanding and learning a new language of learning and they are unable to. The second and longer trauma is the ongoing effect on others of their inability to learn as per their peers.

### Studies underpinning this paper

Alexander-Passe [110] notes the initial results from a study of Dyslexia and Success, investigating N=20 dyslexic adults (diagnosed by educational psychologists or specialist teachers), who identify themselves as successful. They were able to provide evidence of their success by being: mainly self-employed, degree-educated, some with master degrees, professionals, senior managers, entrepreneurs and business leaders in their chosen fields. An investigative interview script was used to draw themes of motivation, leadership qualities, attitudes towards risk and failure, entrepreneurship. Questions were posed concerning their families and childhoods, looking at their school experiences as a means to understand their motivation to succeed post-school.

Alexander-Passe [9] investigated N=29 dyslexia adults (diagnosed by educational psychologists or specialist teachers), some with and without a diagnosis of depression (some clinical). An investigative interview script was used to review childhood trauma and adult coping strategies (negative and positive). Whilst equal numbers of depressed to non-depressed were selected as a sample, the majority N=22 indicated depressive symptoms: self-harm, avoidance, withdrawal, attempted suicide, risk behaviours.

Alexander-Passe [111] details a study of N=88 adults and used the Adult Dyslexia Checklist [112] to identify the severity of dyslexia compared to two measures of personality [113,114], personally approved by Professor Eysenck for use. N=46 self-reported adults with dyslexia (N=21 males and N=25 females, mean age 35.63 yrs, SD 11.543) and N=42 adult controls (N=17 males and N=25 females, mean age 43.41 yrs, SD 8.180) were recruited. The measures of: emotional instability vs. Adjustment; Introversion vs. Extroversion were used to identify differing personality profiles for those with dyslexia vary according to its severity. It also allowed a comparison of gender and degree/non-degree education as a means to investigate dyslexia and academic success.

### Success - crucial factors [113]

#### Family factors/other supportive adults

- What I remember is the amount of input my mom had. She encouraged me to draw and to write diary entries (AHD)
- My parents have always been very, very supportive (TPE)
- My mother, I would never have got through school if it hadn't been for her. If I didn't want to go into school, she didn't send me. That's how I coped with school. She always made me do my homework. She used to sit down at the kitchen table with me for 3-4 hours a night.

- It was effort not results that mattered to my mum (PUY)
- Fortunately, I had my mum, who was very supportive, as she was always the antidote to anything that I did wrong at school. If my self-esteem would have gone down, it didn't, because she was so encouraging. It balanced itself out (NHN)

#### Advance of tasks

- One tried to do as little as possible, sit at the back of the class, I was consciously trying to avoid reading aloud. Oh god, I hated that. (JBB)
- You just made sure you didn't catch the teacher's eye (TPE)
- I would shy away from writing (PSS)
- I think it suited me to be the cheeky one at the back of the class making everyone laugh (PAT)
- My whole life at school was about not being discovered, keeping my head down and out of trouble, and that fear has stayed with me for 35 years (JEA)
- I coped by not going into school on Mondays and Thursdays, because we had spelling test on those days. One year they made a fuss as I had missed 71 days of school, which they felt was unacceptable (JEA)

#### Opportunity to show strengths/tasting success (At School)

- Photography, skiing, sailing (JBB)
- Sports, Art and Design, and selling my ceramics and wheeling dealing (TPE)
- Football and wrestling (TBA)
- Music (SDE)
- Drama, Art and Design (PS and PU)
- Art, design, music (JLA)
- Spoken German (EWD)
- Business ventures, stocks and shares, poker, photography (GHD)
- Sports (AHD)
- Music (AMJ)

#### Use of assisted technology/coping strategies (As an adult)

- I do everything on a PC, I avoid writing, as my writing makes me look mentally retarded. It's terrible, and then you have the spelling part of it (TBA)
- I avoid writing notes in meetings, but will record bullet points (PSS)
- Work late in the night to get projects completed (PSS)
- I think the modern form of communication is such a help to dyslexics, thank God I was born in the generation with email, because it's not about using an instrument which is thousands of years old (a pen). I can get away with very concise, short sentences to communicate what you are saying. Modern technology helps me a vast amount (JBB)
- I use Dragon Naturally Speaking to dictate my work (EWD)

