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University of Southampton

Faculty of Environmental Life Sciences

School of Psychology

The Views and Experiences of Children and Young People with Literacy Difficulties

by

Alexandra Hampstead

Thesis for the degree of Doctorate in Educational Psychology

June 2022

University of Southampton

Abstract

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Having basic literacy skills is considered to be fundamental to achieving success in school and positive outcomes across the lifespan. Literacy difficulties impact learners' access to a full and diverse curriculum and children and young people (CYP) with these difficulties are working considerably below their peers. Thus, the mission to optimise support for these learners to improve their literacy skills is of great importance. The need to involve CYP in matters that affect them has been highlighted through government policy and research. Whilst there has been a drive to improve literacy rates through government strategies, the voices of the CYP at the focus of these developments do not feature. There is, therefore, a need to explore the educational experiences of this group and consult them about the support they feel they should be receiving.

In the first chapter of this thesis I introduce the research; I explain my personal interest in the research area, what I wanted to explore, my approach to the research, and what I learned through my research journey. In the second chapter I present my systematic literature review exploring the school experiences of CYP in mainstream school with literacy difficulties. A thematic synthesis of 12 studies identified five overarching themes: experiences of teaching approaches, accommodations, and support with learning; a degree of struggle; the need to belong; being made to feel different; and emotional experience. The findings suggest that, for these learners, what has been key to their experience is how much they feel understood, respected, and included within their school community and how this has impacted both their wellbeing and academic outcomes. However, many of the CYP involved in the reviewed studies were identified as having dyslexia and there appear to be some differences in educational experiences for those with and without this label. Furthermore, these participants were not explicitly asked about the support they feel they should be receiving in school. This highlights a need to further explore the experiences of CYP without a label and consult them for their views about what support should be available in school. In my third chapter, I present the findings of my empirical research where I explored the experiences of this group and asked them to construct their ideal and non-ideal schools. Thematic analysis of interviews and a focus group led to the development of nine overarching themes: making sense of and coping with academic ability; developing awareness; the need for increased school support; what enables learning; impact of the environment; impact of poor teaching; low self-concept; the right support leads to a successful future; and feeling happy and ready to learn. The findings show that, for these learners, the quality of teaching and access to support is key in determining their school experience and future outcomes, but that this group also values having access to a positive learning environment and supportive relationships so that they can experience wellbeing and feel ready to learn.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Alexandra Hampstead

Title of thesis: The Views and Experiences of Children and Young People with Literacy Difficulties

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signature: ....Date: 15th June 2022

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to my grandparents, three of whom I sadly lost during my time on this course, and all of whom would be incredibly proud of what I have achieved.

Definitions and Abbreviations

CASP .... Critical Appraisal Skills Programme

CYP .... Children and young people

DfE....................................... Department for Education

EEF....................................... Education Endowment Foundation

EP .... Educational Psychologist

OECS.................................... Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

Ofsted .... Office for Standards in Education

PCP .... Personal Construct Psychology

PRISMA .... Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta Analyses

PISA .... Programme for International Student Assessment

SEN .... Special Educational Needs

SEND .... Special Educational Needs and Disability

UK.. United Kingdom

USA...................................... United States of America

WEIRD .... Western Educated Industrialised Rich and Democratic

YP .... Young people

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background

My interest in literacy difficulties and school experience is, largely, inspired by my partner, Troy. Troy has a diagnosis of dyslexia and has identified with this label from a young age. Troy and I had very different experiences of school. My own experience was, largely, positive and, although there were times where I really struggled in school, I felt nurtured, supported, and valued. Troy, on the other hand, hated school. He remembers the negative relationships he had with his teachers, the injustices he experienced, the lack of support available, and the disinterest in, and absence of opportunities, for him to engage in activities that focused around his strengths and interests. His secondary school experience, however, was more positive, which Troy maintains was in part due to the help a diagnosis provided. He feels that whilst it was not an “excuse,” it gave a reason for his difficulties and led to better understanding of what he found difficult and why.

The ongoing debate surrounding the dyslexia label is something in which I have become very interested, especially so during my time on the doctorate. I am also passionate about embedding person-centred approaches in my practice, which stems from my time as a Residential Worker at a Short Breaks service for children and young people (CYP) with learning disabilities, where facilitating CYP to communicate their views was a key part of my role.

It is these interests, conversations, and experiences which have influenced my chosen research area. Specifically, I wanted to learn more about how learners with literacy difficulties experience school, from their own unique perspective.

1.2 My thesis

In Chapter 2, in my systematic literature review, I set out to review the existing literature looking at the experiences of young people (YP) in mainstream school with literacy difficulties,

inclusive of those with a diagnosis of dyslexia. Building on this in Chapter 3, in my empirical paper, I set out to directly explore a group of 16-17-year-old YP's retrospective and current perceptions of their school life and college experience, including their access to resources and support for their literacy difficulties, and use personal construct psychology (PCP; Kelly, 1955) to consider how they might frame an ideal and non-ideal school. The findings from both papers help us to understand what school is like for these learners, their experiences of support, how they feel in their school environment, what they most value about school life, and what they would change. This has implications for teachers, school leaders, and Educational Psychologists (EPs) about how we support these learners in school.

I took a participatory approach to my research. Participatory research is an approach which includes those who are impacted by the subject being studied so that the research is carried out in collaboration with these individuals instead of to them (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). It places an emphasis on the value of co-construction between the researcher and the people representing those who are directly impacted by the issue, drawing on their lived experience and knowledge in addition to the skills of the researcher, in order to inform the planning of research and facilitate change (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). This integration of perspectives and skills improves the relevance of research questions, the level of participant engagement, and the overall rigour and quality of research (Vaughn et al., 2018). Furthermore, as participatory research is informed by those in real-life contexts, it has increased relevance and applicability to these contexts (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). The findings can be more easily applied to the participants' lives and it can result in wider dissemination (Vaughn et al., 2018).

When assessing the quality of the studies in my systematic literature review, I evaluated the extent to which the studies used participatory methods as per Hart's ladder of participation, outlined in Table 1.1. I also drew on Hart's (1992) ladder when planning my empirical research. The YP were informed about the aims and purpose of the research and made an informed decision to participate. They were also given a meaningful role within the research where the

implications of the research were driven by the participants' views. This placed the research on the fourth rung of Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, assigned but informed. Future research could address the higher rungs of the ladder by asking CYP what they would like to find out about and supporting them to plan and conduct this.

Table 1.1 *Descriptions of the eight levels of CYP's participation as per Hart's (1992) ladder of participation*

	Eight levels of CYP's participation	Description
Degrees of participation	8. Child initiated, shared decisions with adults	The project is designed and directed by CYP but the decision making is shared with adults which gives CYP the opportunity to learn from the experience, insight, and expertise of adults.
	7. Child-initiated and directed	The project is designed and directed by CYP and adults have a supporting role. The decisions are made by the CYP.
	6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children	The project is designed by adults but the decision making involves the CYP.
	5. Consulted and informed	CYP are informed about how their data will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults. They are given the opportunity to give their views on the adult-designed project, which adults give consideration to.
	4. Assigned but informed	CYP are informed about why they are involved and who made the decisions about their involvement, are assigned a meaningful role within the project, and choose to participate after the project was explained to them.

	Eight levels of CYP's participation	Description
Non-participation	3. Tokenism	CYP appear to be given a voice but have no choice about the subject and are given little or no opportunity to express their views.
	2. Decoration	CYP are used to support an objective and are not informed of what is involved, how their data is used, and the outcome, but adults do not pretend that it is inspired by CYP.
	1. Manipulation	Adults pretend that the objective is inspired by CYP but the CYP do not understand of what is involved or how their data is used and they are not informed of the outcome.

I took a reflexive approach to data analysis. Throughout the analysis, I discussed themes with my research supervisors. I also kept a research diary which I used to note down my initial reflections following each interview in addition to reflexive notes that I made whilst coding the data in each transcript. Appendix A includes extracts of these diary entries. The use of supervision and reflexive note taking assisted transparency and enabled me to be aware of my how my own personal views and prior knowledge, gained through wider reading and conducting my systematic literature review, were influencing the thematic analysis. Being aware of this whilst conducting the analysis allowed me to recognise how the themes were influenced by what was important to me as a researcher, whilst ensuring that I was representing the views and experiences of participants.

1.3 Research paradigm

Research paradigms are the beliefs and theoretical frameworks that provide a lens through which we can derive meaning and understand the world (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). They

comprise of four components: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Ontology is defined as “the study of being” (Crotty, 1998, p. 10) and ontological assumptions relate to where the researcher stands in relation to what constitutes reality. Epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge and the process by which it is constructed, acquired, and communicated by the researcher (Cohen et al., 2007). Ontology influences epistemology which, in turn, has implications in terms of the chosen methodology, the design that underlies how the research should take place (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). This is, then, reflected in the methods, the specific techniques used to collect and analyse data to answer a research question (Crotty, 1998).

Within my literature review and my empirical paper, I employed a qualitative methodology and approached the research overall from a constructionist epistemology. I initially viewed the research from a critical realist perspective. Critical realism posits that whilst there is a reality or truth that exists independent of the observer, this is mediated by the observer’s experience and point of view (Bhaskar, 1975). I, therefore, approached the research with the assumption that the participants’ experiences would capture a small part of a wider reality from their perspective. However, during my research journey, I began to further question my own role within the research, my influence on how the data was acquired and how meaning was constructed. Although I maintained more of a critical realist perspective during the interview process, I became more aware of the shared reality that I had constructed collectively with the participants in the focus group and thus, began to view my approach and findings through a social constructivist perspective.

Social constructivism assumes that all knowledge and meaning is jointly constructed in our interactions with others within a social context, rather than seeing knowledge as a truth which is waiting to be discovered (Crotty, 1998; Galbin, 2014). It suggests that our perspectives are shaped through our complex interactions with our community, society, and culture (Crotty, 1998; Galbin, 2014). I became increasingly aware of my developing social constructivist stance when planning

and conducting the focus group. The Drawing the Ideal School technique (Williams & Hanke, 2007), which informed the questions for the focus group, is based on PCP (Kelly, 1955). Kelly comes from a constructivist position which assumes that knowledge is actively constructed by the individual to make sense of the world (Fox, 2001). Kelly (1955) suggests that people use personal constructs to construe events and make sense of their experience (Raskin, 2002). Although constructs are seen as personal to the individual, the concept of sociality suggests that we need to construe the constructs of others in order to develop relationships, and this, therefore, has similarities with social constructivism (Pavlovic, 2011). Pavlovic recommends that we reframe PCP as discourse that permits us to create meaning individually whilst allowing for the influence of social constructs.

Using this methodological approach allowed me to draw upon the strengths of these two different researcher paradigms and positions in a pluralist way, and deepened my own capacity for reflexivity. It allowed me to maintain a critical realist appreciation of the possibility of an independent reality that was being studied and to respect the agency and individualism of my participants through the interview process, as well as my own role in interpreting and reporting what is real to me. However, it also enabled me to make the most of the opportunities for participative, co-construction and exploring the social and discursive forces that shape mine and the participants' shared understanding. Therefore, although the research was initially planned and conducted from a critical realist perspective, the analysis of the transcripts was approached from a social constructivist lens.

I analysed my data in my systematic literature review and empirical paper using thematic synthesis and thematic analysis, respectively. Thematic analysis is a flexible approach which allows for different epistemological positions, including critical realism and social constructivism (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which made it appropriate for my research. Although my prior experiences, interest, and knowledge in the research area may have influenced my thinking, I took an inductive approach to analysis through immersing myself in and trying to interpret meaning from the data.

Navigating and deciding on a single position early on in my research was, and still is, a complex and confusing process. Indeed, even amongst published researchers, it is acknowledged that there is often inconsistency and confusion in the way many epistemological terms are used: “if the precise differences between the constructivist psychologies escape those who identify themselves as being ‘in the fold,’ one can only imagine how bewildered non-constructivist psychologists must be” (Raskin, 2002, p. 1). It is through my experience as a researcher that I have been able to reflect on and wonder about my position, and, although I have moved towards a more social constructivist position in my research, I believe there will be points throughout my life where I move between co-constructing and independently perceiving reality.

1.4 Ethical challenges

Ethical approval was sought and received from the University of Southampton Ethics Committee and the Research Governance Office. I sought consent from the college for the research to be conducted with students from their setting and then sought consent from the participants themselves as they were all 16 years of age or older. I considered that asking questions about the participants’ literacy difficulties and school experiences may elicit difficult thoughts and memories that may cause psychological distress. To account for this, the participant information clearly stated the aims of the research and what the interviews and focus group would involve and participants were able to withdraw from the interview and focus group if they chose to. The interviews and focus group also ended with a mood repair involving distraction (Kovacs et al., 2015). In addition, I anticipated that the participants may be concerned that what they said would be shared with college staff so they were assured that their data would be anonymised and were given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym. Finally, the interviews and focus group were organised for times that were convenient for the participants in order to minimise the impact of the time taken to participate on their studies.

Due to school closures and various lockdowns in England in response to the pandemic, I needed to complete a number of resubmissions of my ethics application to account for changes in

the recruitment process and setting so that the interviews and focus group could take place either online on Microsoft Teams or in person dependent on the government guidance. This also meant that I needed to update the participant information and consent forms to include consent for video recording in addition to audio as audio recording only was not possible using this computer programme. These unanticipated changes taught me a lot about the importance of being able to adapt to change and consider and respond to new ethical challenges as they arise, a skill that I am determined to continue in my practice.

1.5 Reflective learning

At the start of my research journey, I did not anticipate the barriers that I would face in terms of recruitment. Whilst I understood that a 25% response rate meant that I would need to approach more education settings and YP than I would need to participate, I did not appreciate the challenges I would face, some of which were perhaps in my control, and some of which were not. Firstly, the increased pressures placed on schools and colleges during the pandemic, including adapting to online learning, the roll out of Covid testing, and managing staff sickness and wellbeing to name a few, meant that many of the settings, who were approached by myself and EPs in local authority teams, felt unable to participate in the research. This meant that only two settings agreed to participate in the research, one of which withdrew consent before participant recruitment. Although I hoped that this would still result in a larger number of participants, I experienced further challenges. The learning support coordinator had difficulty identifying students who met the selection criteria as the majority of students who had been identified as needing support with literacy in college, had a dyslexia or other diagnosis. This resulted in a smaller sample size than I had initially hoped for.

This has important implications in itself as it begs the question: why were YP who struggled with literacy who did not have a diagnosis so difficult to find? Is it that YP with dyslexia or other diagnoses were more easily identified as needing support? Or could it be that many YP with literacy difficulties have had access to a professional who can assess and confirm a dyslexia

diagnosis by the time they reach a certain stage in their education? Either way, the reliance on diagnosis to determine the need for support may still mean that many unidentified struggling readers are being overlooked (Gibbs & Elliott, 2020).

For me, this further highlighted the need to reach YP without a diagnosis to listen to what they have to say and learn from their experiences. It also made me even more determined to do my best to represent the views and experiences of this group and give them the opportunity to feel heard. And most importantly, this was reflected in the responses of the YP involved in my research, who thanked me for taking the time to listen to them and wanted me to share with them the findings of the research.

My thesis has also made me consider the implications of maintaining an interactionist approach when working with CYP, at both an individual and whole school level. In casework with CYP, EPs are well placed to enable families and schools to take an interactionist perspective when considering the support that an individual might need in school. They can encourage them to think about other aspects of the child or young person’s life, such as their belonging and esteem needs, and how this might be impacting both their wellbeing and their learning, helping adults to recognise that they may need to take a more holistic approach to support to enable progress. EPs could also deliver training on literacy difficulties to school staff which emphasises this message, highlighting the need to consider all areas of difficulty that a CYP may require support with, in addition to specific literacy interventions. Finally, this message could be further reinforced through the development of checklists or templates for Individual Education Plans which remind staff to consider different aspects of the child’s school life and their individual needs in each of these areas, so that this informs the resources and strategies in place to support. CYP could also be involved in the development, delivery, and use of training and checklists in school to ensure that what is created is meaningful and useful to them.

1.6 Dissemination plan

The findings of the research will be shared with the participants and the college learning support coordinator through the graphics that were created in the focus group and a summary of the key findings. The findings will also be shared with my Educational Psychology team. I hope to publish the two papers in this thesis in a peer-reviewed journal. Thus, the papers have been written in the style required for submission to my chosen journal, Teaching and Teacher Education. This is a journal that focuses on early childhood through to secondary education and the professional development of teachers. Given the importance with which teachers were viewed by the participants and the implications for their professional practice, I felt that this was an appropriate choice of journal. In addition, the option to make the papers open access makes it more accessible to teachers and school leaders. Finally, my work will impact my own practice when working with CYP, schools, and families. It has highlighted the importance of taking an interactionist perspective when problem solving around literacy difficulties and supporting others to consider how we meet the needs of the ‘whole’ child, in addition to interventions that specifically target literacy.

Chapter 2 What are the school experiences of children and young people in mainstream school with literacy difficulties? A systematic literature review

2.1 Abstract

This systematic literature review explores the views of children and young people with literacy difficulties, who have English as a first language, in relation to their mainstream school experience, encompassing multiple aspects of school life. Ten qualitative papers and two quantitative papers published between 2006 and 2019 were included in the review. Through the process of thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008), five overarching analytical themes were identified: experiences of teaching approaches, accommodations, and support with learning; a degree of struggle; the need to belong; being made to feel different; and emotional experience. The implications for education professionals are discussed.

Keywords: literacy difficulties, dyslexia, children, young people, school, experience

2.2 Introduction

Having basic literacy skills is considered to be fundamental to achieving success in school and positive outcomes across the lifespan (National Literacy Trust, 2017). Literacy difficulties impact learners' access to a full and diverse curriculum and children and young people (CYP) with these difficulties are working considerably below their peers (Driver Youth Trust, 2020). In addition to the impact on academic attainment, these pupils are more likely to develop negative self-perceptions in relation to their literacy skills and competence as a learner (Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2021a). Research has also shown that literacy difficulties are associated with a range of negative outcomes such as

school exclusion, poorer employment prospects, and narrower life opportunities (Department for Education, DfE, 2022; Every Child a Chance Trust, 2009).

