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Learning Differently: The Struggles and Silver Linings of Dyslexia

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to understand the struggles and joys of individuals who have dyslexia. Situated in sociological theory, I contend that dyslexia is biological by nature, but socially constructed as a learning disability. This social construction is culturally shaped and bound by values of nonverbal communication which, consequently, is the area in which dyslexics struggle the most. Using a content analysis style of collecting data, I read hundreds of blog posts aiming to understand the experience of dyslexic individuals living in the United States. This article delves into themes of education, upbringing, and individual perceptions of self. I also explore how an accurate diagnosis of dyslexia can improve learning, which often helps promote positive self-esteem. This study explores how to find the gifts of dyslexia to redefine genius for individuals in Western societies.

Keywords: Dyslexia, learning differences, social constructions of learning

Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.—Albert Einstein

Many people associate Einstein with dusty textbooks, physics, and the gold standard of genius. In the midst of all these triumphs, many people do not know that Einstein was dyslexic. Dyslexia is an unexpected difficulty with reading and processing written language that is biological in origin (Shaywitz 2004). Individuals with dyslexia are often very bright and do struggle with phonological awareness (Peterson and Pennington 2015).

Drawing on blog posts and documentary interviews of dyslexic individuals, this paper explores the struggles and joys of living with dyslexia in our Western society. There are many constructed barriers that people with dyslexia can experience. This can range from difficulties communicating through written language to struggling with driving directions. I focus on the main themes that emerge from dyslexic stories of navigating the academic world and learning to redefine their strengths as individuals with diagnosed dyslexia. Here, I argue that one never overcomes or outgrows their dyslexia. Instead, dyslexic individuals learn to live with it; they learn to dance around the struggles involved with growing up dyslexic in a reading-focused society. I also explore how narrow our cultural understanding of literacy can be. People who are dyslexic challenge this conception of literacy by proving that there are multiple ways to learn and interact with written language (Shaywitz 2004). I also suggest that the social construction of what smart is defined to be is the main factor that holds dyslexics at a disadvantage. The mainstream definition of

intelligence is influenced by society and bound by the cultural values of the time (Hiscock and Kinsbourne 1982). Moreover, our society has identified dyslexia as a “learning disability, and, for the purpose of this paper, I will focus on using the language of specific “learning difference” as a replacement. Altering this language shifts the understanding of dyslexia from a stigmatized societal disadvantage to a “difference” which denotes advantages and disadvantages.

Dyslexia Discourse

Historically, dyslexia has been examined through an often-misunderstood psychological lens that has emphasized the differences in the brain structure of dyslexics compared to neurotypical individuals (Campbell 2013). Developmental dyslexia resides under an umbrella of neurodiversity, which can be thought of as the differences in brain function that an individual is born with (Macdonald 2009a). Throughout the past twenty years, a broader understanding of this specific learning difference has emerged throughout disability studies and sociological disciplines. Examining dyslexia through a disability studies lens has expanded cultural understandings of literacy. This, in succession, has allowed educational institutions the ability to recognize the unique abilities of each dyslexic child. The main theories central to my project have been the social model of disability and the sociological imagination. Recent literature in the field of Education and Psychology has revealed what is known about dyslexia, the social construction of dyslexia as a learning disability, and the formation of self that dyslexia impacts.

The Politics of Reading —Understanding Dyslexia

A basic understanding of language and reading is that learning how to speak is innate and natural, but that reading is not. Sociologist Campbell writes that, during the twentieth century, as “literacy became central to production,” people were starting to be diagnosed with dyslexia in the West (2013, 1). As reading and writing became an essential part of Western society, the formation of dyslexia as a diagnostic category emerged in 2013 (Campbell 2013). Diagnostic criteria for learning disabilities are relatively universal, but dyslexia

is diagnosed at higher rates in cultures that utilize reading and writing in their society (Macdonald 2009b).