### Motivation to show self-worth

- I wanted to prove all those people wrong about me (PUY)
- Historically I was always motivated by trying to prove that I was as good as I thought I was, rather than as bad as I looked. This definitely dates back to my school years, as some of my headmasters doubted my abilities (TPE)
- I seek recognition of my skills and abilities, and this goes right back to childhood and school. I will work extremely hard to achieve things, but it's recognition I seek most of all. I have a chip on my shoulder about not achieving at school (NHN)
- I seek self-worth, I always had a sense of wanting to be known to be good at something (PSS)
- It's not about money, its gaining self-respect. It just makes me think one of my teachers didn't waste her time on me. It always links back to my school days, being under-rated. (AP)

### Chip on their shoulders from school

- People say I'm unpredictable, but I say this is learned behaviour from school. I would just fight back if I was bullied or teachers unfairly picked on me. If people question me in a certain way, I emotionally just start seeing that chain of events again. It's just a feeling of being picked on again (GHD)
- Some of the dyslexics I meet are motivated to do well because of traumatic schooling, but not all of them (SDE)
- Some dyslexics I've met have gone to the n'th degree to prove that they are not stupid (SDE)
- I think I was simply driven to bounce back from failure. I got used to failing, and I got used to picking myself up again as best I could, because I hated it. That's what drove me as a child and a young adult (JLA)
- Looking back to my trauma at school, I always say 'I have to thank them because I would never have done as good as I have without that experience' (PUY)
- I think for everyone that gets a push to prove others wrong, there are several hundred that are emotionally damaged for the rest of their lives (ESA)
- Every time I failed at school I was able to say that Richard Branson also failed at school and has built a hugely successful company. That's really what got me through the worst of it and where I am today (ESA)
- I absolutely hated the state school system, and I was determined above everything else, to give 2 fingers to the school. I walked out of that gate and the only thing I wanted to do was to go back in a Rolls Royce and tell them to F\*\*\* off. That was my main motivation and determination (GHD)
- Yes I have a chip on my shoulders about not doing well at school. I'm described as a workaholic, but is it because of school (ASG)

### Risk and failure

#### Dealing with risk

- One of the biggest risks is not trying at all. Actually if you don't try, you'll never know if it was a good idea (TPE)
- I am happy to take a risk to do things if I think that would make a difference, I am happy to take on risks (NHN)

- I think risk is something I don't like, but I think it's unavoidable for dyslexics. Your whole life is waiting to be 'found out' at any moment. You're so familiar with what it feels like, either to anticipate it or to be in that horrible moment when the wheels just come off in life. You really fear but, so it drives you (JLA)
- I'm a risk-taker without a shadow of doubt, I think 'what have I got to lose' (JBB)

#### Coping with failure

- I always say, in order to succeed in life, you must fail first because you will never understand the taste of success unless you fail. For me, failure is an experience. In order to celebrate success, you must go through the depths of failure (PUY)
- Those who have never failed at school find failure as an adult really hard, as they never had the opportunity to fail as children. I think failure is bad, but at least I've done it a lot so at least I know it's not life threatening (TPE)
- I think some of it is I'm not afraid to fail as I have failed so many times before. So I'm not frightened of failure (TBA)
- It's a journey. One person said to me, there's no such thing as failure, there's results you didn't want (SDE)
- Failure is important. I think I have more 'grit' for long-term projects and perseverance, because I don't expect to be the best at something when I begin, or expect to get it right first time. This is dates back to school. (ESA)
- Peter Stringfellow said one of the best things that happened to him was leaving school without any qualifications, because there were no expectations on him. He could try whatever he wanted and failure wasn't a big deal because he wasn't expected to achieve anything (SDE)

The above study of successful dyslexic adults aimed to look at the childhood backgrounds to understand their motivations for post-school success. The results of the qualitative study indicate several factors:

- Their parents were highly supportive, praising effort and not achievement
- They coped at school by avoiding reading and writing as much as possible
- They had the opportunity to find hobbies and subjects that they could excel in at school (e.g. art, design, sport, drama, ICT)
- They had experienced success as children, thus retained a sense of worth at school
- They found as adults that assistive technology is helping them immensely to deal with their dyslexic deficits
- As adults they are highly motivated to gain a sense of 'self-worth', coming from a need to prove themselves to others, dating back to their teacher low perception of them
- They have a chip on their shoulder from school, to disprove to their teacher that they were not 'stupid and lazy'
- They have a healthy relationship with risk as they believe they experienced huge risks at school for not being 'found out' that they could not read or write
- They perceive failure in a positive light, that they are not afraid

of failing in tasks. Failure is seen as a journey and opportunity, rather than something to wallow in.