Within the literature, a range of terminology has been used to describe literacy difficulties, including literacy difficulties, reading related disabilities, specific learning difficulty, and dyslexia. In addition, a range of methods are used to identify these needs. Even when the dyslexia label is used, definitions are not always made clear and there has been considerable debate as to whether this is helpful terminology to use (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014). The Rose Report (2009) provided the following working definition of dyslexia which has since been adopted and added to by the British Dyslexia Association (2010):

> Dyslexia is 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 (Rose, 2009, p. 9)

Whilst this definition shares characteristics with the definition used by the British Psychological Society (1999) and the International Dyslexia Association (2002), definitions vary, thus reflecting the multifaceted nature of literacy difficulties themselves and highlighting the issues that come with using this label as a route to support. In this review, the term ‘literacy difficulties’ will be used to encompass all learners with these needs, regardless of diagnosis, and other terminology will only be used when this has been explicitly mentioned by participants or reflected on by the researcher.

In England, 14.9% of CYP receiving Special Educational Needs (SEN) support have a specific learning difficulty as a primary area of need (Sizmur et al., 2019). There has been a drive by the UK Government to improve literacy rates through strategies, ranging from the National Literacy Strategy in 1997 (The National Strategies, 2011) to the Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading (Rose, 2006). In 2009, the Rose Report made recommendations to support learners with literacy difficulties, suggesting schools use systematic phonics to teach reading and that all teachers should have some awareness of how to identify literacy difficulties, and where to go for information as to how to support these learners (Rose, 2009). This led to changes in the English National Curriculum (DfE, 2013), which required schools to use systematic phonics, and to the introduction of the Phonics Screening Check (DfE, 2012) to assess literacy. However, in 2018 the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results showed that reading scores in England have not changed since 2006 and that this is particularly the case for low achievers (Sizmur et al., 2019). This suggests that, despite these government initiatives, low achievers in reading are not progressing at the same rate as their high achieving peers.

Whilst these developments are key in developing educational practice in order to increase engagement and promote progress and attainment in literacy, the voices of those at the focus of the work, the students, do not feature. The need to consult CYP in matters that affect them has been highlighted both nationally and internationally through the Children and Families Act (2014) and the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (United Nations Children’s Fund, 1992) and there is a growing body of research that seeks to explore CYP’s views. Previous reviews of the literature have focused on synthesising data in relation to the educational experiences of learners with dyslexia in higher education (MacCullagh, 2014; Pino & Mortari, 2014). However, recent reviews have not considered studies that focus on school experience. Furthermore, whilst literature reviews have gained valuable insight into the self-perceptions of CYP with literacy difficulties (Burden, 2008; Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2021a), these did not include literature pertaining to the lived educational experiences of these learners. There is therefore a need to gather rich, detailed information about

the school experiences of CYP with literacy difficulties, from their perspective. Thus, a systematic literature review was conducted to answer the question: what are the mainstream school experiences of CYP with literacy difficulties?

2.3 Methodology

2.3.1 Search strategy

A systematic search was conducted to source relevant papers to answer the review question (Figure 2.1). The systematic searches were conducted within three electronic databases: PsycINFO, Web of Science, and ERIC. Synonyms for 'literacy difficulties' were taken from a recent systematic review exploring dyslexia, literacy difficulties, and self-perceptions (Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2021a). Terms for 'school' and 'experience' were generated based on papers identified through scoping searches and other relevant known synonyms. Titles were searched for the terms related to literacy difficulties because this was central to the review question. Titles and abstracts were searched for terms relating to school and experience. Details of the search strategy can be found in Table 2.1. This was adapted as necessary for the different databases.

Table 2.1 *Search terms and search strategy*

Search term	Like-terms and search strategy
Literacy difficulties	TI(dyslexi* OR "reading disabilit*" OR "reading difficult*" OR "reading impairment*" OR "literacy difficult*" OR "SpLD" OR "specific learning" OR "specific literacy")
School	TI(school* OR educat* OR class* OR college* OR "sixth form*" OR pupil* OR student* OR learner OR child* OR "young pe*" OR adolesce* or teen*) OR AB(school* OR educat* OR class* OR college* OR "sixth form*" OR pupil* OR student* OR learner OR child* OR "young pe*" OR adolesce* or teen*)

Experience	TI(experienc* OR perspective* OR “perception* of” OR perceive* OR view* OR attitude* OR narrative* OR recollect* OR phenomenology OR “meaning making” OR observation* OR feel*) OR AB(experienc* OR perspective* OR “perception* of” OR perceive* OR view* OR attitude* OR narrative* OR recollect* OR phenomenology OR “meaning making” OR observation* OR feel*)

Papers were retrieved from the last 15 years (2006-2021) and the most recent systematic search was conducted on 12th June 2021. This time period was chosen on the basis of recency but also because it coincided with the publication of the Rose Review (Rose, 2006), which recommended that reading instruction should include systematic phonics teaching. This resulted in policy changes in England as systematic synthetic phonics became a legal requirement in schools in 2007 and could have therefore impacted on CYP’s experience of literacy teaching. Filters were applied to exclude books and to include journal articles and theses. This yielded a return of 2178 papers across the three databases, with 1470 papers once duplicates were removed.

Titles and abstracts were screened for eligibility using the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2.2) and a further 1426 papers were excluded. Six papers were excluded because the full-text was not available through the university library or inter-library loan. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were then applied to the full text of the 38 remaining papers. Twenty-six papers were excluded, leaving 10 qualitative and two quantitative papers for the analysis. Details of the search results and the process of paper selection are displayed in Figure 2.1.

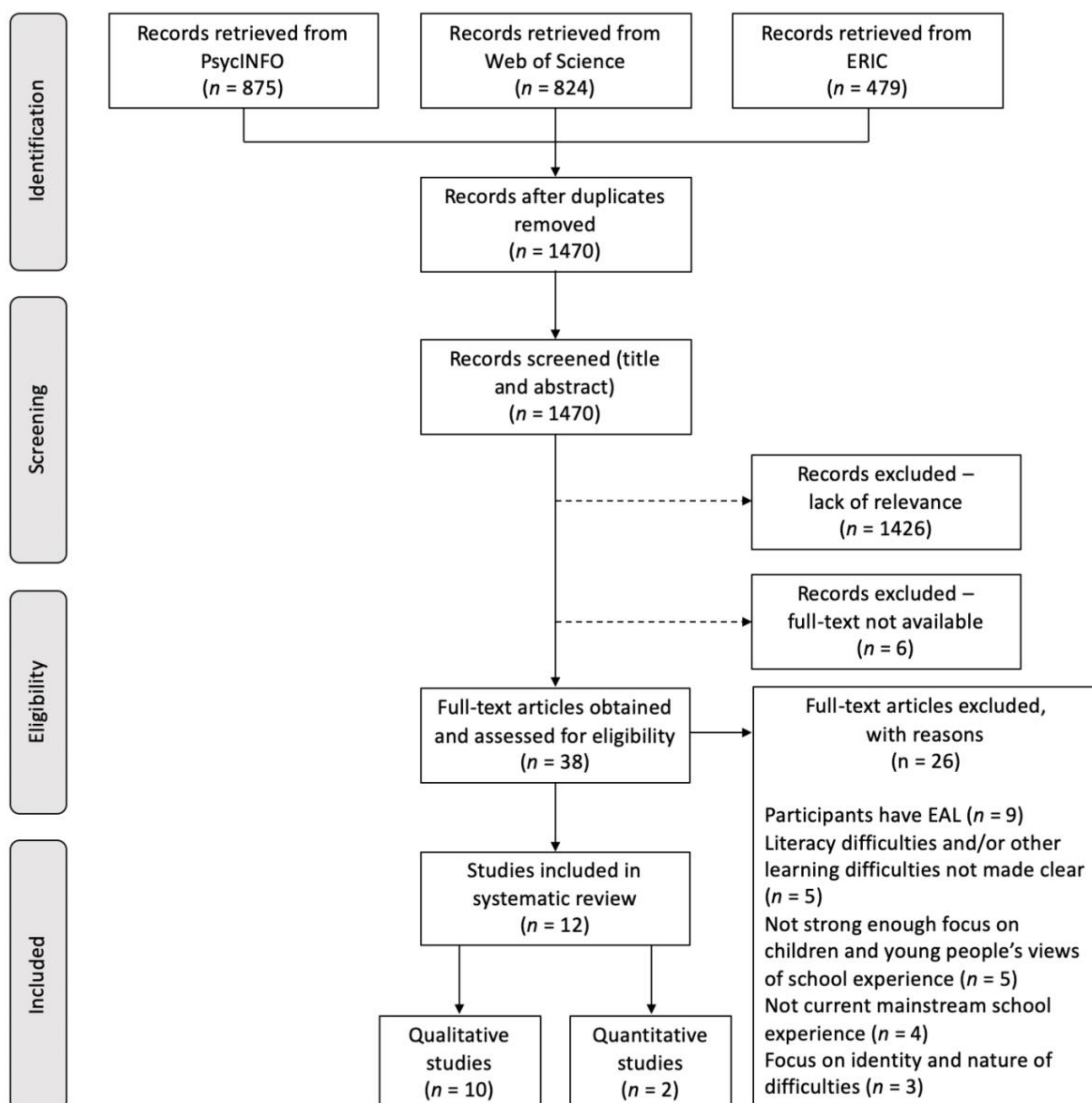
Table 2.2 *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
The study explores CYP’s current school experience.	The study explores the current experience of participants in higher education (post-18) or adults’ retrospective experience of school.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
CYP have been asked directly for their views about their school experience.	CYP have not been asked directly about their experience. CYP have been asked for their views as part of a wider study involving adults, parents, teachers etc. and their views cannot be separated from the views of adults, parents, and teachers in the data.
Participants are CYP who have been identified as having literacy difficulties (including those with a dyslexia diagnosis).	Explicit reference to participants having another label or construct that acts as a confounding variable e.g. additional diagnosis (such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder).
Participants have English as a first language or the research has been conducted in a country where English is considered to be a main language. Much of the research on dyslexia is conducted in English speaking countries and, as English is an opaque language, it presents a particular challenge in learning to read (Caravolas, Kessler, Hulme & Snowling, 2005; Ziegler, Perry, Ma-Wyatt, Ladner & Schulte-Körne, 2003). Therefore, this criterion was included to reduce the impact of spoken language in accounting for any differences in experience.	Participants have English as an additional language or are talking about their experience of second-language learning.
The study explores universal mainstream experience.	The study explores special school experience. The main focus of the research is on self-perceptions (e.g. self-esteem).

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
	The main focus of the research is on dyslexic identity.
	The main focus of the research is on the impact of a specific intervention or programme.

Figure 2.1 *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) diagram (Moher et al., 2009) to show paper identification and selection*



2.3.2 Quality assessment

The qualitative papers were assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Research Checklist (CASP, 2018) and the quantitative papers were assessed using the Manchester Review Framework for Quantitative Investigation Research (Bond et al., 2013). Due to the focus of the review question on exploring CYP's views, both checklists were adapted to include a question about whether the authors had taken steps to increase the level of participant participation.

Details regarding study quality against each criterion are detailed in Appendix B. No study was excluded on the basis of quality. Nor did the study quality impact the extent to which it was included in the thematic synthesis. However, Thomas and Harden (2008) suggest that "the quality of qualitative research should be assessed to avoid drawing unreliable conclusions" (p. 4). Thus, instead of excluding studies on the basis of quality, the contribution of each paper was determined by its relevance to the review question and through the development of descriptive and analytical themes.

2.3.3 Data synthesis and extraction

Data regarding the characteristics of each study was extracted, details of which are displayed in Table 2.3. The results of the studies were analysed using an iterative three stage thematic synthesis approach developed by Thomas and Harden (2008). All the text labelled 'findings' was imported into NVivo and any images of handwritten text were typed out and added to the data set. All of the data regarding pupil voice, including the authors' interpretations, were included in the synthesis. However, there were a number of studies who sought the views of adults over 18 years of age and/or used other methods of data collection in addition to gathering pupil views. Where it was clear that the data came from adults over 18 years of age or an alternative method, this data was excluded from the synthesis.

Stage one of the thematic synthesis involved line by line coding of the data. At least one code was given to each sentence which resulted in a large number of what Thomas and Harden (2008) refer to as 'free' codes. These were then refined and renamed to capture the meaning of the different free codes across studies. Stage two involved looking for commonalities in the free codes and grouping them together to identify descriptive themes, which led to the development of 14 descriptive themes. Table 2.4 shows the descriptive themes as well as the papers that contributed to each theme. Finally, stage three involved using judgement and interpretation to develop analytical themes that go 'beyond' the findings of the individual studies in order to answer the review question (Thomas & Harden, 2008). This resulted in the development of five analytical themes.

Table 2.3 *Study characteristics*

Author(s) and date	Country	Setting	Participant characteristics	Literacy measures / diagnosis	Design and data collection methods	Data analysis	Notes
Anderson (2009)	England	Primary school	N: 4 Age: school years 5-6 Gender: n/a Ethnicity: n/a	One participant assessed as dyslexic and had a Statement of Special Educational Needs. Three participants were considered to meet the British Psychological Society (1999) definition of dyslexia. All had reading ages at least two years below their chronological age.	Qualitative data. Case study. Observation and interviews.	Qualitative analysis (approach not made clear).	
Barden (2014)	England	Sixth form college	N: 5 Age: A-level students Gender: n/a Ethnicity: n/a	Participants were identified as dyslexic and were legally classified as disabled.	Qualitative data. Elements of case study and action research with characteristics of ethnographic research. Participant observation, semi-structured pre- and post-project interviews, video, dynamic screen capture, and protocol analysis.	Grounded theory.	

Author(s) and date	Country	Setting	Participant characteristics	Literacy measures / diagnosis	Design and data collection methods	Data analysis	Notes
Blackman (2010)	Barbados	Secondary school	N: 16 Age: 14-16 years Gender: 1 single sex girls school and 1 co-education school Ethnicity: n/a	Participants with dyslexia identified through a statement of dyslexia from a psychologist, teacher nominations, and Bangor Dyslexia Game (Miles and Miles, 1990).	Qualitative data. Multiple case study. Semi-structured in-depth and pair interviews, documentary evidence (academic records and samples of assignments and work), observation and narrative forms of recording.	Miles and Huberman's (1994) inductive approach to analysing qualitative data.	
Blackman (2011)	Barbados	Secondary school	N: 16 Age: 14-16 years Gender: 1 single sex girls school and 1 co-education school Ethnicity: n/a	Participants with dyslexia identified through a statement of dyslexia from a psychologist, teacher nominations, and Bangor Dyslexia Game (Miles and Miles, 1990).	Qualitative data. Multiple case study. Observations, individual semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and documentary evidence (academic records, sample assignments).	Miles and Huberman's (1994) inductive approach to analysing qualitative data.	
Learned (2016)	USA	Secondary school	N: 8 Age: 14 years Gender: 4 female, 4 male	Participants scored below proficient on standardised reading assessments.	Qualitative data. Open-ended ethnographic interviews, semi-structured interviews, reading think aloud interviews, literacy assessment data,	Constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).	

Author(s) and date	Country	Setting	Participant characteristics	Literacy measures / diagnosis	Design and data collection methods	Data analysis	Notes
			Ethnicity: 2 African American, 2 White, 1 African, 1 Hmong, 1 Lao, 1 Latino		school records and reports, and classroom and school items (e.g. student work, photos).		
Leitão et al. (2017)	Australia	Not specified	N: 13 Age: 10-16 years Gender: 7 female, 6 male Ethnicity: n/a Plus: 21 parents	Child participants had a diagnosis of dyslexia from Dyslexia – SPELD Foundation Western Australia, and it had been at least one year since diagnosis.	Qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews (in person or via Skype).	Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).	Data was only extracted for students.
Lithari (2019)	England	Secondary school (n = 6) and college (n = 2)	N: 20 in total (14 included in this paper) Age: 12-18 years (n = 8), 18-54 years (n = 6). Gender: n/a Ethnicity: n/a Plus: 5 parents and an educational professional (not included in paper).	Participants had a diagnosis of Dyslexia.	Qualitative data. Interpretative, qualitative research. In-depth qualitative interviews.	Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis 1998).	Data was only extracted for participants aged 18 years and under.

Author(s) and date	Country	Setting	Participant characteristics	Literacy measures / diagnosis	Design and data collection methods	Data analysis	Notes
Long et al. (2007)	Northern Ireland	Not specified	N: 25 Age: adolescents Gender: n/a Ethnicity: n/a	Participants identified as having dyslexia.	Quantitative data. Preliminary small-scale survey using a questionnaire (closed questions to assess literacy support and instruction and open questions to explore student views on their needs and support in school).	Approach not specified. Frequencies.	Data was only extracted from small-scale survey. The case study (main focus) was excluded on the basis of inclusion / exclusion criteria.
Marshall et al. (2006)	New Zealand	State or private school. Primary, intermediate or high school	N: 8 Age: 9-14 years Gender: n/a Ethnicity: n/a	Participants were identified as having specific learning difficulties in literacy and numeracy. Some participants identified as having dyslexia.	Qualitative data. Narrative enquiry with an interpretivist methodology. Unstructured narrative interviewing procedure.	Narrative analysis.	
Morgan (2019)*	England	Secondary school and three primary schools	N: 21 Age: 7-16 years Gender: n/a Ethnicity: White British	Participants were identified by a member of school staff as dyslexic. All had dyslexic traits. They did not need to have a formal diagnosis.	Qualitative data. Individual face-to-face interviews: Talking Mats interviews (n=21) and follow up semi-structured interviews (n=16).	Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke (2006).	

Author(s) and date	Country	Setting	Participant characteristics	Literacy measures / diagnosis	Design and data collection methods	Data analysis	Notes
Pollock (2019)	England	Mainstream school	N: 4 Age: 13-15 years Gender: male Ethnicity: n/a	All participants were identified by the SENCo as having literacy difficulties, self-identified as having literacy difficulties, and attended literacy interventions.	Qualitative data. Exploratory case study with four embedded case studies. Photovoice.	Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).	
Witmer et al. (2018)	USA	Not specified	N: 19 Age: 4th-12th grade students Gender: 11 female, 8 male Ethnicity: 16 White, 2 Native-American, 1 Hispanic/Latino Plus: 78 teachers	Students identified as having reading-related disabilities.	Quantitative data. Student structured interview.	Approach not specified. Frequencies.	Data was only extracted for students.