People with dyslexia often have “difficulties attaching the appropriate labels or names to letters and words,” but there is no evidence suggesting that dyslexia is a visual or sight issue (Shaywitz 2004, 100). It is important to note that verbal expression for dyslexics can exceed that of their neurotypical peers, but challenges arise when they must formulate their thoughts on paper (Shaywitz 2004). Hiscock and Kinsbourne (1982) explain the learning difference as being a spectrum of academic ability. Although there are neurological similarities between dyslexic brains, the learning difference still presents in unique ways for each individual. Cerebral dominance appears to be a major explanatory factor of dyslexia. For example, educational systems place an extreme focus on the left hemisphere of the brain, which is precisely the side that dyslexia affects. Dyslexia is a spectrum of decoding and word recognition difficulties that is often associated with highly intelligent individuals that have intact sensory abilities (Peterson and Pennington 2015). The learning difference is associated with “aberrant structure and functioning,” which appears particularly in the left temporal lobe, occipito-temporal and temporo-parietal areas of the brain which are in charge of the reading and language networks (Peterson and Pennington 2015, 283). It takes people with dyslexia longer than a neurotypical person to decode written material, though this has no association with lower capacities to learn and problem-solve.

The Social Construction of Dyslexia as a Disability

The construction of disability in cultures across the globe is socially created (Wappett and Arndt 2015). It is difficult to find cross-culture perspectives and comparisons on learning disabilities such as dyslexia (Vaidya 2010). A possible explanation for this is that dyslexia has not yet been recognized as a learning difference in many countries. This comparative conversation remains broad and never specifically mentions dyslexia as a disability. Ginsburg and Rapp (2013) discuss disability as being a profound relational category that is often shaped by social conditions that make it

difficult for individuals to fully participate in society. The anthropological understanding of disability spans beyond just the brain and body; it is created by “social and material conditions” (Ginsburg and Rapp 2013, 53). This social construction of the word disability is generally referred to as being a physical impairment that interferes with daily social functions (Granfield 1996). Researchers who use a sociological lens to examine disability generally focus on communities and their views of physical disabilities. This is used more often than expanding the definition of disability as being related to invisible impairments or learning differences. The social model of disability focuses on the ways that “social environments impose limitations upon certain groups or categories of people” (Barnes 2007, 135). This model also places emphasis on the community and aspects of society that are difficult for individuals with disabilities to navigate.

Western educational systems label children with learning disabilities as a method to systematically identify them in larger classroom spaces. In academic contexts, ideas of disability are often formed from the special education lens that tend to label children with specific disabilities. Dyslexic children are often left out of this category because their overall skills may not mirror the same severity as the other special education kids. There is less focus on the sociological perspective that emphasizes children’s well-being in relation to their social surroundings (Tomlinson 2021). More often than not these labels become stigmatized, and form negative aspects of a student’s academic identity (Shifrer 2013). Titchkosky (2012) explores the social understanding of disability in our culture. The focus for Titchkosky (2008) is on analyzing the physical struggles of diagnosed disabilities in higher education and argues that disability can act as a social power that often reproduces the status quo of what is expected of individuals in society. Understanding how disability impacts the formation of self and social interactions can help shed light on dyslexic experiences.

Social Impacts of Dyslexia in Relation to the Formation of Self

Due to the prominence of dyslexia being understood as a disability in the conceptual frameworks of psychology and education, there has been little research done to “locate dyslexia within a sociological context” (Macdonald 2009b, 347). Among the sociological studies that have been conducted, the social model emphasizes that barriers are constructed for dyslexic individuals in our society that derives all of its information from text-based formats (Macdonald 2009b). If society placed no importance on reading, then dyslexia would not be considered a disability. There are many social factors such as access to outside support and documented testing that play a role in how dyslexia is diagnosed. Diagnosis manuals are not used by all countries and leave room for cultural interpretation (Jutel 2011). A major relevant factor in the sociological studies of diagnosis is the social framing and definitions surrounding disease. Dyslexia is biological by nature but socially framed which means that those who have dyslexia are born with the learning difference that will not change based on the socio-economic status or upbringing of the child.