- They have extreme work ethics which means they are willing to put in 70 hour weeks or more to achieve what needs to be done, this extreme focus allows them to act faster to the needs of the market.

It is interesting that N=15 out of the N=20 sample were self-employed. They explained that only by working for themselves can they: delegate the tasks they are not good at, buy in talent/skills to allow them to work to their strengths (e.g. selling and motivating), and can be judged on what they can do and not what they can't.

### Unsuccessful - Crucial Factors [9]

*Do you feel that you are reaching your potential?* No! I think my opportunities to reach my potential were reduced by me being diagnosed too late. I think going back into education when I did, showed that I missed out on so much opportunity (Anita), p. 251.

*Would you call yourself a successful dyslexic?* I would say I was successful at hiding it for thirty-three years. They said 'you have O'levels, A'levels, and an undergraduate degree, and you didn't have any support!...That's fantastic' and I sort of flipped one-hundred-and-eighty degrees with the feelings I had about it, that I didn't do as well as I should have done, that I could have done better, as there were people now saying 'you did really well, considering all the stuff you had to deal with! So I kind of probably am, but I don't feel successful in my own camp, so in some ways I kind of...it's difficult. *So other people call you successful but you don't feel it yourself?* Yep. *So what would you need to feel successful?* I think to feel successful; I would need to feel that I was fulfilling my potential in terms of understanding and ability to act. (Norman), p.254.

*Would you call yourself a successful dyslexic?* No. *What do you think you would need to call yourself a successful dyslexic?* A degree? Well. I think a degree is just one milestone to complete. For me at this age, if at a young age I had achieved my degree it would have made an advantage in my life, which would be more than an achievement, to respect myself. A degree is to achieve something that I was not equipped to achieve [when I was younger]. It was not that I was not inspired and that people were not there for me, I just did not do it. (Jordan), p.255.

*Would you call yourself a successful dyslexic?* No, because there is so much more I want to achieve. *Do you feel you are reaching your*

*potential?* No. *Do you feel you will ever reach it?* I hope so. (Jean), p.255.

*Would you call yourself a successful dyslexic?* [Long pause] I have to answer that no. *Why?* Because I am never happy with what I have done. *You were comparing yourself with your dyslexic brother with the degrees and qualifications, would you call him a successful dyslexic?* [Long pause] I would not call him a successful dyslexic because he has degrees, I would call him more successful than me because he is more contented with life (Peter), p.256.

*Would you call you're a successful dyslexic?* Nope, not yet. Every dyslexic feels they have under-achieved don't they. *Do you think when you get a degree that you will be a successful dyslexic?* Yes. No I don't think I will actually, because even if I get it, it would be like, thinking 'I got support, so it's not really me'. *So you think the support you get would take from the value of the achievement?* Yes. Don't you think getting the support is purely there to be a support; they aren't doing it for you? In a way, but it still feels like that. (Ronnie), p.256.

*Would you call yourself a successful dyslexic?* It is quite funny in this one. In the material world, I am a failure, because I can not get a job, which is how most people measure themselves. But in the providing help to others I seem to be quite good at that, and that is helping me understand me, it means when people say 'thank you for helping me' that gives me a buzz. (George), p.256.

The above evidence helps to understand the experience of many with dyslexia perceive themselves as being unsuccessful. It is not just about academic achievement, but personal achievement and working towards ones potential. Very few people in life are lucky enough to work to their true potential, but in the above evidence they do not feel they are not even close to it, maybe a 'million miles away' from it. Schools and lack of early diagnosis and intervention seems to be the root cause for many.

**Personality factors: Personality factors [111] were shown in Figure 1 and 2 (Table 1).**

### Discussion

Each of the three studies [9,107,111] enhances this discussion that aims to investigate a common variable of 'school-failure' but how successful and unsuccessful group have differently dealt with their failure.