Note. Papers marked * are grey literature which have not been peer reviewed

Table 2.4 *Descriptive themes identified in each study*

Descriptive theme	Anderson (2009)	Barden (2014)	Blackman (2010)	Blackman (2011)	Learned (2016)	Leitão et al. (2017)	Lithari (2019)	Long et al. (2007)	Marshall et al. (2006)	Morgan (2019)	Pollock (2019)	Witmer et al. (2018)
Differentiation	-	YES	-	YES	YES	YES	-	YES	YES	YES	-	YES
Resources, technology, and social media	-	YES	-	-	-	-	-	-	YES	YES	YES	-
Interventions and withdrawal tuition	YES	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	YES	YES	-
Collaborative learning	-	YES	YES	YES	YES	-	-	-	-	YES	YES	-
Positive feedback and punishment	-	-	-	-	-	YES	YES	-	-	YES	YES	-
The nature of literacy difficulties	YES	YES	-	-	-	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	-	-
Need for support and access to accommodations	-	YES	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	YES	YES	YES
Negative teacher experiences	-	YES	-	-	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	-	-
Negative peer experiences	YES	-	-	-	-	YES	-	-	YES	YES	-	-
Being understood and accepted by school staff	-	-	-	YES	-	YES	YES	-	YES	-	YES	-
Being understood and accepted by peers	-	-	YES	-	-	YES	-	-	YES	YES	YES	-
Comparing progress and feedback to peers	YES	-	-	-	-	YES	YES	-	YES	YES	-	-

Descriptive theme	Anderson (2009)	Barden (2014)	Blackman (2010)	Blackman (2011)	Learned (2016)	Leitão et al. (2017)	Lithari (2019)	Long et al. (2007)	Marshall et al. (2006)	Morgan (2019)	Pollock (2019)	Witmer et al. (2018)
Impact of support and accommodations	-	-	-	-	YES	YES	-	-	-	YES	YES	YES
Not wanting to stand out	-	-	-	-	-	YES	-	-	YES	YES	-	-

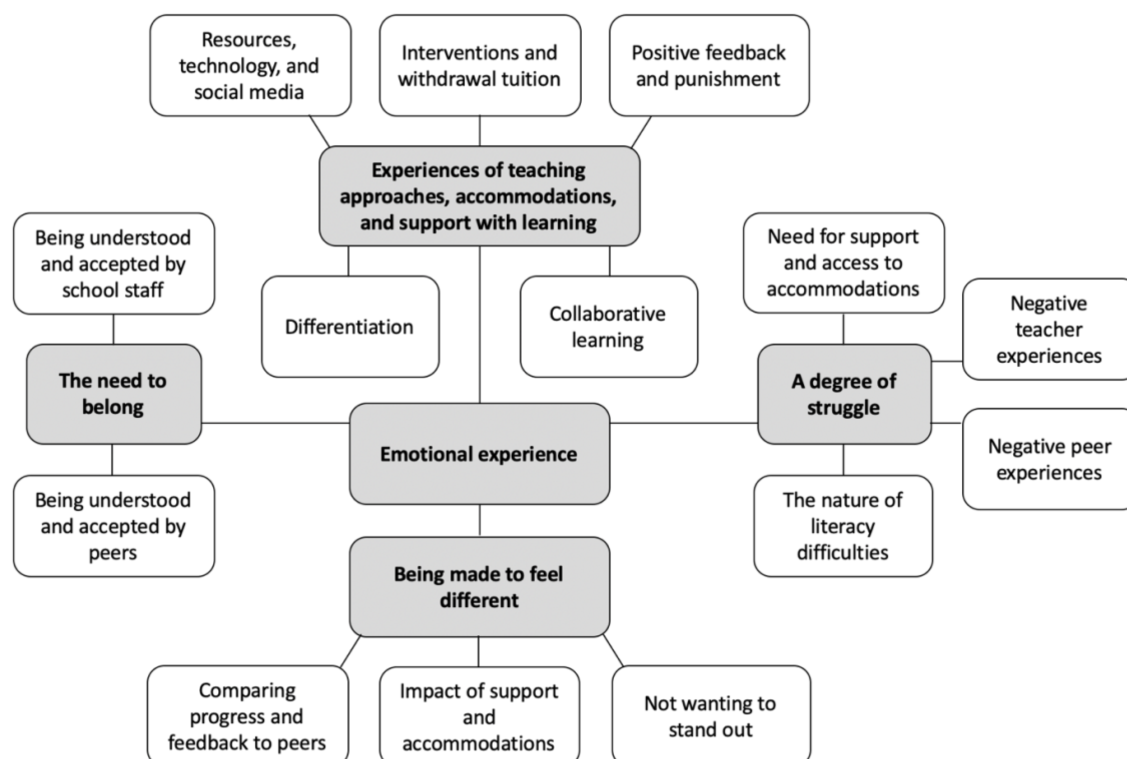
2.4 Synthesis

2.4.1 Synthesis overview

Ten qualitative papers and two quantitative papers were included in this synthesis. This included eleven journal articles and one thesis. Five studies were based in England, two in the United States of America (USA), two in Barbados, one in Northern Ireland, one in Australia, and one in New Zealand. The papers were published between 2006 and 2019.

Five analytical themes were developed in response to the review question: 'what are the mainstream school experiences of CYP with literacy difficulties?' These included: experiences of teaching approaches, accommodations, and support with learning; a degree of struggle; the need to belong; being made to feel different; and emotional experience.

Figure 2.2 *Thematic map displaying the five main analytical themes with their associated descriptive themes*



2.4.2 Analytical themes

The descriptive themes will be discussed, in turn, in relation to their encompassing analytical themes. The analytical theme of 'emotional experience' connects each of the four other analytical themes, and will be discussed in the context of each.

2.4.2.1 Experiences of teaching approaches, accommodations, and support with learning

Within the reviewed research, CYP spoke about their experiences of being supported with their learning, both within and outside of the classroom. Participants described their experiences of the lack of effective differentiation in lessons, even when they felt the teacher was aware of their difficulties, which impacted their ability to engage and progress with their learning (Leitão et al., 2017). Examples of these were "expecting me to do the work when everyone else could and at the same speed" (Leitão et al., 2017, p. 328) and "meaningless" activities which resulted in students going "off task" (Learned, 2016, p. 1288). Participants also spoke about the challenge of

following dictation, "our teacher dictates a lot to us … then I get left behind" because they "can't spell any of the words" (Marshall et al., 2006, p. 32), and how they struggled to follow instructions when the teacher read them out without additional visual cues to support memory, "like I don't have a good memory … Miss will read loads of stuff to us and like will tell us to do stuff in ten like sequences stuff like that and I'm like... What, what...Err..." (Morgan, 2019, p. 141).

However, participants also spoke about the differentiation that they found helpful, which "would have been a bit better than him just reading and giving us homework and writing on the board" (Blackman, 2011, p. 183). They described teachers' use of demonstrations, explanations, and visuals, such as diagrams and mind maps, to support their memory and understanding (Barden, 2014; Blackman, 2011). They also referred to tasks being broken down into steps (Blackman 2011), and having visual reminders of these on the board to help them to remember what to do and reduce their need to ask for help (Morgan, 2019). Witmer et al. (2018) investigated accommodation use and found that 89% of pupil participants said that they had received extra time, 84% had written materials read out, 68% had directions read out, and 37% had frequent breaks. In the qualitative research, participants spoke about the importance of fun and enjoyment in their learning and having access to reading materials that interested them (Blackman, 2011; Learned, 2016; Leitão et al., 2017). This was demonstrated through CYP's quotes, such as "the teacher makes it really fun" (Blackman, 2011, p. 182) and "like writing about good stories" (Morgan, 2019, p. 155).

The use of resources, technology, and social media also supported participants' literacy difficulties. Participants reported using resources such as coloured paper, overlays, and reading rulers (Morgan, 2019; Pollock, 2019), and technology, such as laptops and iPads (Barden, 2014; Marshall et al., 2006; Morgan, 2019; Pollock, 2019). They expressed how these supported them with their literacy difficulties and enabled them to work more in line with their peers, "before I could use the iPad… well, I felt like I was the one behind everyone cos everyone was writing big pieces of paper whilst I was on the first page" (Morgan, 2019, p. 124). The use of this equipment

also reduced some of the physical discomfort that participants experienced when reading and writing (Barden, 2014; Morgan, 2019). Furthermore, the use of social media, as highlighted by participants in Barden (2014), can provide access to learning resources, help with memory of assignments, and provide opportunities for learners to work collaboratively and seek support from their peers and the teacher:

> It’s very easily accessible and most people my age are on it like all the time so and I think the layout’s quite good as well like when you’re messaging you can see what you put to them and its quite easy to understand what the work is if they’re telling you about it. (Barden, 2014, p. 9)

Participants also spoke about having access to accessible texts and having some choice and control over what they read, “we have to read books but I’ve actually got just like a book of short stories that I’m doing because I find it easier to read short stories” (Marshall et al., 2006, p. 32). Although participants expressed what they felt was helpful in terms of what supported them in their learning, some participants experienced challenges in relation to their access to accommodations and spoke about how receiving additional support made them feel in the context of the classroom. This will be described in more detail within the relevant analytical themes in the sections below.

In addition to the support experienced in the classroom, some participants shared their experiences of intervention and withdrawal tuition either during or in addition to the school day (Anderson, 2009; Morgan, 2019; Pollock, 2019). Participants’ feelings towards this type of support were mixed. One participant included a photo of a bag of prizes used in a literacy intervention within his top six photos, suggesting that he viewed this positively (Pollock, 2019). On the other hand, some participants viewed interventions more negatively. They described the impact that this has on missing lessons they enjoyed, “sometimes it’s good, sometimes it’s bad cos she comes at different times and like good lessons and bad lessons” (Anderson, 2009, p. 59). One participant expressed that they “like going to that group but sometimes … when I’m not very happy I don’t,

cos I like ICT" (Anderson, 2009, p. 57) and another felt "disappointed" (Anderson, 2009, p.58) about not being able to finish off tasks in class. Some participants also described their lack of progress despite intervention:

> I've been having, doing extra handwriting lessons all the way from primary school, at the start of secondary school then they gave up on me and let me use an iPad. My handwriting looks the same as it did in reception. (Morgan, 2019, p. 148)

Participants spoke about their experiences of collaborative learning with their peers. Many felt that working with their peers was a positive experience and they expressed how much they valued these opportunities (Barden, 2014; Blackman, 2010; Pollock, 2019). They reported that this gave pupils the chance to share their ideas and learn from each other, "that was really good 'cause the different ideas came together … and we agreed on one" (Blackman, 2010, p. 8), and supported their understanding, demonstrated by comments such as "I learn best with my buddies" (Pollock, 2019, p. 106) and "I prefer working in groups because you understand things better than working by yourself" (Blackman, 2010, p. 9). Participants also described how it supported their knowledge of how to do the task, "some steps I would know and she may sometimes forget them and I would be like wait you have to do that first and she would be like okay" (Blackman, 2010, p. 9). However, some participants expressed how they can struggle in group work situations as their literacy difficulties present a barrier to them participating in certain aspects of the task:

> If we have to work on group projects and we need to write something down I will always step back and say I can't do this. I feel embarrassed by it. I feel like people won't be able to read it. Then there would be an awkward conversation of me having to explain what it says. (Morgan, 2019, p.149)

Participants also spoke about positive feedback and recognition of progress and shared the positive feelings and emotions associated with this. They described feelings of happiness, confidence, and pride when they had mastered things they found hard and when their teachers

recognised this through rewards, certificates, and by explicitly telling them that they were doing well at parents evening (Leitão et al., 2017; Lithari, 2019; Pollock, 2019). This was noted by one participant who said "that's what boosts your confidence … when someone tells you that you're good at it" (Lithari, 2019, p. 289) and another who said "I got smarter and then I won like lots of awards for best student and most improved... I felt really happy, like I could do anything" (Leitão et al., 2017, p. 327). However, other participants spoke about the punishments they had received for not completing their work or not completing it to the same standard as their peers, such as missing break to finish learning tasks (Morgan, 2019). One participant explained that "if I don't finish my work, I have to finish it during my break... if I have to miss my break, I cry cos I like my break" (Morgan, 2019, p. 154) and another expressed how this resulted in him missing social opportunities, which made him feel sad and angry:

> I would have to do it every break time till Miss forgets… It makes me feel erm very sad because my breaks are like my time to sit down and do nothing or like talk with my friends … it makes me feel angry cause I could be playing outside and having fun but I'm inside doing boring work. (Morgan, 2019, p. 151)

2.4.2.2 A degree of struggle

Whilst the review question did not aim to gather data about how participants experience their literacy difficulties, during the process of the thematic synthesis a fourth descriptive theme was developed within this analytical theme. This focused on the nature of the participants literacy difficulties, how these made classroom tasks and activities a struggle for them, and how this made them feel. This provided a helpful context for participants' experiences of school life, and was therefore included in the final descriptive themes. Participants described their difficulties with reading, writing and spelling (Leitão et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2006; Morgan, 2019). They had difficulties with understanding and "learning things, like words and spelling and stuff like that" (Marshal et al., p. 32) as well as remembering information (Leitão et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2006; Morgan, 2019). They also felt that they were getting "left behind" (Marshall et al., 2006, p.

32) and found it "hard" to catch up (Anderson, 2009, p. 59). Participants shared that they felt sad, frustrated, anxious, and stupid when they found it difficult to complete tasks they found challenging and experienced a loss of confidence when they made mistakes (Barden, 2014; Leitão et al., 2017; Lithari, 2019; Morgan, 2019). In addition, having to do the things that they find hard in front of their peers, such as reading in front of the class, was described by one participant to make them "feel nervous and a bit angry because sometimes I get the words incorrect" (Morgan, 2019, p. 154).

In addition to the lack of effective differentiation experienced by some participants, as reported in the analytical theme above, participants in two studies spoke about their need for additional support and access to accommodations. Witmer (2018) found that over 50% of students felt they needed the use of accommodations, such as extra time and reading aloud directions and written materials, more frequently. The most common reason why students felt they did not receive these accommodations when they needed them was that the teachers were not aware of their need to access the accommodation. Other school related reasons included lack of resources and the teachers not feeling like it was necessary for them to access it more frequently. The denial of accommodations was also commonly reported by participants in Morgan (2019). For example, one participant expressed, "I think they forgot and said I can't have it anymore" (Morgan. 2019), p. 145), and another highlighted the inconsistencies in provision across teaching staff:

> An old teacher who was here before … let me type on a laptop when I was doing long pieces of work. Until another teacher came and took the class when she left and said I have to write it down. (Morgan, 2019, p. 146)

One participant also highlighted the potential inequity in access to accommodations amongst learners. They reported that "unless you have dyslexia or some other mental condition then they won't let you" (Morgan, 2019, p. 125), suggesting that there could be more barriers to

accommodation use if there was no formal identification or recognition of needs, such as through diagnosis.

Many participants described aspects of their negative relationships with school staff, which appeared to contribute to their experience of struggle in school. Some participants described teachers who made negative remarks (Morgan, 2019), criticised their work (Long, et al., 2007), were “mean and discouraging” (Leitão et al., 2017, p. 328) and who told them that they would “never amount to anything” (Lithari, 2019, p. 286). These negative relationships with teaching staff appeared to be underpinned by teachers’ lack of empathy, awareness, understanding, or belief about literacy difficulties (Leitão et al., 2017; Long et al., 2007; Marshall et al., 2006). This lack of awareness and understanding was reported to impact teachers’ expectations about what they felt these learners could achieve, which caused participants more stress. Although Leitão et al. (2017) found that the majority of participants’ school experiences improved after they received a dyslexia diagnosis, one participant said that their teachers “didn’t believe in dyslexia, so they sort of treated me more hard” (Leitão et al., 2017, p. 328) and another felt that teachers were “not understanding, and expecting me to do the work when everyone else could and at the same speed’’ (Leitão et al., 2017, p. 328), suggesting that a diagnosis does not necessarily change teachers’ perceptions or the support provided. Long et al (2007) and Morgan (2019) found that learners with literacy difficulties can be reluctant to ask for help and negative experiences of teaching staff were reported to impact participants’ willingness and ease with which they could seek support, “I don’t like asking for help cause to me my teachers are scary” (Morgan, 2019, p. 143). The lack of understanding by their teachers and how participants were treated by them also negatively impacted how they felt in school. Some felt stressed when teachers did not understand their difficulties or adjust their expectations and others demonstrated feeling angry and frustrated when they did not receive the support that they needed (Barden, 2014; Marshall, et al., 2006, Morgan, 2019).

Some participants also described negative experiences with their peers which impacted on their learning, their social experiences and their wellbeing. They referred to being spoken about by their peers and shared their experience and fear of being ridiculed regarding their literacy needs (Anderson, 2009; Leitão et al., 2017; Morgan, 2019). One participant reported that "they laugh at me and say that you have problems reading so err sometimes I don't like… I try not to go out" (Morgan, 2019, p. 154), suggesting that these experiences made it difficult for this participant to engage socially. Some participants also spoke about experiences of bullying, with one participant describing it as the "hardest part of my life" (Leitão et al., 2017, p. 328). Negative comments and bullying from their peers impacted well-being and self-esteem (Leitão et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2006). One participant described how this made him feel, "they start insulting you and it's like being kicked… it doesn't hurt that much – the more they do it the more it starts to hurt and hurt and hurt until finally you fall down or collapse" (Marshall et al., 2006, p. 33). Paralleling their relationships with teachers, these negative comments and experiences of bulling from peers appeared to be a result of limited understanding and misconceptions about what their difficulties or diagnosis meant (Marshall et al., 2006; Morgan, 2019). This was illustrated by a participant who stated that "they don't really know what dyslexia is, and they just think that it means you're dumb" (Marshall et al., 2006, p. 33).