However, there are still many cultural and income-based factors that can impact a child’s access to dyslexia testing, diagnosis, and support. If a child is born with dyslexia, they will be dyslexic for life—providing support for the child can help with the difficulties of the learning difference but will not allow a child to “overcome” or “outgrow” their dyslexia. If not given the help and or support needed early in the child’s schooling, difficulties with reading comprehension and understanding can become heightened. The lower a child’s socio-economic status, the greater chance they will meet the “diagnostic criteria for developmental dyslexia” (Peterson and Pennington 2015, 286). This is thought to be due to the lack of support that the child is receiving in and out of the classroom. It is important to note that there is a lack of clear evidence that supports this claim because there is little literature written which discusses the “social implications of dyslexia and socio-economic positioning” (Macdonald 2009, 49a). The majority of literature published

on dyslexia is rooted in psychological theory, which focuses on data sets pulled from the middle class. These data sets typically stand alone and lack any comparison to people residing in the lower class who often lack access to dyslexia testing and educational resources (Anderson and Meier-Hedde 2011).

Social factors that impact a child’s educational track also play a role in their own conception of self (Howard 2018). People with dyslexia often experience high rates of stigmatization and lowered self-concept (Howard 2018). Children with dyslexia are also at higher risk for “developing negative self-perceptions of themselves as learners” (Gibby-Leversuch, Hartwell, and Wright 2021, 5595), but not of their overall self-worth. These self-perceptions often begin to form in the child’s early experiences in formal education. Dyslexia-friendly schools that focus on community and parental agency often influence children’s self-esteem and view of themselves as a learner in positive ways (Griffiths, Brahm, and Burden 2004). Another factor that impacts dyslexics’ formation of self is the classroom environment. Paniagua (2017) claims that there is no normal when it comes to learning. Discrimination against children with learning disadvantages creates the opportunity for children to diminish their own self-worth (Paniagua 2017).

This literature shows that generally dyslexia is examined through a psychological perspective or disability studies lens that mentions learning differences as a whole with no specific focus on dyslexia. By nature, a dyslexic brain perceives and interacts with the world in ways that differ from those who are non-dyslexic. These alternate ways of making sense of the world become apparent when a child must learn to access written language (Shaywitz 2004). There is a clear lack of understanding and research done in the field of sociology in relation to dyslexia and our cultural understanding of literacy. My contribution to this literature will appear in the form of personal stories that showcase the dyslexic experience. These stories shed light on the social impacts, triumphs, and hardships of being dyslexic.

Research Methods

The idea behind this project was derived from my own experience as a dyslexic individual. My personal struggles with dyslexia lead me to search and discover online platforms for individual dyslexic stories, which is the data that I used for this project. The stories I used for this project were posted online between 2012 and 2022. The research to find these stories was a product of simple searches with keywords that kept my focus on personal stories of dyslexia. I utilized public blog posts and documentaries that focused on showcasing individual stories. These unfiltered stories were an expression of the dyslexic community's ability to unite through online platforms to promote a greater understanding of the learning difference. The intentionality behind using this data was to expand my reach of whose stories I had access to read and hear. I selected these blog posts and documentary films to discover a wide variety of stories about dyslexics' experiences navigating school and life.

I analyzed more than forty blog websites that focus on providing dyslexics with a platform to write their stories. Some of these sites included: 'The Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity,' 'The International Dyslexia Association,' and other personal online blogs that were designed for public viewing. In addition to that, I watched individual interviews on educational sites and informational videos that were linked in the blogs. Lastly, I watched documentary films that specialized in showcasing the dyslexic experience. I read (N=100) online blog posts and watched (N=5) documentary films.