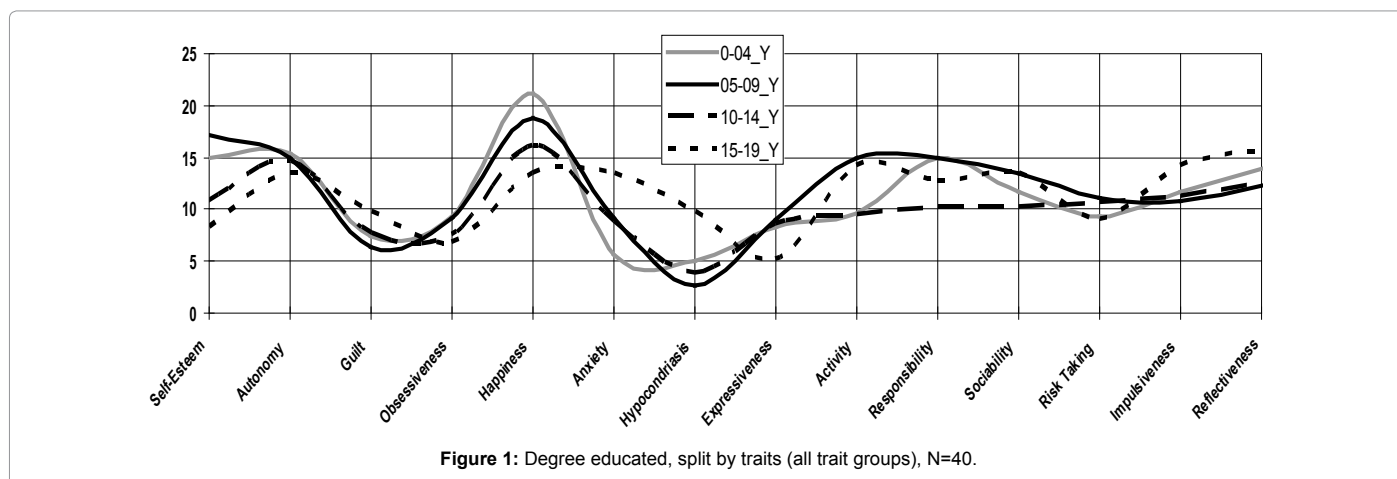
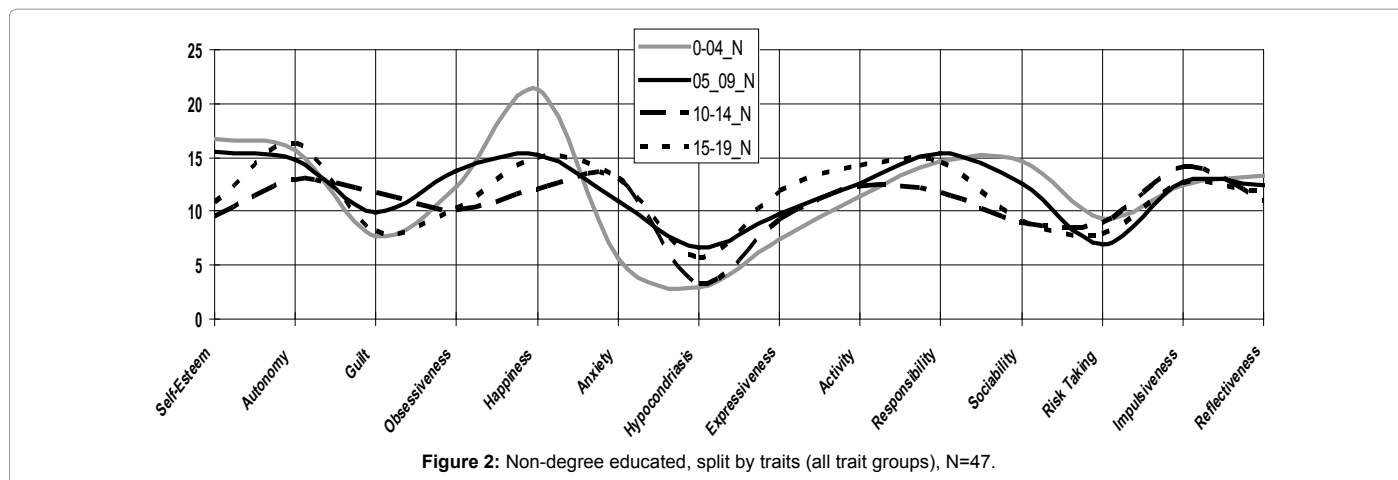


Figure 1: Degree educated, split by traits (all trait groups), N=40.