2.4.2.3 The need to belong

In contrast to the experiences outlined above, participants also described their experiences of feeling understood and accepted by school staff which resulted in positive learning relationships. These relationships were characterised by the teacher's positive personal characteristics, their awareness, knowledge, and understanding of their pupils' literacy difficulties, and their support in the classroom. Participants described teachers who were "really nice" (Marshall et al., 2006, p.32), "supportive" (Leitão et al., 2017, p. 328), and who "always see the best in people" (Pollock, 2019, p. 107). These teachers were thought to have made the effort to get to know these pupils, understood their individual needs, and adjusted their expectations and teaching styles accordingly (Leitão et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2006; Pollock, 2019). In addition to

supporting them with their learning, the participants reported that teachers provided emotional support (Pollock, 2019). Not only did this make the participants feel good about themselves in school, it supported them to make academic progress “since she’s known that I have dyslexia, she’s let me do things a bit differently, which helps me a bit and it’s become more easier and I’ve learnt more” (Leitão et al., 2017, p. 328). Participants felt that having positive relationships with school staff and receiving the support they needed improved their confidence (Lithari, 2019; Pollock, 2019).

Participants also described their experiences of being understood and accepted by peers. They described the positive characteristics of their friends as well as the support that they received from their peers. Participants seemed to value the non-judgemental support with their learning that they received from their peers. For example, one participant described how they sometimes find it easier to seek support from a peer than from a teacher, “I’m still just a bit scared of askin, so I normally ask a friend or something like that” (Morgan, 2019, p. 143). Another shared that they would sometimes seek and receive support from the peers they sit next to because they would help them without questioning it or passing judgement, “some kids that I sit next to, just help me out a lot, like when I’m spelling something, they won’t go like ‘oh you should know how to spell that or something’ they will always just spell it” (Leitão et al., 2017, p. 328). Participants also valued the emotional support that they received from their peers who were “caring … understanding … and encourage me” (Leitão et al., 2017, p. 329). One participant expressed that friends helped him to cope with the challenges he faced at school, “it would be really hard without friends … without friends and different coping strategies, school, it would not be an option type thing” (Pollock, 2019, p. 108). Furthermore, when participants felt accepted by their peers, they felt more comfortable to embrace and express their difficulties:

> I told her I was dyslexic and she goes, “oh really, I am as well” and so everyone’s actually really open about being dyslexic … and it’s all not like a private thing that you don’t want to tell anyone about. (Marshall et al., 2006, p.34)

The participants reported feeling happy when they were with their friends and the friendships and sense of belonging that participants felt in school resulted in more positive mood and improved progress (Blackman, 2010; Leitão et al., 2017).

2.4.2.4 Being made to feel different

How participants felt in school was heavily influenced by peer comparison and this was true for both positive and more difficult emotions related to their academic progress and the feedback they received. Participants spoke about the progress they were making relative to their peers, illustrated by the quotes "I learnt to catch up with kids in my class" (Leitão et al., 2017, p. 327) and "it was quite nice to be able to say, 'well, I've got a learning difficulty and I'm still at the top, so it can't be too bad!'" (Lithari, 2019, p. 285). However, peer comparison also negatively impacted how participants felt in school. At times participants felt "stupid, 'cause I wasn't at the same level as everybody else" (Lithari, 2019, p. 285) and felt "lazy" and "dumb" (Leitão et al., 2017, p. 326) when they could not do things at the same pace as their peers. They also compared their work and feedback that they received to that of their peers which made them view themselves negatively (Lithari, 2019, Morgan 2019). One participant shared, "they're really good at something and I'm comparing myself to them and I'm thinking 'oh, I'm rubbish at that and everything'" (Lithari, 2019, p. 288). Another participant described the humiliation they experienced when comparing their feedback to others':

> Everyone was getting ticks when they had used persuasive pros or good terminology something, I got a tick if he could read the word. Sh, sh, shows, shows like some people still got more ticks than me. It was quite embarrassing. (Morgan, 2019, p. 148)

Participants spoke about the impact of receiving support and accommodations had on their feelings of difference. Some participants felt that accommodations, such as using a computer, further highlighted their literacy difficulties, making them feel embarrassed (Morgan, 2019) and Witmer (2018) found that student embarrassment was a reason why participants felt they did not use accommodations when needed. Similarly, some felt that the differentiated

materials that they were using, such as lower level reading books below those read by their peers, made them feel embarrassed (Learned, 2016; Morgan, 2019; Pollock, 2019). For example, one participant said that “they were like tiny kid books that they made us read … I was like, dang this class makes me feel stupid” (Learned, 2016, p. 1295). These feelings of shame and embarrassment were also reflected in participants’ attitudes towards asking teachers for help. One participant shared that they “don’t want to be the only one who puts their hand up for help… because everyone … sees who it is and they always talk about who had put their hand up (Morgan 2019, p. 142).

Not wanting to stand out and “wanting to be like with everyone else” (Leitão et al., 2017, p. 331) was another key theme which participants referred to when talking about the impact of their literacy difficulties on their school experiences. Not being able to “do something and everyone else can” (Morgan, 2019, p. 142) made them feel different to their peers. Whilst some participants acknowledged their need for support and that recognition of their difficulties (such as through diagnosis) sometimes made them feel better about themselves, they also felt that this “was a bad thing because like I was being treated differently to everyone else, didn’t want to stick out too much” (Leitão et al., 2017, p. 326). For some participants, this feeling of being different and not wanting to stand out was emphasised by the negative peer experiences, societal misconceptions, and the fear of being ridiculed as described in the analytical theme above (Marshall et al., 2006; Morgan, 2019). One participant also described their feelings about certain labels that might highlight them as different; although they did not mind the label ‘dyslexic,’ “I don’t like walking around like with a giant sign on my head saying ‘I have learning disabilities’. I just like to be called normal” (Marshall et al., 2006, p. 32).

2.5 Discussion

2.5.1 Summary and implications

This literature review explores the school experiences of CYP with literacy difficulties. It aims to illuminate the voices of these learners in order to enhance understanding of what it is like to experience these challenges in school which can then inform educational practice. Through the process of thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008), four separate overarching analytical themes were identified: experiences of teaching approaches, accommodations, and support with learning; a degree of struggle; the need to belong; and being made to feel different, all of which were all linked by the fifth analytical theme, emotional experience. The implications for education professionals will be explored in detail below.

Participants shared some of the challenges they experienced in relation to teaching approaches and support in school, including a lack of appropriate differentiation in lessons and having inconsistent or not enough access to the accommodations that they feel they need. Research suggests that many teachers feel unprepared to support learners with literacy difficulties (Knight, 2018; Merga et al., 2020). For example, the Driver Youth Trust (2013) found that 60% of teachers felt that their teacher training did not equip them with the knowledge and skills to teach learners with literacy difficulties and this was even higher (74%) with regard to identifying and supporting learners with dyslexia. As previously recommended by the Rose Report (2009), the experiences of these learners suggest that there needs to be further training for teachers to enable them to identify pupils who are struggling with literacy and for them to have access to specialist teachers for support with how best to teach these pupils and enable them to progress. The DfE (2022) recommend that children who are at risk of falling behind should have additional opportunities for practice with a well-trained adult and that headteachers need to prioritise building a team of “expert teachers who know and understand the processes that underpin learning to read, and draw on expert training, practice and coaching to achieve this” (DfE, 2022, p. 72). Furthermore, Educational Psychologists (EPs) are well placed to provide

training, coaching, and supervision to promote school staff's awareness of literacy difficulties as well as specific strategies and interventions to support them.

Despite these challenges, participants spoke about the teaching approaches they found helpful and the support that they received both within and outside of the classroom. With the exception of Anderson (2009), who specifically explored the perceived benefits and challenges of withdrawal tuition, literacy intervention was rarely mentioned by participants in the research. Instead, participants tended to describe the teaching approaches, resources, and support that they found helpful within classroom learning. They expressed how having access to technology supported them with their literacy difficulties, reduced discomfort and enabled progress. Indeed, research has shown that technology can improve learners' motivation and attitudes towards literacy and reduce barriers to learning (Picton, 2019). Participants also described strategies such as breaking learning down into small steps, use of visuals, peer collaboration and support, making learning enjoyable, and praise, all of which share characteristics with quality first teaching referred to within the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (DfE, 2015). Research into working memory also supports these aspects as a helpful way of learning (Gathercole et al., 2006). This suggests that learners with literacy difficulties value this high quality, differentiated, inclusive approach to teaching and that schools should therefore be ensuring that all learners have access to high quality teaching in the classroom from their class teacher.

The potential inequity in access to accommodations was highlighted by participants. The findings suggest that there could be more barriers to accommodation use if there is no formal identification or recognition of need (such as through diagnosis). However, it was also acknowledged that diagnosis did not necessarily change teachers' perceptions or the support provided. This is consistent with findings from Gibby-Leversuch et al. (2021b) who explored the views of young people (YP) with and without literacy difficulties or dyslexia. They found that a perceived advantage of a dyslexia label was that it was thought to enable access to resources and

support but that a disadvantage was that the label does not inform what support a learner will need. The findings of this review suggest that it is not necessarily the presence or absence of a label that will determine the level of support provided, it is rather the teachers level of awareness, understanding, beliefs, and empathy for these learners that impacts their experience and the way that they feel in school.

Participants shared their experiences of being made to feel different to their peers, which appeared to stem from comparing rates of progress, their use of differentiated materials, the additional support they received and, in some cases, the use of certain labels. This innate drive to evaluate oneself and one's abilities is in line with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) which also suggests that individuals make comparisons to the abilities of others. This can impact academic self-concept, one's evaluation of their ability which impacts what we think we can achieve (Burns, 1982; Shavelson et al., 1976). Research has shown that CYP tend to compare themselves with peers who they perceive as performing better than, but are also similar to, themselves and that this can negatively impact academic self-concept (Dijkstra et al., 2008). This was evidenced in participants' descriptions of how these comparisons negatively impacted how they felt about themselves, leading them to judge themselves as stupid and lazy. Dijkstra et al. (2008) also found that upward comparison can lead to improved attainment. Although participants in this review experienced positive emotions when they made progress in relation to their peers, improved attainment that resulted from peer comparison was not acknowledged. However, participants did speak about their feelings of difference in school. It is possible, therefore, that because they did not perceive themselves as similar to the peers they were comparing themselves to, upward comparison did not impact on their attainment.

The skill development model suggests that experiencing achievement improves academic self-concept (Guay et al., 2003), so supporting learners to make progress in literacy will be key to developing their belief in their ability. Indeed, for the participants in this review, mastering things they found challenging in school resulted in positive emotions and improved confidence. Self-

determination theory posits that this sense of competence and mastery over skills needed to succeed in this area, will support their motivation to achieve their goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Furthermore, other experiences which seemed to improve their academic self-concept included receiving recognition and positive feedback from teachers. Whilst extrinsic motivators, such as rewards, can make one feel less autonomous and therefore reduce intrinsic motivation, positive feedback increases feelings of competence which, in turn, boosts intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This highlights the importance of teachers giving constructive feedback which can improve academic attainment and increase learner independence, motivation, and engagement (McLeskey et al., 2017).

Relationships with school staff and peers was another factor that impacted participants' wellbeing and experiences of school. Many participants described aspects of their negative relationships with school staff, evidenced through their descriptions of unjust punishment and discouraging remarks. This negatively impacted their experience of school and made them feel upset, stressed, and angry. Similarly, some participants described negative experiences with their peers. Some were ridiculed for their literacy difficulties and others experienced bullying and this had a significant impact on their learning, their social experiences, and their wellbeing. This is consistent with the findings of previous research which has found that learners with reading difficulties are at increased risk of bullying involvement (Turunen et al., 2017). These negative experiences of both teachers and peers appeared to be a result of limited understanding and misconceptions about what their difficulties or diagnosis meant. This emphasises the need to increase both peer and teacher awareness and understanding of literacy difficulties and what these mean for these learners, in addition to the need to address and prevent incidents of bullying. These experiences are also likely to impact on CYP's feelings of safety and social acceptance in the classroom, needs that must be fulfilled in order to enable them to learn and achieve (Maslow, 1943). Self-determination theory suggests that this psychological need for belonging or relatedness supports ones' motivation to learn, master, and apply new skills (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, these findings have important implications in terms of how educators can

promote an inclusive school environment which fosters a sense of belonging and inclusion in order to promote wellbeing and achievement.

School belonging is defined as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment” (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). School is a key context in which CYP learn and develop and provides a range of opportunities to promote a sense of belonging at different levels (Allen et al., 2016; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Participants in the reviewed literature spoke about the positive characteristics of their teachers and how they had made the effort to get to know them, understood their individual needs, and adjusted their expectations and teaching styles accordingly. This enabled the participants to feel more confident, view themselves more positively, and make progress in their learning. Tillery et al. (2013) suggest that the student-teacher relationship promotes school belonging through providing them with resources and support that help them to achieve their goals, fulfilling their need for connection which increases motivation, and providing a trusting and nurturing relationship that supports the development of emotional regulation and social skills. The participants also shared their experiences of being understood and accepted by peers, characterised by the positive, non-judgemental support they received from them, both academically and emotionally, which they felt resulted in improved mood and learning progress. This is consistent with previous research which has found that peer support is strongly associated with school belonging (Allen et al., 2016).

Fostering a sense of school belonging in CYP has been shown to have a range of positive outcomes including improved engagement in learning, academic achievement (Gillen-O’Neel & Fulgini, 2012), and psychological wellbeing (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). Furthermore, Fong Lam et al. (2015) found that it was positive emotions that participants experienced that mediated the relationship between school belonging and academic achievement. This highlights the need for schools to develop a positive, inclusive school ethos which values the individual contributions of

all pupils, creates a culture where teachers and students seek to understand, respect, and support one another, and strives to foster a sense of belonging within the school community.

2.5.2 Strengths and limitations

The three-stage thematic synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008) used in this review enabled an in-depth, high quality analysis of the reviewed studies' findings which was appropriate to the review question and provided a rich picture of participants' experiences. All of the reviewed studies sought the views of CYP and this was a focus of the research for many. The synthesis of these views is particularly relevant given legislation such as the Children and Families Act (2014) which emphasises the importance of gathering the views of CYP. It also adds to the current literature as a previous systematic review exploring the educational experiences of learners with literacy difficulties focused on those in higher education (MacCullagh, 2014; Pino & Mortari, 2014). Furthermore, it included grey literature, which is another strength of the review.

Although a sensitivity analysis could have been conducted, whereby findings from lower quality papers were included and excluded to evaluate the impact on the conclusions of the review, the process through which this can be applied to thematic synthesis is argued to be unclear (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). Therefore, in this review, rather than excluding studies on the basis of quality or prioritising them in the synthesis, the identified themes were evaluated in light of the quality of the contributing studies. Table 2.4 shows the relative contribution of each study to the descriptive themes and tables in Appendix B show the quality of each study. It is clear that the studies which were considered to be of higher quality were the ones that made the largest contribution to the synthesis and those of lower quality did not contribute any unique themes of their own. Therefore, the conclusions drawn can be considered robust.

One limitation of the review is that the synthesis included studies that had also sought the views of parents, teachers, and other professionals, in addition to those of the child participants.

Whilst these views were excluded from the synthesis, it is possible that they contributed to the interpretations and themes of each study that took this approach.

Another limitation is that the majority of studies in this review recruited participants who had a formal diagnosis of dyslexia or either self-identified or were identified by others as having dyslexia. The findings therefore may not be as representative of those who have literacy difficulties but do not have a formal diagnosis.

Furthermore, only two of the twelve studies collected information on ethnicity, and only one study reported a diverse range of different ethnicities (Learned, 2016). This is a limitation of the research as the representativeness of pupil voices captured could be potentially biased towards western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies. This is important considering that individuals from non-WEIRD countries make up just 3% of participants in developmental psychology, while making up 85% of the world's population (Nielsen et al., 2017).

2.5.3 Directions for future research

Five of the reviewed studies did not take steps to increase the level of participant participation. Although several studies took steps to increase this through informing participants about the research, gaining their consent, and giving them a meaningful role by seeking to highlight their experiences, the majority did not employ methods that enabled the degree of participation past the fourth rung of Hart's participation ladder, "assigned but informed" (p. 11, Hart, 1992), and it was not always clear whether the participants were given the power to choose to participate rather than refuse or drop out after parental consent was gained. Pollock (2019) and Morgan (2019), on the other hand, both informed and gained the consent of participants and co-constructed themes through the data collection methods used, thereby increasing the level of participation. Future research could build on the participatory methods of previous research by

consulting participants for their views and involving them in decision making, as per the fifth and sixth rungs of Hart's (1992) ladder of participation.

Although participants shared some of the things they liked about their school experience, they were not consulted about what provision they would value and would be most helpful in supporting them with their literacy difficulties. Future research could therefore focus on how YP with literacy difficulties would choose to improve their school experience, if they were given the opportunity.

Although not the focus this particular research, there appear to be some differences in educational experiences for those with and without a dyslexia label. Future research could, therefore, aim to further explore the views of CYP with literacy difficulties who do not have a diagnosis of dyslexia so that we can gain further insight into the experiences of those who have not had access to this label.

2.5.4 Conclusion

This systematic review extends the literature by synthesising research that seeks to illuminate the school experiences of CYP with literacy difficulties from their perspective. Much of the focus of government initiatives to support these learners has been focused on approaches to instruction and support to target literacy skills. However, whilst the experiences of teaching approaches, accommodations, and support with learning came through in the participants' narratives regarding their school experiences, it only forms part of the picture. For these learners, their experiences of school go beyond the basics of literacy instruction. Rather, what has also been key to their experience is how much they feel understood, respected, and included within their school community and how this has impacted both their wellbeing and academic outcomes.

Chapter 3 "Successful because I was supported": The school experiences of young people with literacy difficulties and their perspectives on ideal and non-ideal schools

3.1 Abstract

This research explored the school experiences of young people aged 16-17 with literacy difficulties, without a dyslexia diagnosis, and their frame on a non-ideal and ideal school. Thematic analysis of four interviews and a focus group with two participants led to the development of nine overarching themes: making sense of and coping with academic ability; developing awareness; the need for increased school support; what enables learning; impact of the environment; impact of poor teaching; low self-concept; the right support leads to a successful future; and feeling happy and ready to learn. Implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords: literacy difficulties, young people, school, college, experience

3.2 Introduction

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicated that young people (YP) of 15 years of age, in the United Kingdom, scored above the OECD average in reading (OECD, 2018). This has remained stable since 2006 which means that there has been no improvement or decline. However, the 2012 International Survey of Adult Skills found that YP aged 16-18 have one of the poorest levels of literacy compared to other age groups across 18 countries and that over 16% of adults in England have very poor basic literacy skills, achieving Level One or below (Wheater et al., 2013).