The method I used to analyze this data was content or thematic analysis which required me to familiarize myself with the data before I began coding the stories. Then I used qualitative coding to organize and categorize the stories I chose. I sifted through each story while taking notes, identifying codes, and finally choosing the main themes which emerged from the data. This paper does not cover everything that people with dyslexia experience, but it has unraveled some prominent themes that can be related to a broader understanding of dyslexia in relation to sociology. It is also important to note that my research lacked racial, gender,

and socioeconomic comparisons. The bulk of stories examined for this project were shared by white, middle-class, dyslexic individuals. I believe this trend in data is because people in this category have received a formal diagnosis and dealt with navigating the public school system.

The dyslexic community has been utilizing online platforms to write their stories because there is a shared identity between all its members. I sensed that folks felt empowered on these sites, and it was a privilege to read them. The stories I used for this project are mainly from students and adults with formal dyslexic diagnoses who felt compelled to write and or speak on their experience. The quotes and stories I will share in the following sections are from children in the thick of school all the way to adults reflecting on their early schooling and life with dyslexia. The major themes that emerged from this data were: feeling stupid, the power of diagnosis, and redefining genius.

Feeling Stupid

In most student blog posts that I read, dyslexics described feeling stupid and often anxious in the classroom growing up. The ableist word *stupid* was used to describe how many dyslexics felt about themselves in relation to school, and more broadly in daily life as an outcome of their learning difference. This societal creation of disability has caused these individuals to internalize their thoughts instead of providing them with the tools needed to succeed. In school, the writers shared their frustrations with themselves and their capacity to grasp academic material. Allison, who works as a paralegal, shared on a blog post that she often compared herself to classmates growing up. She states, "no matter how quickly I attempted to work through a problem, I was always so far behind. I started to give up, knowing that I would never finish in time. Although I felt stupid for the first time in my life, I didn't want my classmates to think the same." Comparing oneself to others is naturally human, but in the school setting, the dyslexic bloggers seemed to exacerbate this difference. Jennifer expressed her experience with peers as being foundational to her self-image. She states, "I would look at my friends and not

understand why they were able to do things that I couldn't. I guess sometimes I felt almost, I wouldn't say envious of my peers, but I felt a longing. I wished I could partake in what they were doing. Talk about the latest book that someone read." This sense of craving the ability to relate to classmates is a common experience of the dyslexics I researched for this project.

Sometimes, this lack of ability to *keep up* with everyone else can lead one to attribute their self-worth in comparison to others, and or their performance in the classroom. Anna shared her experience growing up dyslexic:

Lots of the time I take the parts of learning that are still hard for me as rejection—as someone telling me I can't. I see points taken off for misspelled words on in-class English essays, and I start to see my future crumbling. I see the kids with better scores, who don't need tutors, or extra time, and I feel jealous. I feel worthless.

Relating one's self-worth to something as small as a misspelled word sounds like a drastic comparison to make. But to these individuals, this is reality; a misspelled word feels as though it translates to a college rejection letter. Many bloggers related their self-worth to academic achievements, which can result in a great deal of anxiety related to being in the classroom.

Feeling anxious was a common description that many dyslexics used to describe their experience in K-12 education growing up. Izer shared that he still remembers his reading circle in early elementary school as feeling like there was "no way out. Everybody was there to discover that 'oh my god, he can't read.'" That feeling stayed with him for a long time. Alex also remembers his teachers and peers thinking that he was "'lazy and just didn't want to work,' but it was always more than that...I wasn't grasping what was being taught to me. I just got pinned as being lazy or not trying. Teachers maybe just assumed that I would get it or that I didn't care, and I was dumb." This was not an uncommon feeling that many of these storytellers experienced resulting from early education. These emotions and discomforts with being in the classroom lead many people with dyslexia to 'hate' school and

the broader academic world.