<p><b>Academically successful dyslexic males</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Physically inactive and lethargic</li> <li>Casual, easy going and have less need for order</li> <li>Resistant to irrational fears or anxieties</li> <li>Confidence in themselves/abilities</li> <li>Enjoys freedom, independent and are realistic about abilities</li> <li>Does not regret past actions/behaviour</li> <li>Cheerful, optimistic and mentally healthy</li> <li>Careless, late and unpredictable</li> <li>Enjoys socializing and meets people easily</li> <li>Lives dangerously, can be gamblers and enjoys taking risk</li> <li>Likes ideas, discussions and speculations</li> </ul>	<p><b>Academically successful dyslexic females</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does not regret past actions/behaviour</li> <li>Cheerful, optimistic and mentally healthy</li> <li>Resistant to irrational fears or anxieties</li> <li>Systematic, orderly and can be cautious</li> </ul>
<p><b>Academically unsuccessful dyslexic males</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Careful, highly disciplined and finicky</li> <li>Easily upset by things that go wrong</li> <li>Active and energetic</li> <li>Has low self-opinion and feel unattractive failures</li> <li>Lacks self-reliance and can be easy pushed around</li> <li>Self-blaming and can be self-questioning of life</li> <li>Pessimistic, gloomy and depressed</li> <li>Reliable, trustworthy and a bit compulsive</li> <li>Few special friends and enjoys solo activities</li> <li>Prefers familiarity, safety and needs security</li> </ul>	<p><b>Academically unsuccessful dyslexic females</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-blaming, and self-questioning of life</li> <li>Pessimistic, gloomy and can be depressed</li> <li>Are easily upset by things that go wrong</li> <li>Can make hurried and premature decisions</li> </ul>

**Table 1:** The dyslexic adult personality (academically successful and unsuccessful).

Alexander-Passe [110] talks about how successful adults with dyslexia have positively used their 'school-trauma' to drive them forward and that whilst they had positive parenting that focussed more on effort than achievement, they still had huge chips on their shoulders from being called 'stupid and lazy' from both peers and teachers. They were lucky to have found strengths at school and enjoyed some success in this, which helped to improve their self-worth. It could be argued that they went beyond the achievements of their peers post-school, and will keep on over-achieving, as they developed a thirst to prove others wrong about their abilities and ideas. Many are self-employed and this was chosen to allow them to be highly creative and do what they do best without needing to be forced into corporate structures routines, it also has allowed them to delegate their skill weaknesses to others better suited to certain tasks, mainly linear thinkers/non-dyslexics.

Interestingly many are social entrepreneurs and are motivated to fix a perceived broken system, whether it is re-entering the education sector (their feared stimulus) to put in the support that they would have wished to get at school, or to use modern technology to create apps for those with dyslexia, or support services so that dyslexic adults are supported. Others have noted that working for themselves allows them to create some of their ideas, as they are constantly solving problems in their heads, and most companies would not inject the sums needed for

research and development. The data from the Alexander-Passe [110] study is in its early analysis stage and further investigations with IPA and other models will be used to uncover greater insights.

Alexander-Passe [9] was an interesting study of dyslexic adults, looking at a range of issues including depression, self-harm and attempted suicide. The investigative interview script began with childhoods and worked into adult-life to understand how they cope. The quotes included in this paper describe their lack of success.

The evidence describe how many adults with dyslexia were diagnosed late in their lives, at university or in the workplace, and that this delay in assessment had ramifications for them. Many mentioned (e.g. Norman) that the diagnosis was too late and they had gone through a grieving process after a positive diagnosis, for the countless missed opportunities at school, along with anger towards teachers who had missed sometimes very severe dyslexia symptoms. They ask 'if I have achieved so much without the diagnosis, how much more with the help that a diagnosis would have brought at school! However one could question they had achieved so much to date because they had this urge to prove themselves to others that they were not 'stupid'?

When questioned them about success, they talked about potential namely missed potential, along with contentment. Many were

questioned whether a degree was enough to call a dyslexic successful and many thought not. Success for them was contentment and having their skills recognised.