Many YP are, therefore, leaving school without the skills and confidence in literacy that they need to achieve their full potential as adults, which makes the 16-18 age group a particularly vulnerable population (Wheater et al., 2013). Consequently, the drive to optimise support for these learners to improve their literacy skills is of great importance (Office for Standards in Education, Ofsted, 2013).

Some YP, who experience literacy difficulties, are diagnosed with dyslexia for which the Rose Report (2009) provided the following definition:

> Dyslexia is 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. (Rose, 2009, p. 9)

This definition shares characteristics with the British Psychological Society (1999) definition, the British Dyslexia Association (2010) definition, and the International Dyslexia Association (2017) definition. However, whilst these definitions are widely used, including for research purposes, using the definition for diagnostic purposes and as a requirement for resource allocation is problematic due to the lack of consistency about how it is defined and the impact on those with similar difficulties who may not meet the diagnostic criteria (Brady, 2019; Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014; Gibbs & Elliott, 2020).

This fact that current definitions of dyslexia do not provide clarity on how we distinguish those with a diagnosis of dyslexia from those who experience literacy difficulties, in general, or where, exactly, the threshold for diagnosis lies (Elliott & Gibbs, 2008) has generated considerable

controversy as to whether the label should be used at all. In addition, there are still a variety of practices regarding the identification of and support for those with literacy difficulties/dyslexia. For example, despite the comprehensive evidence against the discrepancy model, which linked reading ability to intelligence, it is still widely used by practitioners, which highlights the inconsistency and, therefore, lack of validity in diagnosis (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014; Elliott & Nicolson, 2016), which is very evident in the variation in reported prevalence rates which vary from 3% and 27% (Gibbs & Elliott, 2020).

Further debate has been generated as research has consistently found no difference between the support needed for dyslexic or non-dyslexic YP (Elliott & Gibbs, 2008). Whilst it is acknowledged that a diagnosis of dyslexia can reduce stigmatisation, promote teacher understanding, support self-esteem, and enable access to support (Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2021b; Snowling, 2015) one of the problems with diagnosis, as a route to support, highlighted above, is that it has the potential to exclude YP with literacy difficulties, who have not had access to a specialist teacher or professional who could assess and confirm a dyslexia label (Gibbs & Elliott, 2015).

It is clear from the existing research, that gathering the views of children and young people (CYP) with literacy difficulties is key in developing educational practice (Riddick, 2009). Although previous research has explored the views and educational experiences of CYP, many of the studies recruited participants who had a formal diagnosis of dyslexia or were identified by themselves or others as having dyslexia and so are likely to be less representative of those without such a label. Furthermore, the participants in these studies have not been explicitly asked about the support they feel they should be receiving in school.

The aim of the present research, therefore, is to explore the views and experiences of YP with literacy difficulties who do not have a diagnosis of dyslexia, with an emphasis on exploring their access to support and what they feel would enable them to succeed in their education. Given the poor literacy rates amongst school leavers (Wheater et al., 2013), the researcher aims to gain

a detailed understanding of the views and experiences of education of YP of this age. Furthermore, the researcher aims to use participatory methods to ensure that the implications of the research are participant driven. Participatory methods are valuable as they enable adults and YP to work more effectively together to allow the YP to be heard and accurately represented and enable them to actively and meaningfully shape the communities in which they develop (Hart, 2008). The research questions are as follows:

1. What are YP's views and experiences of their literacy difficulties across their school journey?
2. What are YP's experiences of access to resources and support for their literacy difficulties across their school journey?
3. How do YP frame their non-ideal school in relation to supporting their literacy difficulties?
4. How do YP frame their ideal school in relation to supporting their literacy difficulties?

3.3 Method

3.3.1 Design

This study adopted a qualitative design in two sequential stages to explore the views and experiences of participants with literacy difficulties, with the aim of gathering a rich understanding of how YP perceive and experience their literacy difficulties and how they would design their non-ideal and ideal schools. In the first stage of the research, this took the form of individual semi-structured interviews with four participants which aimed to explore how the participants experienced their literacy difficulties and their experiences of support across their school journey. These participants were then invited to attend a focus group during which they were asked to collaboratively construct their ideal-school. Two of the original four participants chose to participate in the focus group, which took place eight weeks after the final interview.

The data from the two stages of the research was analysed separately using Big Q reflexive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). The analysis was approached with an inductive, data

driven orientation, which lies on a spectrum with deductive, researcher- or theory-driven approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2021a). The data was used as the starting point to develop meaning, recognising that it is not possible to remain purely inductive and that the researcher's own perspective, knowledge, and biases also shape the meaning of the data. Big Q reflexive thematic analysis differs from coding reliability approaches which tend to be deductive in nature, focus on objective coding and the use of a codebook and inter-rater reliability to facilitate accurate coding, and where themes are developed at an early stage. Big Q reflexive thematic analysis is therefore distinct from other approaches as researcher subjectivity and interpretation is perceived as an analytic tool and a strength of the analytic process that facilitates iterative theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

3.3.2 Participants

Participants were aged 16-17 and were recruited from a college in the South of England. This age group was chosen due to the low literacy levels in this age group compared to other age groups (Wheater et al., 2013), and because it was felt that participants would still be close enough to their school years to reflect meaningfully on their experiences there. All participants were currently experiencing difficulties with reading and/or writing and had done so throughout their time at school. The college had identified, through their own procedures, that the participants needed additional support with literacy. The participants did not have a diagnosis of dyslexia or another diagnosis (such as a learning disability) and they had English as a first language. These selection criteria were specified in order to reduce the impact of possible confounding variables on the experiences of participants.

3.3.3 Materials

3.3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

The interview schedule incorporated questions from a topic guide (Appendix C) which provided the researcher with questions but allowed for further clarifying questions to explore the individual experiences and priorities of the participants. The topic guide began with an introduction that introduced the researcher, explained the aims for the interview and asked the participant for additional verbal consent. It also reminded the participant about their right to withdraw and gave them the opportunity to ask any questions.

3.3.3.2 Focus group

Following the interviews, two of the four interviewees took part in a focus group. The questions for the focus group (Appendix D) were based upon the Drawing the Ideal School technique (Williams & Hanke, 2007) which was adapted from Moran's Drawing the Ideal Self (2001) and is based on Personal Construct Psychology (PCP; Kelly, 1955). Research has shown that the technique is effective in gaining YP's views about the learning environment and the support they need (Morgan Rose, 2015; Williams & Hanke, 2007). The technique provided a structure to support the participants to consider what would have been most and least helpful in supporting them across their education in terms of the classroom, the teachers, their peers, and how they would feel attending each school. It was adapted so that it could be used in a group context and to incorporate additional questions regarding the adults outside of school, access to resources, and their future. A research assistant created a graphic of the non-ideal and ideal schools and, with guidance from the participants and the researcher, wrote the agreed key words alongside the graphics. Full details of the focus group procedure can be found in Appendix D.

3.3.4 Procedure

The learning support coordinator at the college gave consent for the college to participate and then passed on a research flyer, participant information, and consent form to participants who met the selection criteria. Four participants agreed to take part in the research and either emailed their completed consent forms directly to the researcher or with support from the learning support coordinator. Four participants took part in semi-structured interviews, which lasted for 30 minutes on average. Of these, two participants agreed to take part in the focus group, which lasted for one hour and 26 minutes. Both the interviews and focus group took place on Microsoft Teams.

3.3.5 Data analysis

The interviews and the focus group were electronically recorded on Microsoft Teams and then transcribed by the researcher, which helped to increase familiarity with the data (Riessman, 1993). At this point, any identifying information was removed and the participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms chosen by the participants. The interview and focus group transcripts were imported into NVivo 12 Qualitative Data Analysis Software (2021). The data was analysed using Big Q reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021a). This process of eliciting themes is outlined in Appendix E. A more inductive approach to analysis was used so that the developed themes strongly reflected the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Due to the researcher's prior knowledge that was developed whilst conducting a systematic literature review in this area, it is unlikely that the approach could be completely inductive. However, Braun and Clarke (2020) recognise that the analytic approach lies on a continuum as it is not possible to separate ourselves entirely from prior knowledge and theory.

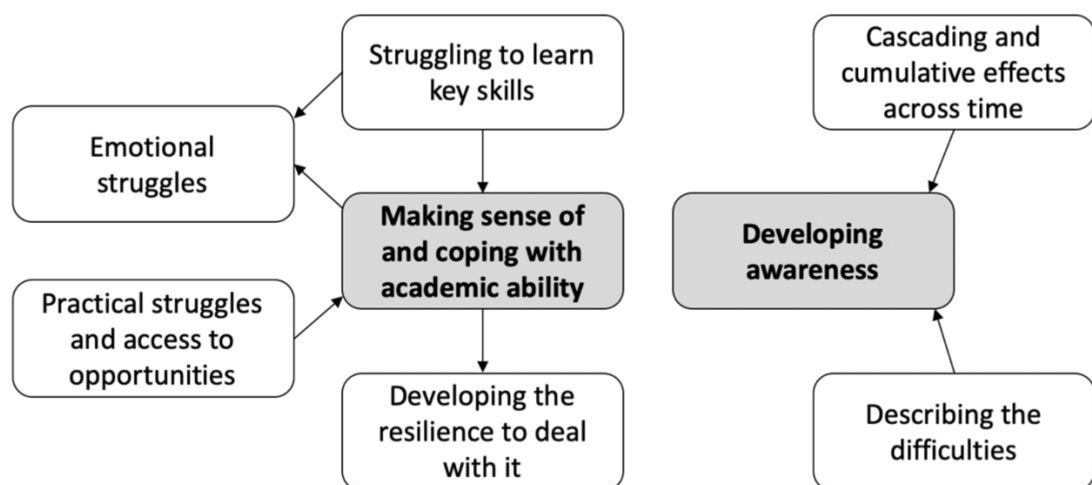
3.4 Results

Through thematic analysis of the four semi-structured interviews, four themes and their associated sub-themes were developed in response to the first two research questions regarding participants experiences of their literacy difficulties and access to support across their school journey. In addition, thematic analysis of the focus group of two participants yielded five themes and related sub-themes in response to the third and fourth research questions regarding their non-ideal and ideal schools. This section presents each theme in turn with the associated sub-themes, in response to the research questions. The overall thematic maps are in Appendix F.

3.4.1 What are YP's views and experiences of their literacy difficulties across their school journey?

Two main themes portray the participants' views and experiences of their literacy difficulties throughout their school journey (Figure 3.1). These include: making sense of and coping with academic ability and developing awareness. The associated sub-themes are explored in detail below.

Figure 3.1 *Thematic map displaying two themes and the associated sub-themes in response to research question one*



3.4.1.1 Making sense of and coping with academic ability

This theme focuses on how participants experience their literacy difficulties first hand. Participants described what they specifically struggled with and how they perceive their experiences to be a barrier to their education and their future. The theme also encompasses how these experiences made them feel as well as how they have learned to cope with their difficulties and build their resilience.

3.4.1.1.1 Struggling to learn key skills

All participants described how they struggle with different aspects of literacy, such as reading. Ben shared that “sometimes I read too far ahead and then I've missed words or miss lines” and struggle more when “it’s got like larger words and more difficult reading.” Participants shared how they “struggle to read out loud” (Will). Will “might say like words wrong” and Kevin would “skip things.” Participants also described how their reading ability and pronunciation of words made spelling more difficult. Will shared that this was because “[I] need to understand it before I can spell it” and Paten described how she sometimes “can't pronounce words properly and I can't spell ‘em properly.”

Kevin and Will described how their difficulties writing prevented them from recording their ideas. Kevin has “got all these ideas in my head that I, can’t for the life of me put it on paper” and Will shared how “when you speak it comes out all fluently everything’s it all matches up, all your sentences makes sense. But when I write it down, everything is more like a mumbo jumbo” and his “grammar isn’t really up to standard.” In lessons, Paten described how she felt she needed to “write it really quickly and it looks messy and I can't, like understand what I've written.” The concept of needing to take more time to do things was also shared by other participants who felt that others would be “a bit faster to understand it than I would be” (Will) and that it “tends to take me a little bit longer to complete the work” (Ben).

Some participants reported that they can't "concentrate very well" (Paten) and are "easily distracted" (Kevin). They also described difficulties with processing and memory which meant that they needed repetition. Will described how he "might read a whole couple paragraphs, and then I'll forget" so he has to "read it multiple times just to understand" and Paten shared that "I can't progress it on the first time. I just have someone to repeat it like a second or third time."

3.4.1.1.2 Emotional struggles

When participants struggled with their difficulties and school experiences, they experienced strong emotions, which further impacted their ability to access learning and ask for help. All participants reported difficult emotions such as feeling "frustrated" (Will), "anxious," "embarrassing" (Ben), "stressed" and "panic" (Kevin and Paten) in response to learning tasks, homework, exams, and being asked to read out loud. They described times where they were "just so stressed out that I just went home" (Kevin) or "have to walk out the class" (Paten). Ben, for example, "used to be quite anxious when asked to read" and found himself "walking out instead of telling the teacher and explaining." Kevin now experiences a sense of "regret … 'cause I'm having to retake" exams. These emotions were particularly apparent in secondary school. Kevin explained that he experienced "stress in school, not in college" and that he used to be "dizzy constantly … cause there was so much going in my mind about them being strict and my GCSEs."

3.4.1.1.3 Practical struggles and access to opportunities

Participants described their literacy difficulties and school experiences as a barrier to them achieving their potential, both in their education and in their future careers. Kevin shared how his literacy difficulties held him back in school because although his "teacher told me I had top set, um, answers in my head" and "I feel like I could have been in a lot higher set, … because of my reading and writing, I was kept down in bottom set pretty much the whole of my school experience." Paten and Will shared their experiences of failing their English exams and Will felt

that he is unable to reach his potential and achieve “exactly what I want” in college because of his grades:

> I struggled to pass my English exam and, it’s put me in a position that I can't go up and do a Level 3 subject … I wanna move up to a high level subject but I can't actually do that without the grades to back it. I-I know I have the full potential to do the Level 3 subject in hand, and I could do it, and I could pass it. But you just need that the thing that I can't get. (Will)

Will felt that “everything in my life at the moment is involving me passing my English exam” and all the participants wanted to make progress with their basic literacy skills by the time they left college, “being able to read what people want” (Ben), for example, so that they could progress into their future careers. The importance of getting support with their literacy difficulties in order to break down these barriers before they leave college was highlighted by Kevin, who felt that “I might just have to live with them from then, if I haven't sorted them out.”

Conversely, these barriers were not experienced by participants outside of school. Kevin shared how he “got on with it” and Will explained that “the only time yeah I’d really read and write is probably for messaging” and “I'd get something spelling wrong but, it's not a biggie.”

3.4.1.1.4 Developing the resilience to deal with it

Despite the difficult emotions and barriers that they experienced, participants described how they have developed their resilience and have “got used to it” (Kevin). Will shared that “I feel like I’m quite strong” and spoke of his increasing independence, “trying to get on with it myself as well a bit, and if I needed help I would ask.” Ben spoke about his strengths, such as “I can read postcodes very quick and licence plates” and “I know the Cat and the Hat off by heart,” as well as the opportunities he had to harness these, doing “motor vehicle” at college and reading to his brother. Paten shared that “I'm confident now” and described the use of emotional regulation skills which support resilience:

> When I can't pronounce the words, or can't write it properly … I just get stressed about it, an- sometimes like, I just don’t know what to do usually, so I might put music on and just try an calm myself down and then get back onto it. (Paten)

Kevin and Will described how their experiences have not impacted on their identity, sharing that “I'm just me whether I've got difficulties or not” (Kevin) and “I'm happy with everyday life with the way I am” (Will).

3.4.1.2 Developing awareness

This theme relates to how participants developed an awareness of their difficulties. Participants spoke about when they came to realise their struggles and the factors that contributed to this, including the use of the dyslexia label.

3.4.1.2.1 Cascading and cumulative effects across time

Although “it’s sort of always been there” (Kevin), participants became more aware of their difficulties as they got older and pressures increased. Ben and Paten first realised that they had literacy difficulties when they were in “year three year four … when you start properly reading” (Ben) but “it was never really, a thing that concerned” Will at this age. Paten acknowledged that throughout secondary school “it got so- much more harder” and Will shared:

> when I really started getting like bad difficulties, not like bad but like, you notice that I should be better at this, was probably about year 10, when I did 'cause it's GCSE and you really start start need to upping it. (Will)

3.4.1.2.2 Describing the difficulties

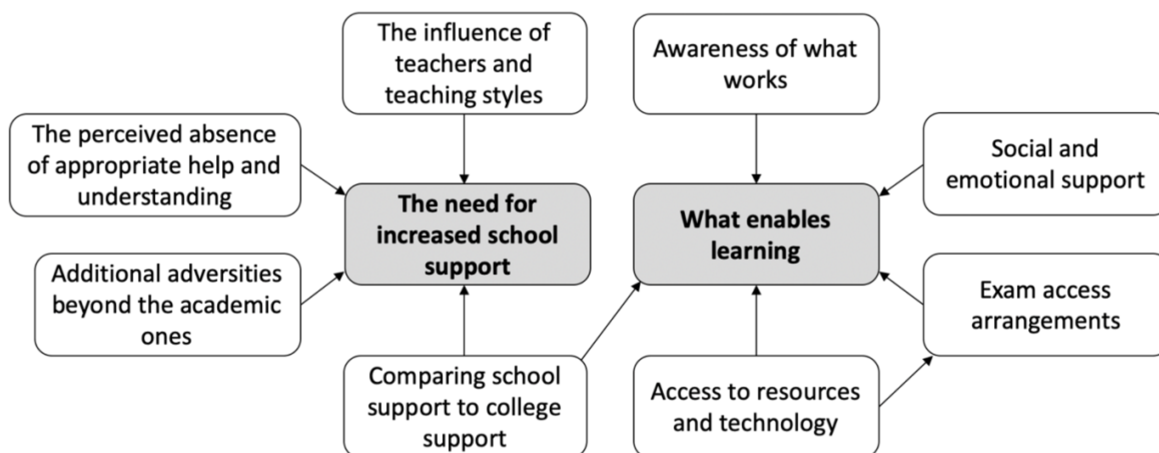
Participants’ awareness of their difficulties was also influenced by others. Despite confirming that he did not have a diagnosis, Ben initially described his difficulties as dyslexia as this was the term that other people used to describe his difficulties, including “my mum and dad” and “the doctors down the road.” Ben shared that his “dad’s dyslexic … and he was like well you it

looks like you've got the same thing that I do so we're just gonna stick a label on it and call it dyslexia" but shared that "I don't really care much because it's just a word, it doesn't really mean anything." Similarly, Kevin's "mum uh asked the school to get me tested for dyslexia I came back positive or something, but then they did nothing about it and the teacher that tested me left so they just sort of dropped it" and this was not a term that Kevin used to describe his literacy difficulties.