Sam expressed that, "school was really hard. I thought I annoyed my teachers by asking them too many questions so I just would spend my whole school day trying to disappear." This idea of escapism into an imaginary world or alternate place other than school was a common theme in the dyslexic body of stories that I read. Brent shared that school was a "nightmare" and it was "literally the last place I wanted to be." In his 9th grade class, he was asked to read aloud "I panicked" he stated, "In my mind I'm like how can I get out of this? what can I do? I started guessing at words and you hear kids laughing and snickering... wondering what is going on... and it still plays in my head to this day... so many years later." Trying to escape outside of the classroom, outside of reading in general was expressed by many dyslexics. "Why would I want to be in a place that asks me to do what I struggle with most" said Dame, a dyslexic who hated school growing up. The school system is not set up for a dyslexic brain, so it is no mystery why dyslexics struggle to navigate academia and often feel *stupid* when they don't succeed. Jamie posed the question: "who said education is what we say it is. Oh, because a couple of dudes set up the structure of it?" I wonder if dyslexics' stories about school would change if the system was indeed created for them. Would fewer dyslexics feel stupid? In an interview about dyslexia, young Charlie shared:

When I'm in a reading group and it's my turn to read it gets stressful because I don't know the words and then someone in my class says, 'you just don't want to read because you don't know how.' *How does that make you feel?* Very upset about it, like I don't belong there anymore. *Are you upset at the school or are you upset at yourself?* Upset at myself more than the school. *Even though it's not your fault, you realize that right?* No, not all the time.

This idea of *feeling stupid* is a way that dyslexics attribute their self-worth to school. It is often a challenge to separate the self and feelings towards the self from academics. They are intimately connected to many dyslexics. Richard

added the point that “it’s the definition of what stupid is though, like everyone is good at something different and I believe that I am good at other things, and I only discovered that when I left school.” I found that as dyslexics moved through their schooling the degree to which they attributed their beliefs about themselves in relation to school lessons. Brian shared that, “it got better when I felt I wasn’t dumb, it got better when I decided I wasn’t stupid—I was actually pretty fucking smart.” Many years separate Charlie and Brian, which is apparent in their quotes and feelings towards themselves in relation to academia. To help ease the burden of navigating academia, many dyslexics turn to their formal diagnosis as a platform to help them advocate for their learning in schools.

The Power of Diagnosis

Learning about one’s dyslexia is a process that often begins in early schooling and continues throughout adulthood. Some people are fortunate enough to be diagnosed in early elementary school and some formally learn about their learning difference through the diagnosis of their children, or from self-diagnosis later in life. Having a formal diagnosis is a godsend for some and others struggle with having a learning difference label. About a fourth of the stories I read directly discussed their experience of being formally diagnosed as dyslexic, some mentioned it at the start of their post, and other folks chose to focus on other aspects of their story. Dyslexia is classified as an invisible disability, so more often than not, one’s dyslexia is unknown to others. There are many pros and cons to identifying with dyslexia and its varying physical, academic, and mental limitations.

Children diagnosed early in their education often benefited from having a formal label. I found that this is often because the label allows one to attribute their dyslexic struggles to something tangible; it can take some blame off the self. Anna shared her story of discovering that she was dyslexic in the first grade. She was watching the show *Arthur* on TV and an episode where the main character’s friend discovers that he is dyslexic. Anna said that the character had “unique ideas and outlooks on the world.

He saw things in a different way than his classmates and there was nothing wrong with that. He was just dyslexic.” After watching the fifteen-minute segment she ran to her father and stated loudly: “dad I’m sisplexic!” It gave her struggles a name and shifted her perceptions of self. Similar to Anna, Hope shares that after she was diagnosed as a child she “began to believe for the first time in a long time that [she] could adequately do the work and compete with [her] peers if given an appropriate amount of time to do it and do it well.” After Hope was diagnosed, she was “relieved” and yet “was not completely sure of what it meant to be dyslexic either.” For many, having a formal label of *being dyslexic* or *having dyslexia* is a step in the right direction. It does not necessarily make the path easier to follow, but it can help clear up some mud along the way.