Alexander-Passe [111] describes the personality traits of a sample of N=88 adults, most with dyslexic symptoms. A dyslexia screening measure was used to identify hidden adults with dyslexia in the sample and to understand the differences that come with the severity of dyslexia. 10+ symptoms were perceived by Vinegrad [112] to be enough to define a severe dyslexic, however some indicated 15+ symptoms. The 10-14 symptom group was assessed compared to the 0-4 symptom control group. The results indicate personality differences between adults with dyslexia with a degree (deemed as successful) and those without (deemed unsuccessful), whilst the term unsuccessful was not ideal it was kept to aid understanding. This does not discount that many were successful without a degree and 'school-success does not always mean work-success', in the case of those with dyslexia it's even more so [23] as many are successful in vocational fields (e.g. plumbing, building, sales, and training).

Even with a degree, those with most severe dyslexia (11+ symptoms) experienced higher levels of anxiety/hypochondria and lower self-esteem than controls. Those without a degree, both in the severe and most severe dyslexic group had lower self-esteem, lower sociability, more anxiety, and were more obsessive than controls.

The profiles describes successful male and female groups who are highly resilient, resistant to irrational fears, optimistic and were willing to take risks for success (males only) and were systematic in their approach (females only). Those who were unsuccessful were more self-blaming, upset when things go wrong, made hurried decisions in life, were pessimistic/gloomy/depressive (females only), and had a low self-opinion of themselves/and felt a failure (males only).

Pulling the three studies together both successful and unsuccessful adults with dyslexia experience similar experiences at school, but each group cope different and have varying support structures. However both groups leave school with a need to find self-worth.

It is not surprising that following school without support and the unidentified of strengths, many can be led into low paid and unfulfilling careers that can led to self-harm (drugs, self-harm, attempted suicide) to improve their self-esteem. Depression and withdrawal was found as a means to cope defensively with their low self-fulfilling life, lacking the literacy/communication skills to find gainful meaningful employment. Therefore it could be argued the turn to crime is a strategy of self-survival and find a sense of fulfilment in a community that does not judge individuals by academic achievement. One could argue that this is vocational success.

Self-belief featured an all three studies, in that those who were successful believed in their gut that what they were doing was the right thing, however the unsuccessful personality sample had self-doubt and this is hypothesised to come from the lack of childhood successful experiences.

## Conclusion

This paper began with a research question about the impact of school experience on the creation of post-school successful and unsuccessful adults with dyslexia.

A wide literature review covered many topics: Dyslexia, School Experience/Emotional Coping, Social Exclusion, Success, Successful Dyslexics, Unsuccessful Dyslexics, The Disability Paradox, Dyslexia and Depression/Mental Health, and lastly Post-Traumatic Growth.

Taking the reader through a journey to understand what dyslexia is, how it manifests in the classroom and how many cope at school with their learning difficulties. Then how they feel socially, then moving onto why some are successful whilst others are not, and how mental health/depression is used by some as a means to cope with a life-long condition that affects many aspect of communication in society (reading, writing, and spelling). Many find coping with dyslexia difficult and the workplace is very inhospitable to those who lack back literacy skills. Lastly the reader is led to question why some adults with dyslexia can succeed and to huge heights commercially but still have experienced educational-trauma in school.

The three studies [10,11,111] looking at success and the lack of success in different ways: a sample of successful dyslexics, a mix of successful and unsuccessful dyslexics, many manifesting depressive/mental health manifestations, argued to come from coping in out literacy-based society. Lastly a personality investigation looking at not only severity of dyslexia, but also gender and attainment of a degree education.

The result of the three studies indicate similar school experiences in all with dyslexia in mainstream education: late diagnosis, teachers without an awareness of dyslexic barriers to learning, and lastly humiliation from both peers and teachers due to their low academic attainment and at times their avoidance strategies.

What seems to separate the successful and unsuccessful group of dyslexic adults was:

- The level of parental support as children
- How they coped at school by avoiding reading and writing
- Opportunity to find hobbies and subjects that they could excel in at school
- Experience of success as children
- Use of assistive technology is help them cope with their dyslexic deficits
- Being highly motivated to gain a sense of 'self-worth'
- Seeking to disprove their teacher that they were not 'stupid and lazy'
- Having a healthy relationship with risk
- Perceiving failure in a positive light, as a journey and opportunity
- Extreme focus on tasks or project

## Limitations

The Alexander-Passe [10] personality data was sourced from self-disclosing individuals who identified themselves as dyslexic, thus caution should be used in generalizing from the data, however generalized themes were its main intention.

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