3.4.2 What are YP's experiences of access to resources and support for their literacy difficulties across their school journey?

Two main themes depict how participants felt about their access to resources and support to help them with their literacy difficulties across their school journey: the need for increased school support and what enables learning (Figure 3.2). The associated sub-themes are explored in detail below.

Figure 3.2 *Thematic map displaying two themes and the associated sub-themes in response to research question two*



3.4.2.1 The need for increased school support

This theme relates to the lack of support available in school which hindered participants progress. The participants described the lack of personalised approaches and differentiated

teaching, not receiving the help that they asked for, and their experiences of behaviour management.

3.4.2.1.1 The influence of teachers and teaching styles

The lack of effective differentiation was apparent in the participants' descriptions of teaching approaches. Will described how a teacher in college taught in a way that "benefits the class" but not him which "means that I don't get the full potential out of my lessons." Paten spoke about teachers in school who asked her to do things but "wouldn't explain it" so she "wouldn't understand" and Ben shared his experience of teachers going too quickly so "they tend to move on and, yeah, sometimes I haven't quite finished." Paten described that having a number of different teachers, such as "four maths teachers, … about three or four English," resulted in inconsistent teaching approaches because they would teach in "different ways."

3.4.2.1.2 The perceived absence of appropriate help and understanding

The participants felt "there was a lot more that [school] could have done to support me" (Kevin). Paten described how she initially got some "help" in year 7 from someone who would "tell the teachers about the support stuff so they know what to do." However, when the staff member left, Paten "didn't really get the help I needed" and rated the support "around like four" out of ten. Will also explained that "no one would ever come around and ask" whether I "need help." Both Will and Paten spoke about the lack of responsiveness of school staff when asking for help, stating that "anytime I ask for help or anything they just didn't do it" (Paten). Will described that "in school, it's almost like they're sticking their middle finger up at me."

3.4.2.1.3 Additional adversities beyond the academic ones

This sub-theme relates to peer behaviour and teacher behaviour management. School "wasn't a great place to be" (Will) at times for some participants and the behaviour of peers contributed to this. Ben shared that "I got a bit bullied" and Will explained:

People in my class would always mess about they would always, throw things will distract the teacher, always get sent out and the whole classroom would just become massive room of just arguments between this kid and this kid and then the teacher and this kid

Participants reported getting into trouble if they didn't "get on with it" (Will) or if they had "a lot of arguments with teachers." The participants spoke about the teachers "not being able to handle" (Will) the students and Kevin described how he was "sent out very easily" and was given "four or five detentions a week" (Ben). This put the participants "at a disadvantage" (Kevin).

3.4.2.1.4 Comparing school support to college support

This sub-theme connects the overarching themes of the need for increased school support and what enables learning. The participants' experience of primary school was "alright" (Ben) but it was difficult to remember because "that was over like, six years ago" (Kevin). Most participants described receiving support in primary school, through "phonics" (Ben), going "out for an hour with and I would read to someone" (Will) or being "in a separate little classroom doing spelling tests" (Paten). Participants explained that "secondary got harder" (Paten), for many of the reasons outlined in the sub-themes above. Will described his overall school experience as "rubbish." The participants were more positive about their college experience because they "got more help at college than at school" rating it as a "seven" out of ten (Paten). Will described how "my life has actually changed since I've gone there." This will be explored in more detail in the following section.

3.4.2.2 What enables learning

This theme focuses on what participants valued about their experiences that helped them in their education, including teachers' awareness of the YP's difficulties and how they adapted their teaching, as well as the emotional support they received from the people around them, exam access arrangements, and their access to resources and technology.

3.4.2.2.1 Awareness of what works

This sub-theme relates to teachers' awareness of the YP's literacy difficulties, the differentiation in class, and the interventions that the YP had access to. Participants felt it was important that teachers knew about their literacy difficulties and how to support them. They spoke about the need for "examples so I have something to base around," breaking things down into "small kind of simplified chunks," because "when you've been given instructions and it's all in paragraphs on the board and stuff like that … my brain doesn't work like that" (Will). Paten also spoke about needing someone to "explain what I've got to do, or … write it down in a simpler way that I would understand."

Although Will did not have access to interventions in school, the other participants described support they received outside of class where they did "some reading and writing" (Ben) and "interventions during the weekend and after school" (Kevin). However, Ben "didn't really like leaving the lesson because i-it's removing me from my lesson time." Kevin mainly attended after school interventions as an alternative to detention, but missed out on this support during lessons, "they pulled out other students but not me even though they knew I was struggling." However, Kevin shared that college "helped me with just like literacy" and "every Tuesday, at eleven o'clock, I go up to the Learning Support Centre. And we either go over maths or English or just everything, depending on what I'm struggling."

3.4.2.2.2 Social and emotional support

In addition to the increased academic support and differentiation described above, participants also received support with their emotional regulation. Some had an "exit pass that gives me like, 15 minutes out of the lesson" (Ben) so "if anything gets over like… stresses me out or whatever so I can just show my time out card then go speak to study advice or whatever, which helps a lot" (Kevin). Kevin also reported having meetings with "wellbeing" due to stress and family pressures.

Despite some personal and family pressures, the participants benefited from support outside of school throughout their school journeys. Ben had “support from everyone in my family” who “used to push me to do my best” and Paten’s mum would “check my college work” and tell college “about the support I need.” Kevin shared that he “would talk to my mates about” any concerns.

3.4.2.2.3 Exam access arrangements

Many of the participants spoke of the access arrangements that they found helpful for their exams either at secondary school or at college. This included access to “a computer … extra time, and I had… and a reader” (Ben). Although Kevin and Paten had extra time in their exams at secondary school, Kevin “didn't use it” and they didn’t have access to other support such as “someone reading out the questions or anything, I didn't get that” (Paten). Kevin shared that college “helped a lot more than [school] had originally.”

3.4.2.2.4 Access to resources and technology

The participants valued resources that made reading and writing tasks easier for them. Will spoke about the modern facilities available in college, such as “Mac” computers that he could use for “editing” and “typing my English” that reduced his worries about falling behind in his work and improved his “grammar.” Ben and Kevin also found it “easier to type” (Kevin). Technology that students referred to using in school was not always helpful or consistently used. Kevin had a “Dictaphone” in year four that was then “taken off of me” and Paten used a “speak thing on the phone” that she would speak into before writing it down. Ben also had access to “coloured see-through rulers” to help him read and some “teachers used to offer me my work on yellow paper.”

3.4.3 How do YP frame their non-ideal school in relation to supporting their literacy difficulties?

Three main themes portray how participants frame their non-ideal school: impact of the environment; impact of poor teaching; and low self-concept. The themes are displayed in Figure 3.3 and the graphic that was co-constructed with participants in the focus group is displayed in Figure 3.4. The associated sub-themes are explored in detail below.

Figure 3.3 *Thematic map displaying two themes and the associated sub-themes in response to research question three*

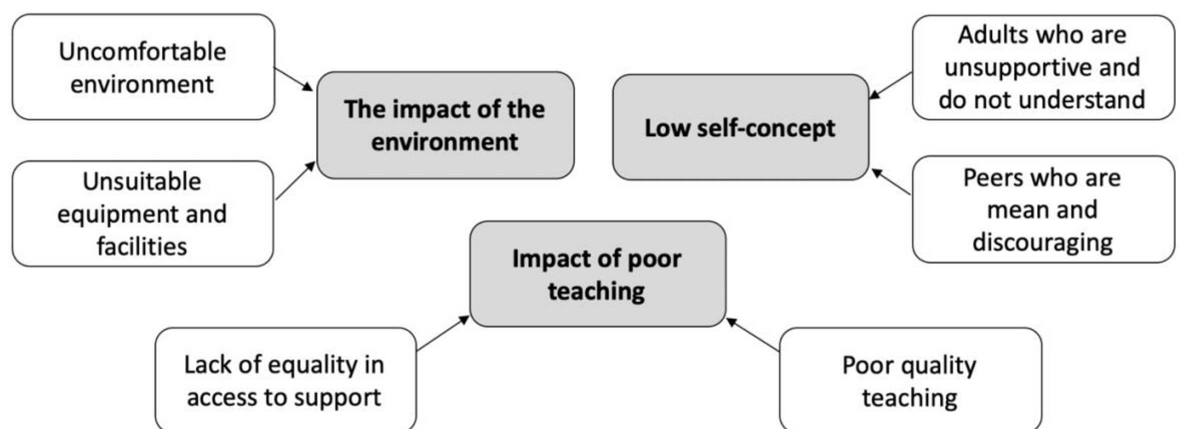


Figure 3.4 *Participant co-constructed non-ideal school drawn by Lindsay Gray*

3.4.3.1 Impact of the environment

The participants described how the environment would impact their learning through being uncomfortable and having unsuitable equipment and facilities.

3.4.3.1.1 Uncomfortable environment

The participants described the physical school environment as not being conducive to learning. The building and classrooms would be poorly maintained, appearing “untidy … messy” and as though it will “collapse” (Paten). The classroom would be “freezing cold,” the whiteboard would be “filthy,” there would be “plastic uncomfortable chairs” (Paten), and the walls would be “rotting” (Will). The participants shared that this environment would make them feel “disgusted” (Will) and “uncomfortable” (Paten). The classroom environment described was distracting for the participants as “you’d be more focused on other things in the classroom, like, for your own safety … so you won’t actually be paying attention” (Will). Other distractions included “background noise” (Will) and the behaviour of peers “messing about” (Will).

3.4.3.1.2 Unsuitable equipment and facilities

The participants described equipment and facilities that did not meet their needs. This included equipment that would be "useless to you" (Will), such as "broken pencils and … chewed up rubbers" (Paten) and, even if they did have the right equipment, it would be difficult to use and inappropriate for their individual needs, for example there would only be "left hand scissors" so "it's impossible for people to use it to this if they're right handed" (Paten) but they would not have any choice. The classroom was also described to be "too old" (Paten) and to not have modern facilities "like a big projector" (Will).

3.4.3.2 Impact of poor teaching

This theme relates to participants not being able to achieve what they wanted because the teachers did provide them with the support they needed. Both Paten and Will described how they would be "trying to get my grades and trying to move on" (Paten) "but I can't because no one around me is trying to help me do that" (Will). They shared that it would get to the point where they "probably would have left the school … so I wouldn't have been able to move forward in my life." Not only would this impact their experiences of education and attainment, but it would also create a barrier to a "successful" (Will) future, which was described as "living on the streets" and "not being able to get like a job or anything, because you haven't got the right qualifications" (Paten).

3.4.3.2.1 Poor quality teaching

The teachers were thought to be "the worst teachers you can ever think of" (Paten) and were considered to be one of the most important reasons why participants did not want to go to this school. They were described to be "aggressive" (Paten) and "very strict so you could be like one warning you're out the classroom" (Will). There would be "no break" (Will) so "if you wanted to go for like maybe a 5-minute break or you're going for your breaks or lunch, they might not let you" (Paten). They described the lack of differentiation and quality teaching, explaining that they

would not “teach you right” (Will) or “explain it properly” (Paten). “The teachers aren’t helpful, in the slightest” (Will) so “if you need help, they won’t do it” and you “might a bit scared to ask” (Paten). There also wouldn’t be any additional support available for pupils so “if you wanted any … learning support” it “wouldn't be there if you needed it” (Will). Will shared that “I would have failed my GCSEs, ‘cause my teachers failed me.”

3.4.3.2.2 Lack of equality in access to support

Will commented that the teachers “would not care” about “our support and our life and, that we want to pass.” They would have “favourites” and would “only support them” (Will) and Paten gave the example of “not helping the right children that need more help … if someone’s got like a disability, for example.”

> You should try to treat all of them, equally, and like include everyone instead of like, saying, ‘you can go to the toilet’ or ‘you can go stand up and do this,’ or ‘yes you can get the help’ and it's saying someone else saying no you're not going to do this or you're not getting help. (Paten)

3.4.3.3 Low self-concept

This theme relates to the impact of unsupportive relationships with adults and peers on the participants wellbeing and self-concept.

3.4.3.3.1 Adults who are unsupportive and do not understand

The participants shared how the adults in their life, both within and outside of school, would treat them in a way that showed a complete lack of understanding and willingness to help. They described how the teachers would tell their parents that “you're doing bad even though you're doing, all you can” (Will) and the young person’s parents would tell them to “work harder” or “you’re punished” (Will). Their parents would be “disappointed” in their children, even if the young person feels like it is “a good thing for them” (Paten). Parents would be “angry with you for

not doing the right thing, even though you're incapable of doing the right thing, because your mind might work differently" (Will). This would make the YP feel "upset," "angry," and "worthless" (Paten).

3.4.3.3.2 Peers who are mean and discouraging

The other YP in the non-ideal school would be "really horrible to you" (Paten). They would be "insulting you" (Will), saying "you're a loser' or … you're too, probably skinny, you're too fat, or you're not good at this" (Paten), which could then escalate to them "physically hurting you" (Will). Their peers "won't do anything, to help" with their learning and they would discourage them, telling them that they "don't need to work so hard to succeed."

3.4.4 How do YP frame their ideal school in relation to supporting their literacy difficulties?

Two main themes portray how participants frame their ideal school: the right support leads to a successful future and feeling happy and ready to learn. The themes are displayed in Figure 3.5 and the graphic that was co-constructed with participants in the focus group is displayed in Figure 3.6. The associated sub-themes are explored in detail below.

Figure 3.5 *Thematic map displaying two themes and the associated sub-themes in response to research question four*

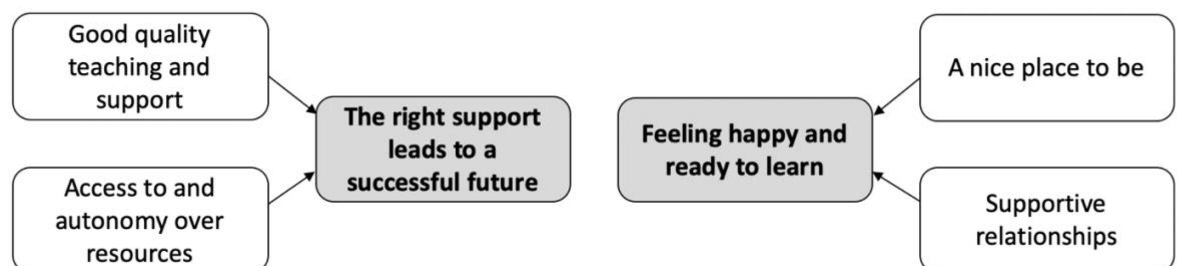


Figure 3.6 *Participant co-constructed ideal school drawn by Lindsay Gray*

3.4.4.1 The right support leads to a successful future

This theme relates to the support that the participants felt it was important to have in their ideal school, such as the availability of skilled teaching staff and resources, and how this would enable them to have a positive and fulfilling future. The participants shared that, in the future, they would be “successful because I was supported” (Will). Success was considered to be “maybe getting like a really good job” or “good career” (Paten).

3.4.4.1.1 Good quality teaching and support

Participants described the different qualities they would want the teachers in their ideal school to have. “Good” teachers were described to have skills and knowledge, such as “being very smart” (Will). They would make learning engaging, “make it a bit more like a fun” (Paten) and they would “do their best for you, to pass” (Will). Teachers would be “really nice” and “really supportive” (Paten), adapting classroom tasks and activities in response to individual needs, so that:

> if you don't feel comfortable reading out loud or, if you even want to read out loud or, if you're reading a book, and you want the teacher to read instead of reading in heads, you can do all of that. (Will)

The teachers were one of the most important reasons why the participants would want to go to this ideal school. Participants felt that their future would be successful because "you got so much help, and you got like good grades in school" (Paten).

Participants felt it was important for support to be available to everyone so that they all "get as much help as they need and want" (Will). This took the form of teachers responding to requests for help and having "plenty" of "extra staff like TAs" and so no one is "waiting for half an hour for help" (Will). In addition to the support available in class, Will felt it would be helpful for "learning support … to be there … with open arms, ready to help" with "getting your homework done" and "helping plan for revising for GCSEs."

3.4.4.1.2 Access to and autonomy over resources

Will and Paten valued having certain resources, school spaces, and equipment available to them and being able to choose what works best for them. Will for example, valued "IT equipment" and Paten valued having access to "the art room, the music room," and "the IT room" and having the opportunity to "learn in … different little ways." They also spoke about being allowed certain things to support their concentration, such as "gum" (Will) or "something to have in your hand whilst writing or typing up" such as "a piece of blue tack … or stress ball" (Paten).

3.4.4.2 Feeling happy and ready to learn

This theme focuses on the aspects of the ideal school which supported participants wellbeing and their readiness to learn, such as the physical school environment and the relationships that enabled them to feel happy in school and to feel accepted and included for who they are.