Late diagnosis is also very common among dyslexics. Often, if a child is diagnosed as being dyslexic one of their parents also has the learning difference but lacked a formal diagnosis as a child. Brent self-diagnosed himself after his daughter experienced struggles in school and was diagnosed by a learning specialist outside of the school. He states that “it meant the world to me to understand that there was something else going on besides me just being dumb or stupid.” This new perspective of how Brent learns provided him with the self-acknowledgement that school was hard because he was dyslexic, not because he was stupid. Brent shares that, “school was a nightmare for me, it was literally the last place I wanted to be and I’m happy that my daughter has the resources now to make it an easier place to be.” It is very common for parents to self-diagnose after watching their children navigate school early on in their learning. Like Brent, Anthony was motivated to get formally diagnosed with dyslexia in adulthood after viewing a documentary on the learning difference. Before being diagnosed, Anthony described his experiences with dyslexia as being a force that, “destroyed [his] confidence enough to a point where [he] quit school.” He states, “luckily that didn’t destroy me, but I’m sure there are a lot of people who aren’t as lucky.” Knowing that he was dyslexic, even later in life helped to alleviate some of that struggle.

Formal diagnosis and the impact of having a dyslexic label can impact everyone in different ways. It is important to note that the individuals who shared their stories here found power in identifying with their diagnosis of dyslexia but that is not true for everyone. Alex knew he was struggling and having that label changed his life for the better. He shared how being diagnosed gave him hope. Alex wrote, "it's easy to throw in the towel and say okay I'm dumb and I'm stupid I just won't go anywhere with my life, but I knew I wasn't dumb, and I knew I wasn't stupid. So, I kept going and searching for an answer, which I eventually found." After formally receiving a diagnosis or self-diagnosing dyslexia, people can begin to identify with the learning difference in unique ways. Dillion shares, "I didn't choose to have dyslexia, but I have accepted it and the life lessons it has taught me. I think I have become a better student and better person because of my challenges and that is pretty cool." On a similar note, Dame shares that he has learned to fully embrace his dyslexia and all the joys that come with it. He states, "I have no regrets about having dyslexia at all. I think it gave me different strengths and resilience." This kind of resilience has been named by many dyslexics as being a factor in their success later in life. Orlando mentions that he felt labeled by dyslexia: "I didn't like that feeling, however that feeling is what also kicked me to work harder in a way." This label of being dyslexic comes up as a negative and or positive feeling for dyslexics. In opposition to Orlando, Sky states that her diagnosis was "something concrete to show myself that I was working hard, I was doing my best, I was just doing my best in a system that was not set up for my unique brain." For many, identifying with a label can help alleviate self-blame surrounding reading and writing performance.

The students and adults who shared their stories for this project described dyslexia as feeling physically limiting in terms of what they can read, write, or achieve, while also feeling extremely mentally limiting. These physical and mental limitations can compile and leave the dyslexic individual feeling diminished. Sami elaborates on this idea by stating that "there is the physical part of not being able to do certain things, and then there is the limiting mental aspect in which I wrongly evaluate myself based

solely on a socially constructed norm about what smart is." Dyslexia is not a physical disability, but there are aspects of the brain difference that feel physically limiting to many people. Rob shared his story of being pulled out from class at a young age to take IQ and a variety of verbal tests. The woman scoring him stated, "you are going to redo second grade. It happens to a lot of kids." Based on the stories analyzed for this project, I discovered that children with dyslexia are removed from their classrooms all the time for extra help and testing. That is part of the physical consequences of the disability. The mental limitations come after one realizes that there was a reason they were removed from the normal class and brought to the *special* room; they are different... they are dyslexic.

For people who are diagnosed with dyslexia, many learn to overcompensate for their *inadequacies*. This academic overcompensation generally begins in early elementary school and continues throughout college. Learning how to navigate the academic world as a dyslexic is essential for positive self-development. In public education, many children with dyslexia receive extra help. This often happens if their support systems in and out of school advocate for them. While in the school system, people with dyslexia typically spend a great deal of time learning how they learn best. No one experiences dyslexia in the same way, which is the beauty and the difficulty of the learning difference.

To help children make their way through the formal education system accommodations like extra time on tests and individualized education plans are used to help assist kids in the public school system. Blair received a lot of extra help in school and made the point that "supporting a student with dyslexia should be no different from supporting any student." Small accommodations like extra time can make all the difference. Sky said that "dyslexia robs a person of time, but accommodations give that back to the student." Extra time on assignments and exams is not the entire solution to help one navigate their dyslexia in school. But with extra time, many students, like Allison, saw their confidence improve. In the college setting, Allison was also able to see her grades improve

when she was given extra time to write papers and take exams. She expanded on this by stating that her academic achievements were also a “result of going into office hours twice a week with my calculus professor or making sure I went to extra hours with my history TAs to talk about the exam.” These folks shared that navigating school and academia is a process of advocating for oneself and learning how to learn.

Developing self-advocacy skills while in school has been a foundational experience in many of the dyslexic journeys that I have observed for this project. Derick stated that, “I have had to learn that it is okay to ask for help; that took me a while.” There is a degree of self-assurance that is required to accept help from others and still know that you will have to work twice as hard regardless. Allison stated: “I have two big regrets in college and, no, neither of them is related to attending parties or my love life. Regret number one: Not asking for extra time sooner. Regret number two: Letting labels dictate how I perceived myself.” Learning how to ask for help and accepting that help heavily influences the success at which these dyslexics speak about their academic experiences.

Learning to learn is another foundational experience that many of the blog posts I read shared. Blair states, “while all dyslexic students are classified under the same umbrella term, they will likely have unique ways of compensating for their reading disabilities. Therefore, there is never one simple answer for how these students should approach learning in school.” Every dyslexic, like every student, learns in different ways that are often unique to them and their learning styles. Brent stated his thoughts on this by sharing that, “we all learn in different ways, and it doesn’t make you or anyone less smart.” What is important to keep in mind is that the ability to reason, think creatively, and understand abstract concepts is fully intact. Reflecting on these stories, I found that often their ability to create new meaning and make important connections between ideas is strengthened as a result of the phonological and grammatical deficits. Creating new meaning from existing content is part of learning how to learn. Orlando shares that, “once you learn how to

enjoy the process of learning, academics become blissful and not a chore.” Understanding one’s own dyslexia is a learning process in itself, filled with much trial error, frustration, and surprise.

As these individuals have filtered through school and grown up, they often learn that they are smart, capable, and intelligent humans. But this fact is often discovered after years of overcompensating in academia. Allison states that, “there are no rules demanding you learn the materials by running around three bases. You may have to run around twelve.” These dyslexics have had to learn different ways of getting around. And that often helps in the real world. Brian shares “in school, there are set ways of doing things and you must perform those actions correctly to receive a high grade. Dyslexics’ brains have to find other pathways to get to the end result in school, they must think outside the box, and I think that that transfers over to life.” In life, there is no set way of doing things – one must live outside the box to make it. Dyslexia does not go away; one just learns to work around it and with it. Learning to work with one’s dyslexia is a part of redefining their own learning style and genius.

Redefining Genius: The Gifts of Dyslexia

The stories I read indicate that dyslexics believe they naturally have the tools needed to engage with the real world. They have the ability to see the whole picture. Orlando shares that: “my imagination, which I think is the gift of dyslexia, is what’s also given me different kinds of insights and perspectives. I can look at anything and think through it in a way that is unique to me.” Many of the stories I read mentioned this awareness or ability to create alternate pathways for understanding. This idea that one must discover their own way of learning material was heavily present in the stories I read. Brian also shares that “as a dyslexic you always have to learn different ways of getting around. And I think that that helps in the real world.” What is important to keep in mind is that the ability to reason, think creatively, and understand abstract concepts is fully intact. Often, a dyslexic’s ability to glean new meaning and make important connections

between ideas is strengthened as a result of the phonological deficit.