3.4.4.2.1 A nice place to be

A “good environment” that enables pupils to feel “safe, comfortable, relaxed” (Will) was one of the most important aspects of the ideal school. The classroom would be “nice and tidy and clean,” have “nice decorations” and be “well organised so you know where everything is all the time,” (Will). The pupils would have access to a “comfortable chair” such as “bean bags” (Paten) and it will be the “right temperature” (Will). There would also be “places where you can go to, catch up on your homework or … relax with your mates” (Will).

3.4.4.2.2 Supportive relationships

The participants shared that the teachers would be “kind, caring and just, genuine” and would “always welcome you like every time you step through the classroom” (Paten). The teachers would be “patient” and “polite” when supporting them in the classroom and “say nice comments about the students” (Paten). The participants described how they would feel able to be themselves around the teachers and would feel accepted and respected for who they are, “you can feel like open with them, you don't worry about them judging you” (Will).

The YP in the ideal school would also be “greeting you” (Paten) and were described as “calm and nice and friendly” (Will). They would also be working collaboratively, “helping you in a team” (Paten). Participants would feel a sense of belonging with their peers as “you would always have plenty of friends, you would always have someone to hang around with” (Will). The YP would make them “comfortable” (Paten), “happy and welcome and relaxed” (Will).

Participants also spoke about the positive feedback that parents would get about their children from the teachers who would say “nice things” such as “your son or your daughter works so hard on uh this piece of English work” (Paten) and that their parents would be “proud of you.” They also spoke about the support that they would receive from their parents if they were attending this ideal school. Paten shared that they “would be really supportive and they’ll help you with your work” and Will said that they would be “glad that you’re happy

3.5 Discussion

3.5.1 Summary and implications

This research explored the views and school experiences of YP with literacy difficulties who do not have a diagnosis of dyslexia and how they would frame their non-ideal and ideal schools. Four overarching themes were developed in response to the first two research questions and five overarching themes were developed in response to the second two research questions. The findings were presented in the context of each research question and the implications, which are informed by participants' experiences and driven by the construction of the ideal school (summarised in Table 3.1), will be discussed in detail below.

Table 3.1 *Implications of the research and some of the associated themes and sub-themes that contributed to these.*

Implications	Experience	Non-ideal school	Ideal school
Ensuring that CYP without a diagnosis are not excluded from provision of support	The perceived absence of appropriate help and understanding and the need for increased school support	Lack of equality in access to support	Good quality teaching and support
Educating teachers as to how to support those struggling with literacy and auditing school practices to support the development of literacy plans across subjects	Struggling to learn key skills, the influence of teachers and teaching styles, and CYP's awareness of what works	Poor quality teaching	Good quality teaching and support
Increasing the academic self-concept of learners with literacy difficulties through support with literacy and emotional support	Developing awareness, emotional struggles, additional adversities beyond the academic ones, and social and emotional support	Low self-concept	Supportive relationships
A supportive school environment that meets the physiological, emotional, and belonging needs of CYP	Emotional struggles, additional adversities beyond the academic ones, and developing the resilience to deal with it	Uncomfortable environment, adults who are unsupportive and do not understand, and peers who are mean and discouraging	A nice place to be, supportive relationships, and feeling happy and ready to learn
Access to resources and equipment and the option to use technology to complete learning tasks	Access to resources and technology	Unsuitable equipment and facilities	Access to and autonomy over resources

All the participants described their difficulties with reading, writing, and spelling, and the frustration they experienced in relation to these. In addition to their specific literacy difficulties, participants reported struggling with concentration, memory, reading out loud in class, and taking more time to complete tasks. Despite not having a diagnosis of dyslexia, the nature of the participants perceived literacy difficulties shares many similarities with those described in previous research by CYP who have been identified as having dyslexia or specific learning difficulties (Leitão et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2006). This evidences the issues associated with distinguishing those with a diagnosis of dyslexia from those who experience literacy difficulties in general (Elliott & Gibbs, 2008), and has important implications for how we support these learners in school.

The lack of support and differentiation experienced by participants was a key theme that came out of their experiences of education, which was also mirrored in the characteristics of their perceived non-ideal school. In their own personal experiences of education and in their non-ideal school, participants felt that they were not taught in a way that would benefit them, as teachers would not adapt or personalise their teaching according to their needs or provide them with the help that they needed. This lack of effective differentiation has also been raised by CYP in previous research (Leitão et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2006; Morgan, 2019). When describing their non-ideal school, participants also spoke about the inequity that they would experience in terms of their access to support, explaining how the teachers may support the learning of some students and not others who would benefit from more help. Whilst two participants expressed that the dyslexia label did not mean much to them, it could have significant meaning in the way that it could be used to identify learners in need of support (Gibbs & Elliott, 2015). Thus, it is important to consider how the use of labels could contribute to inequity in provision and ensure that YP without a diagnosis do not get excluded from provision of support.

Although some participants shared that there were still some aspects of teaching that they struggled with at college, their experiences of struggle were particularly prominent in their

descriptions of secondary school, which highlights the importance of improving literacy support in secondary settings, as recognised by Ofsted (2013) and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF; Quigley & Coleman, 2021). The participants viewed the teachers as one of the most important reasons why they would or would not want to attend their ideal or non-ideal school and spoke about the support that they valued, such as scaffolding learning by breaking tasks down into small, simple steps, making learning engaging, working collaboratively, and providing extra support for those who need it. These approaches have been recommended by the EEF as ways of improving literacy across the secondary curriculum (Quigley & Coleman, 2021). The participants also highlighted the need to educate teachers about how to support those struggling with literacy difficulties so that they know what to do. Indeed, professional development is a key aspect of school improvement (Baye et al., 2018) and Educational Psychologists are well placed to deliver training on evidence-based approaches and interventions, in addition to supporting schools to develop individual plans for YP that are person-centred. School leaders could also audit school literacy practices in collaboration with students and teachers and support the development of literacy plans across subjects to reduce barriers to learning resulting from reading and writing difficulties (Quigley & Coleman, 2021).

The importance of support at the secondary level was also reflected in participants' narratives about when they started to recognise their difficulties; they became more aware as they progressed through school and pressures increased. Participants also recalled their experiences of failure and times where they got into trouble with teachers if they were struggling to engage in learning tasks. They experienced difficult emotions in relation to the challenges they faced, such as embarrassment, anger, and frustration, which are consistent with those experienced by CYP in previous research (Barden, 2014; Leitão et al., 2017; Lithari, 2019; Morgan, 2019). These experiences are likely to have impacted on the participants' self-concept, the perception and evaluation of our abilities in certain domains which impacts our expectations of what we think we can achieve (Burns, 1982; Shavelson et al., 1976), particularly in the academic domain. This was evidenced through participants' accounts of how their literacy difficulties and

experiences of failure were a barrier to them achieving what they wanted in life, both in college and in their future careers. This has implications for how we support YP with literacy difficulties to increase their academic self-concept. Whilst it is important for schools to facilitate this through providing additional support that enables YP to experience success in literacy, teachers also have a key role in increasing academic self-concept through providing emotional support (Jensen et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2021), as do parents in ensuring good communication with their children (Zhang, 2020). This is because our self-concept is also largely influenced by how we are perceived by the people we consider important (Byrne, 1984; Shavelson et al., 1976). The participants in this research valued supportive relationships with teachers and parents and felt that this would help them feel happy in their ideal school. Negative relationships, on the other hand, were associated with feelings of worthlessness and not being good enough.

Although the participants were aware of their literacy difficulties, evidence shows that the presence of supportive family, teacher, and peer relationships and personal appreciation of strengths in other domains means that negative academic self-concept is unlikely to impact on global self-esteem, the overall perception of oneself as worthy (Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2021a). Participants in the research appeared to have a positive self-esteem, and spoke about how their resilience had enabled them to cope with the challenges they faced. Participants described different aspects of their experiences and ideal school that have been shown in the literature as being key to developing resilience. Firstly, the supportive relationships that were valued by participants are likely to contribute to their sense of belonging, which has been found to be a key feature of resilience (Scarf et al., 2016). Secondly, participants spoke about their strengths, their college courses, and their motivation to succeed in life, aspects of their experiences and ideal-school that are likely to give their lives meaning, a factor that is also thought to be key for resilience (Masten 2014; Masten & Powell, 2003). Linked to this is the sense of mastery (Masten, et al., 1990; Rutter, 2013) that participants described in their ideal school, their belief in their ability to succeed in life that they would have if they were supported to achieve good grades in school. Finally, participants shared the strategies that supported their emotional regulation, a skill

which is associated with resilience (Masten, 2014; Masten & Powell, 2003). These included tools that participants had identified to help themselves, such as listening to music to help them feel calm, and things that the educational setting could implement, such as opportunities for breaks when they are feeling overwhelmed. Whilst these findings highlight a need to support learners to improve their literacy skills and progress academically so that they can achieve their goals, they also highlight the importance of a supportive school environment where students feel happy and ready to learn.

According to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, CYP need to experience feelings of competence and self-belief and feel physically and emotionally safe and socially accepted within the classroom in order to learn, progress, and fulfil their potential. The Children Act (2004) emphasised the responsibility of schools in promoting the social and emotional wellbeing of their pupils. In addition to these factors, when describing their ideal school, participants outlined the type of environment that they felt was conducive to learning, which was comfortable, organised and had spaces for them to catch up on work and relax with their friends. They also valued access to resources and equipment, including the option of using technology to complete learning tasks, which has been shown in the literature to support literacy skill development, peer collaboration, and learner motivation and engagement (Williams & Beam, 2019).

3.5.2 Strengths and limitations

The focus of this research was to gain an insight into the views of YP with literacy difficulties who do not have a diagnosis of dyslexia, not only with respect to their experiences, but also in terms of what they feel would have been important to support them throughout their school journey. This a strength of the research as much of the existing literature surrounding the experiences of CYP with literacy difficulties focuses on CYP who have been identified as dyslexic and has not incorporated dyslexia diagnosis as an exclusion criterion.

The research employed participatory methods to ensure that participants were actively involved in the research. As the participants were aged 16-17, they were able to give their own consent to participate in the research. Given the participants literacy difficulties, in order to reduce barriers to participation and to ensure that consent was informed, participants were given access to a video recorded summary (Appendix G) of the participant information and were given opportunities to clarify information and ask questions before participating in the interviews and focus group. This is in line with the fourth rung of Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation, “assigned but informed” (p.11).

One limitation of this research was the method in which participants were identified and approached to participate in the study. Participants were not recruited on the basis of self-identification as previous research has highlighted the issues of using self-identification to recruit participants as this can, for example, lead to participants identifying as having a diagnosed significant reading difficulty when they do not (Serry et al., 2018). However, the selection criteria and the recruitment process meant that the YP who were approached to participate were already identified as needing additional support in college. This could explain why participants’ overall experience of college was more positive than their secondary experience. Furthermore, participants struggled to recall their primary experience, which could also explain their negative secondary school experiences came through in their narratives.

The sample size could be considered a limitation as some would argue that data saturation was unlikely to be reached (Guest et al., 2006). However, Braun and Clarke (2021c) argue that the concept of data saturation is poorly defined and operationalised in the literature and maintain that it is not a useful concept in relation to reflexive TA. Furthermore, two participants withdrew from the research before the focus group took place, meaning that the focus group only involved two participants. This means that the non-ideal and ideal schools that were constructed are not necessarily reflective of the collective experience of the group, and may have been constructed differently.

It is also important to acknowledge that the researcher's own views and experiences are likely to have impacted on how data was constructed and themes developed. However, Braun and Clarke (2020) argue the role of the researcher as a "resource for knowledge production, which inevitably sculpts the knowledge produced, rather than a must-be-contained threat to credibility" (p. 7). Thus, the researcher's role was not to identify a 'truth' that can be replicated in future research, but rather to create meaning from the participants' narratives and tell their stories.

3.5.3 Directions for future research

Despite the use of participatory methods, there is scope for future research to build on the approach taken in this study, and utilise approaches further up Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, such as by undertaking child-initiated research. In the context of literacy difficulties, perhaps we should be asking these YP what they would like to investigate, what questions they would like to find the answer to, and what the best ways to research these would be. Involving CYP in action research that focuses on practical school-based change would also allow participants more of an opportunity to shape the school systems in which they develop.

Replicating this research in primary and secondary schools would also be useful. Interviewing younger CYP with literacy difficulties and using the Drawing the Ideal School (Williams & Hanke, 2007) focus group method to construct ideal and non-ideal schools in the context of their current experiences would allow us to gather rich information about what children value or dislike about school to further inform how we can support these learners. The findings could then be compared and triangulated with the findings of this research for common themes.

Although potentially problematic, using self-identification to recruit participants for the research might reach more participants who experience literacy difficulties who do not have a diagnosis, particularly those who have not been identified as needing support. Furthermore, recruiting through other platforms, such as through social media, rather than through education

settings, may encourage more YP to come forward. This research did not collect data regarding gender and race so future research could also attend to intersectionality.

3.5.4 Conclusion

This research drew on novel methods to seek the views of young people with literacy difficulties about their school experiences and how they would describe their non-ideal and ideal schools, in order to inform future practice. The findings strongly suggest that educators, parents and researchers would benefit from taking an interactionist approach when supporting young people who struggle with their literacy skills. This is because any struggles with the functional skills of reading and writing may well coincide with compounding emotional or social struggles. In this study, the most important reasons for either not wanting or wanting to attend school were the teachers, who played an important role in determining the participants' school success and their future. However, whilst the quality of the teaching and access to personalised support was seen as central to this success, it was not the only way that they could be facilitated to achieve it. The young people shared the importance of creating a positive learning environment, having supportive relationships, and feeling happy in school, so that they were in a position where they felt more ready to learn and to demonstrate the necessary resilience to cope with their adversities. These findings also highlight the importance of including young people in research as they provide a unique and valuable insight into what we can do to support the progress, attainment, and wellbeing of learners, and, ultimately, make school "a nice place to be."

Appendix A Reflexive note taking

Interview 3 - Peter - Reflections

- End of interview - thanked me listening to her, seemed to value the opportunity to talk about experiences - have people given her the opportunity to share her views before? To what extent have her views influenced her ~~e~~ school experience / informed support?
- Talked about experiences being 'up and down' - different challenges at different points in school journey?
- Potential impact of personal experiences - spoke about a relationship - could be impacting school exp instead of / in addition to lit diffs.
- secondary experience - worst?
- ongoing struggle despite progress + support (college)
- Did not mention dyslexia label

- spoke about difficulties w/ focus, concentration, stress - in addition to writing ~~struggles~~ + reading struggles
- said 'progress' a lot - did she mean 'process'?

→ college exp. - better - why? Reading + writing less of a barrier at college - getting the support.

- emotional struggles + fixed mindset at school - 'can't do it?'

↓

- spoke about self-regulation strategies - learned to use over time?
- combination of access to support w/ literacy + being able to learn / use own strategies

Transcript 2 - Ben   Notes

- Discussion around Dyslexia + ADHD labels - not diagnosed but does he identify w/ these? Potential impact of this on experience

- 'doctors' 'suspect' - influence of professionals on identity - has this shaped how he views his literacy difficulties?

- 'dad's dyslexic' 'stick a label on it' - influence of parents on identity. How did dad get diagnosis? Discrepancy model? How much is this model still influencing our understanding of 'dyslexic' - validity of diagnosis?

- D 'doesn't mean anything' - usefulness of the label? or doesn't mean anything to him because doesn't have a diagnosis? or understanding what it means? Impact of label has huge meaning (equity, access to resources etc.) - but not for ~~him~~ Ben.

- 'reading age... low' 'apparently' - other people's

Transcript 2 - Ben

influences - what he's been told? Does he agree? How does he view himself? How would he describe it if it wasn't told?

→ influence of others + discussion of label - not mentioned by Will. Small part of transcript. Maybe part of wider theme - 'how I experience/describe my needs'?

- ~~it's~~ 'alright' - reluctance to talk about difficulties or school exp? or struggling to reflect/describe? Starts to talk about current exp.

- 'embarrassing' 'mick taken out of me' - emotional experience and peer rels - other aspects of school life impacting exp.
↓
university because of lit diffs? or wider issues?

- is there an element of self-comparison? like in SLR findings?
↓
maybe more about how they were perceived →

Appendix B Quality assessment

B.1 Quality assessment of quantitative studies

Study	Long, MacBlain & MacBlain (2007)	Witmer, Schmitt, Clinton & Mathes (2018)
1. Clear research question	1	1
2. Appropriate participant sampling	1	1
3. Appropriate measurement instrumentation	0	0
4. Comprehensive data gathering	0	0
5. Appropriate data gathering method	1	1
6. Reduction of bias in recruitment / instrumentation / administration	0	1
7. Response rate / completion maximised	0	0
8. Population subgroup data	0	1
9. Missing data analysis	0	0
10. Time trends identified	0	0
11. Geographic considerations	0	0
12. Took steps to increase level of participant participation*	0	0
13. Appropriate statistical analyses	0	1
14. Multi-level or inter-group analyses	0	0
15. Clear criteria for rating of findings	0	0
16. Limitations considered	1	1
17. Implications	0	1
Total	4	8

B.2 Quality assessment of qualitative studies

Study	Anderson (2009)	Barden (2014)	Blackman (2010)	Blackman (2011)	Learned (2016)	Leitão, et al. (2017)	Lithari (2019)	Marshall et al. (2006)	Morgan (2019)	Pollock (2019)
1. Clear statement of aims	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
2. Appropriate qualitative methodology	YES	YES	YES	YES	CAN'T TELL	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
3. Appropriate design	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
4. Appropriate recruitment strategy and sample	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
5. Appropriate data collection	CAN'T TELL	CAN'T TELL	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
6. Considered researcher-participant relationship	NO	YES	CAN'T TELL	CAN'T TELL	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES
7. Took steps to increase level of participant participation*	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES
8. Ethical consideration	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES
9. Rigorous data analysis	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
10. Clear findings	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Appendix B

Study	Anderson (2009)	Barden (2014)	Blackman (2010)	Blackman (2011)	Learned (2016)	Leitão, et al. (2017)	Lithari (2019)	Marshall et al. (2006)	Morgan (2019)	Pollock (2019)
11. Valuable	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

B.3 Overall study quality and descriptive themes identified in each study

Each study included in the review was assessed for quality. Neither the CASP Qualitative Research Checklist (CASP, 2018) or the Manchester Review Framework for Quantitative Investigation Research (Bond et al., 2013) provided thresholds as to how to determine overall study quality. The overall quality of each paper was therefore subjectively determined by the researcher after completing the quality assessment. On the CASP Qualitative Research Checklist (CASP, 2018), studies that obtained eight 'yes' responses or higher were given a 'high' rating and studies that obtained between five and seven 'yes' responses were given a 'medium' rating. No qualitative studies obtained less than five yes responses so no 'low' ratings were given. On the Manchester Review Framework for Quantitative Investigation Research (Bond et al., 2013), studies that obtained an overall score between zero and six obtained a 'low' rating and studies that obtained an overall score between seven and twelve obtained a 'medium' rating. No studies obtained an overall score higher than twelve so no 'high' ratings were given.

Having established which papers contributed to which themes, I looked to see whether there was any correlation with quality. As shown in the table below, the studies which were considered to be of higher quality were the ones that made the largest contribution to each descriptive theme and those of lower quality did not contribute any unique themes of their own. Were it to be the case that a theme was made up of entirely low-quality studies, this would have been discussed; however, this was not the case.

Appendix B

Study	Anderson (2009)	Barden (2014)	Blackman (2010)	Blackman (2011)	Learned (2016)	Leitão et al. (2017)	Lithari (2019)	Long et al. (2007)	Marshall et al. (2006)	Morgan (2019)	Pollock (2019)	Witmer et al. (2018)
Quality	Medium	High	High	High	Medium	High	High	Low	High	High	High	Medium
Descriptive theme												
Differentiation	-	YES	-	YES	YES	YES	-	YES	YES	YES	-	YES
Resources, technology, and social media	-	YES	-	-	-	-	-	-	YES	YES	YES	-
Interventions and withdrawal tuition	YES	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	YES	YES	-
Collaborative learning	-	YES	YES	YES	YES	-	-	-	-	YES	YES	-
Positive feedback and punishment	-	-	-	-	-	YES	YES	-	-	YES	YES	-
The nature of literacy difficulties	YES	YES	-	-	-	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	-	-
Need for support and access to accommodations	-	YES	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	YES	YES	YES
Negative teacher experiences	-	YES	-	-	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	-	-
Negative peer experiences	YES	-	-	-	-	YES	-	-	YES	YES	-	-
Being understood and accepted by school staff	-	-	-	YES	-	YES	YES	-	YES	-	YES	-
Being understood and accepted by peers	-	-	YES	-	-	YES	-	-	YES	YES	YES	-
Comparing progress and feedback to peers	YES	-	-	-	-	YES	YES	-	YES	YES	-	-
Impact of support and accommodations	-	-	-	-	YES	YES	-	-	-	YES	YES	YES
Not wanting to stand out	-	-	-	-	-	YES	-	-	YES	YES	-	-

Appendix C Topic guide for semi-structured interviews

My name is Alex and I am a trainee Educational Psychologist from the University of Southampton. I’m really interested to hear your views and experiences of reading and writing. I will be asking some questions about what kind of support you have received or any resources that help. The interview is a non-judgemental space where you can freely explore and express your views. Your responses will be confidential and will not be discussed with your teachers, with the exception of anything that would meet the sixth form/college’s typical safeguarding protocol in which case I will need to follow this. Please let me know if you would like to pause or stop the interview at any point or if you would like to withdraw from the research. You can withdraw yourself any time up until the point where your interview recording is transcribed. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Are you happy for me to start the video/audio recording?

I would like to start by asking how you describe or explain your difficulties with reading and writing to others?

How do you feel about reading and writing?

How would you describe your experiences of reading and writing so far?

Could you tell me about the difficulties that you currently experience with reading and writing?

When did you first discover that you found reading and/or writing hard? How did you discover this?

Have your difficulties with reading and writing had an impact on you?

Have your difficulties with reading and writing had an impact on your school experience?

Have your difficulties with reading and writing had an impact on your experiences outside of school?

Appendix C

Has there been anything that has helped you with your literacy difficulties? (In school / outside of school / at home)

I would like to learn a bit more about your school experience. Could you tell me about your experience of school?

Have you had had access to any support to help you with your reading and writing?

Have you had access to any interventions? (What does/did this involve?)

What helps you with your reading and writing?

Is there anything that happens in school which makes things harder for you in terms of your literacy difficulties?" "What doesn't help?

How do you feel about the level of support you have received?

Is there anything you would like to change?

I would now like you to think about when you leave sixth form/college and what you think will be important moving forward.

What do you think will be important to support you with your literacy difficulties over the next two years?

What do you think will be important to support you with these difficulties when you leave sixth form/college?

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix D Drawing the Ideal School

D.1 Topic guide

"My name is Alex and I am a trainee Educational Psychologist from the University of Southampton. This is Lindsay who is going to draw for us today. Today I would like you to think about what would be most and least helpful to support you with your difficulties with reading and writing in school. I will ask you some questions about the kind of school you would not like to go to and the kind of school you would like to go to. Lindsay will draw pictures of some of the things that you say and any key words.

Your responses will be confidential to the group and will not be discussed with your teachers, with the exception of anything that would meet the sixth form/college's typical safeguarding protocol in which case I will need to follow this.

We will be discussing things about a sensitive topic and we will all have different views and experiences. There is value in what everyone says, even if you disagree, and it is important that we respect everyone's views. It is important that any information that is shared within this focus group is not shared with anyone outside this group and if anyone feels that confidentiality has been breached at any point after the focus group, you can go to your SENCo for support and discuss your concerns.

Please let me know if you would like to withdraw from the research. You can withdraw yourself at any time from this focus group discussion but, once we begin, it will not be possible to withdraw any information you have given up until then because I will not be able to separate this from the from the rest of the focus group information. Do you have any questions before we get started?"

Drawing the kind of school you would not like

The school

"Think about the kind of school you would not like to go to. This is not a real school."

"Tell me three things about this school. What kind of school is this?"

The classroom

"Think about the sort of classroom you would not like to be in. Tell me about the classroom."

"Think about what would be in the classroom. Tell me about these things."

Interventions and equipment

"Think about the resources at the school that you would not like to go to."

"Think about the interventions and equipment that you would not like. Tell me about these."

The young people

"Think about some of the other young people at the school you would not like to go to."

"What are the young people doing? Tell me three things about these young people."

The adults in school

"Think about some of the adults at the school you would not like to go to."

"What are the adults doing? Tell me three things about these adults."

The adults outside of school

"Think about some of the adults outside of the school you would not like to go to."

"What are the adults doing? Tell me three things about these adults."

Me

"Think about the kind of school you would not like to go to. What would you be doing at this school?"

"Tell me three things about the way you feel at this school."

The most important thing

"What is the most important thing about this school?"

Drawing the kind of school you would like

The school

"Think about the kind of school you would like to go to. This is not a real school."

"Tell me three things about this school. What kind of school is this?"

The classroom

"Think about the sort of classroom you would like to be in. Tell me about the classroom."

"Think about what would be in the classroom. Tell me about these things."

Interventions and equipment

"Think about the resources at the school that you would like to go to."

"Think about the interventions and equipment that you would like. Tell me about these."

The young people

"Think about some of the other young people at the school you would like to go to."

"What are the young people doing? Tell me three things about these young people."

The adults in school

"Think about some of the adults at the school you would like to go to."

"What are the adults doing? Tell me three things about these adults."

The adults outside of school

"Think about some of the adults outside of the school you would like to go to. Make a quick drawing of some of these adults."

"What are the adults doing? Tell me three things about these adults."

Me

"Think about the kind of school you would like to go to. What would you be doing at this school?"

"Tell me three things about the way you feel at this school."

The most important thing

"What is the most important thing about this school?"

D.2 Focus group procedure

The research assistant was familiar with the Ideal School process and was given the role of graphic facilitator. Whilst in the Drawing the Ideal School activity the drawings are usually completed by the individual themselves, the activity was adapted so that a shared graphic was created by the researcher. The focus group took place on Microsoft Teams and the research assistant drew the two graphics on paper which she then held up to the camera for participants to see at the end of the non-ideal school discussion and after the ideal school discussion. I read the questions from the focus group topic guide, asked clarifying questions, and reflected back what participants had shared when talking about each aspect (e.g. adults in school) of the non-ideal and ideal schools to enable further discussion. During this process, a final question was included which asked participants 'what would your future be like if you went to this school?' I asked participants to choose some key words to summarise their descriptions of each aspect of the school and the graphic facilitator recorded these agreed words on the graphic. The graphic facilitator then read these back to the participants and checked that she had recorded these correctly and if there were anything else they wanted to add. At the end of each section of the

activity, I asked the graphic facilitator to hold up the graphic to the camera for the participants to see and to reflect back the key words that had been recorded.

The main purpose of the graphic was to help facilitate the conversation and to create a shared record of our discussion that could be shared with the participants with the findings of the research. The discussions had and the key words represented in the graphic were shared verbally and so formed part of the focus group discussion which was recorded using Microsoft Teams. Following the focus group, the recording was transcribed by the researcher. This meant that both the key words and the discussion were included in the analysis. Whilst the images drawn in the graphics portrayed what was discussed, they were drawn by the research assistant, so were not included in the analysis.

The individual interviews ended with a mood repair activity called 20 Questions. This involves one person taking the role of the 'answerer' who thinks of an object, person, or place. The other person(s) takes the role of the 'questioner(s)' and has to try to determine what the answerer is thinking of by asking no more than 20 questions. We played at least two rounds of this activity at the end of the interview, taking it in turns to play either role in the process.

As the focus group did not ask participants questions about their personal experiences and ended with the positive section of the activity, the ideal school, it was unlikely to cause emotional distress so the mood repair activity was not planned. However, once we had finished the Ideal School activity, the participants asked if we could play the same game we had played in the interviews, so this formed part of the procedure.

Appendix E Braun and Clarke's (2021a) six phases of reflexive thematic analysis

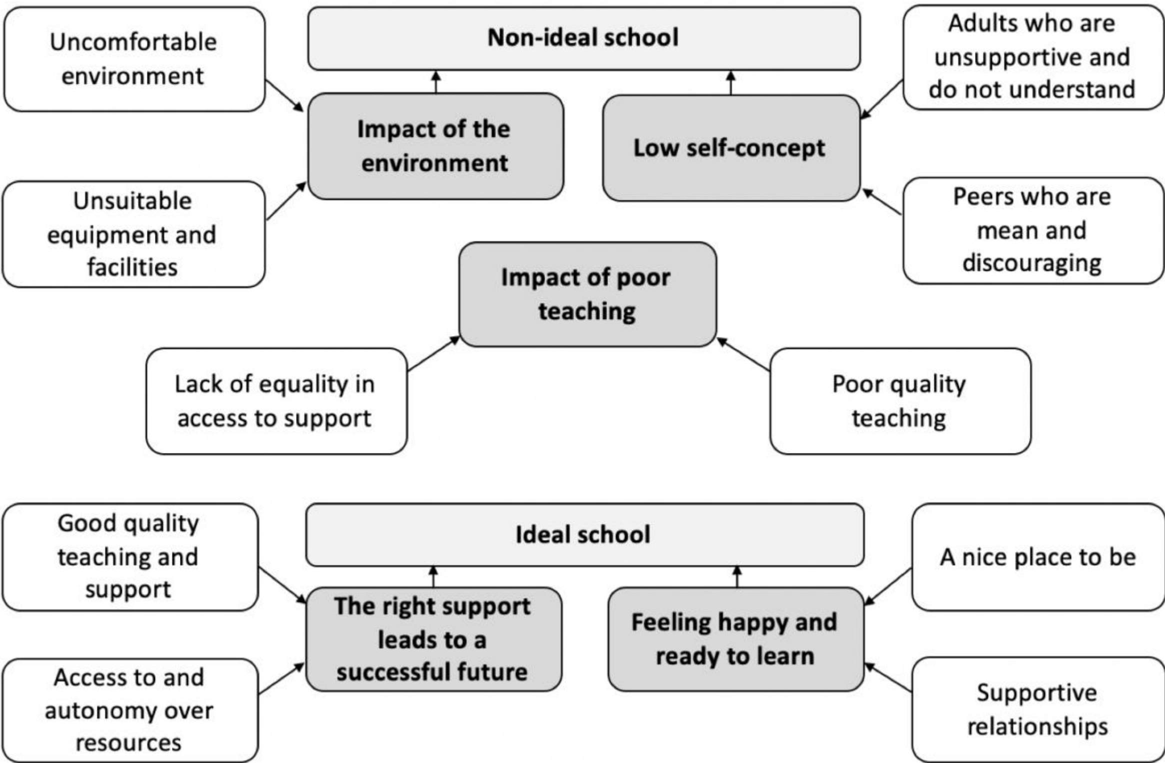
Phases of reflexive thematic analysis	Description
1. Dataset familiarisation	Immersing oneself in the data through listening to the audio-recording and repeatedly reading the transcripts to understand the general content and develop deep knowledge of the data. Beginning to critically engage with the data to make sense of and create meaning from it to identify potential patterns.
2. Data coding	Systematically exploring patterns and diversity of meaning in the dataset, more than once, giving codes to the data to capture meaning which is relevant to the research question through applying code labels to specific sections of data to summarise the meaning and enrich understanding of the data. Codes can evolve as one's understanding of the data develops to develop nuance and depth and support the identification of shared meaning.
3. Initial theme generation	Exploring similarities in meaning across the dataset to develop initial themes. This is done by considering all the codes developed during the data coding phase and identifying broader ideas that link a number of different codes. Thematic maps are drawn to support the development of initial themes, explore the potential relationships between them, and begin to understand the analysis as a whole.
4. Theme development and review	Re-engaging with the dataset and codes to review the areas of shared meaning, check that the initial themes are supported by the evidencing codes, and to look for opportunities to improve the development of these

Phases of reflexive thematic analysis	Description
	themes to answer the research question in a rich, meaningful, and nuanced way.
5. Theme refining, defining, and naming	Further developing and refining themes and structuring how they are reported in the write up (phase 6). Deciding on theme names to concisely and formatively capture the central organising concept. Writing definitions for themes to illustrate what the theme is about and the associated sub-themes.
6. Writing up	Writing up the analysis to tell an overall story to answer the research questions.

Appendix F Overall thematic maps

Overall thematic map displaying four themes and the associated sub-themes in response to research question 1, 'what are YP's views and experiences of their literacy difficulties across their school journey?' and research question 2, 'what are YP's experiences of access to resources and support for their literacy difficulties across their school journey?'

Overall thematic map displaying four themes and the associated sub-themes in response to research question 3, 'how do YP frame their non-ideal school in relation to supporting their literacy difficulties?' and research question 4, 'how do YP frame their ideal school in relation to supporting their literacy difficulties?'


Non-ideal school
Uncomfortable environment
Impact of the environment
Low self-concept
Adults who are unsupportive and do not understand
Unsuitable equipment and facilities
Peers who are mean and discouraging
Impact of poor teaching
Lack of equality in access to support
Poor quality teaching
Ideal school
Good quality teaching and support
The right support leads to a successful future
Feeling happy and ready to learn
A nice place to be
Access to and autonomy over resources
Supportive relationships

Appendix G Video recording of participant information summary

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMaGjrN2We8

Appendix H Example of coding interview transcripts using NVivo

Name	Files	References
1.1 How I experience literacy difficulties	4	8
Concentration and managing distractions	3	8
Difficulty learning literacy skills	1	3
Exams and working under pressure	3	17
Homework	1	2
My brain works differently	1	2
Processing and memory	3	9
Reading	4	42
Repetition	1	8
Spelling	2	9
Taking more time	3	15
Writing	4	50
1.2 Attainment	1	1
Experiences of failure	2	5
Grades or results	1	4
Impact of school experience	1	4
Progress	2	5
1.3 Awareness of my difficulties and developing my identity	3	6
Awareness increases as I get older	4	24
How I perceive myself	4	7
How I'm perceived by others	2	9
Not being the only one	1	1
The dyslexia label	2	20
1.4 Literacy difficulties are a barrier	3	15
Barriers are reduced outside of school	4	8
Grades are holding me back	2	9
Grades are unattainable	1	4
Not achieving my potential or what I want	2	12
Valuing literacy	4	9
1.5 Hopes and worries about the future	4	16
I need to improve my literacy before I leave college	4	10
Literacy skills will enable me to move forwards	2	5

Code		
1.6 Impact on self	3	12
Confidence	2	5
Giving Up	1	3
Independence	1	5
Motivation	1	5
Regret	2	4
Resilience	4	13
1.7 How my experiences of literacy difficulties make me f...	3	10
Anxiety and panic	3	7
Embarrassment	1	3
Stress and frustration	3	13
The more I struggle, the worse I feel	1	1
1.8 School experience across the years	4	24
College experience	4	55
Primary school experience	4	12
Secondary school experience	4	40
1.9 The physical and social school environment	3	7
Behaviour of peers	3	12
Calm environment	2	5
Distractions and disrupted learning	2	8
Personal pressures - family and relationships	3	10
2.1 Negative experiences of teaching and support	4	22
Ability groups or sets	1	2
Behaviour management	1	5
Being asked to do things I find hard	0	0
Covid	2	5
Inconsistency in teaching approaches	1	7
Lack of differentiation or personalised learning	3	15
Lack of support	3	13
Poor facilities	1	3
Punishment	3	12
Responsiveness when asking for help	3	12
School did not do enough	2	4

Code		
Skills and helpfulness of teachers	3	10
2.2 What helps me	4	26
Access arrangements	3	24
Access to support	4	51
Breaking things down	2	8
Examples and explanations	3	8
Having breaks	2	4
Not sure what will help	4	9
Resources and technology enable me	4	29
Teachers being aware	3	4
Use of visuals	1	1
2.3 Relationships with teachers	2	3
Not being heard or understood	1	2
Teachers who care	1	1
2.4 Interventions	3	13
Lack of interventions	2	4
Missing out on lessons	1	1
Support outside of class	4	8
2.5 Support outside of school	1	2
Family	3	13
Tutor	1	9
2.6 Harnessing strengths	0	0
Less pressure on literacy in college	3	3
Lessons I enjoy	3	4
Opportunities to exercise strengths	3	11
2.7 What I would change	3	8

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