Dyslexics have many gifts beyond the academic world. The stories from dyslexics that I read shared their strengths as being persistent learners, having a good work ethic, being good at simplifying, having high levels of empathy, as well as being creative and imaginative. Jared shares that “I have the ability to see patterns in narratives where others may not and an intrinsic ability to understand big ideas or evolving situations and be able to explain them to others.” Many dyslexics are very bright and would say that their dyslexia allows them to make sense of world events. Luis explains that his dyslexia has gifted him the ability to “solve problems others can’t as my brain works differently, dyslexics are used to receiving setbacks so if the first attempt doesn’t work, we will try and try again until we find a solution to a problem.” This is the process of learning how to learn. Overcompensating and working hard to discover the best way one learns can become a strength but does not always feel like one. Sam shares,

The most annoying aspect of it is when people equate a learning disability to a thinking disability. So, when you live in a society where this is the case... you get good at simplifying content and working twice as hard as everyone around you. That’s just what you have to do; it never really felt like a choice or accomplishment to have to work harder than my peers.

Many of these dyslexics are often good at right hemisphere functions and often overcompensate for skills that are attributed to the left hemisphere, such as reading and writing.

The blog posts indicate that people with dyslexia see themselves as great simplifiers. Maggie shares that she has learned to boil it down until I know it by heart—to take notes until it’s too easy to understand and remember. Dyslexics often say what they mean and mean what they say, extra words just complicate things. Learning how to identify and implement critical aspects of material is an individual skill that takes time to master. Sami states, “being

dyslexic enables you to simplify things very quickly. It enabled me to see the big picture and I could make decisions more creatively and effectively as a result.” Of the content I read and watched for this project, I found that dyslexic minds are great at stripping away unnecessary detail to create clear, compelling messages. Many of the adult dyslexics who wrote in are excelling in careers where explaining, educating, or influencing are key, such as teaching, marketing, and journalism.

People with dyslexia also talk about how they have high levels of empathy and creativity. It is unknown if these social and cognitive skills are innate to people with dyslexia or if dyslexics just learn to focus on right hemisphere brain functions more than neurotypical folks. Joseph shares that “I was a very creative kid. I was never bored. I am into architecture now and I may become an aerospace engineer. I have to be creative. I am not a 9-to-5 type of guy; I am hands-on.” Thinking outside of the box is where dyslexics often thrive and where many choose to focus their energy on more creative professions than your typical desk job. This drive to think in creative ways can be attributed to the need or desire to make things work for their unique brain.

Molly works in public schools to help educate parents and teachers about learning differences and she is dyslexic herself. She states “one thing we know for certain about dyslexia is that this is one small area of difficulty in a sea of strengths. Having trouble with reading does not mean that you’ll have trouble with everything. In fact, most kids with dyslexia are good at lots of other things.” Many people with dyslexia who struggled with reading and writing in elementary school go on to college and professions they love. Many of the adult stories I read focused on words of encouragement for young people. Sarah states that “dyslexia is tricky because no two brains with it are the same. My dyslexia is not your dyslexia, and neither of us should question how smart we are because we have it.” These dyslexics have learned to embrace what they have, and own that their brain operates differently.

Dyslexia is with one for life and with that comes a tremendous amount of self-discovery

and redefining what smart means for oneself. Sami shares that, “you have to redefine what you give meaning in your life. There are SO many ways to be smart and excel in life other than school. Find your bliss and follow that as far as it will take you.” Similarly, Piper expressed, “I used to put so much time into trying to ‘overcome my dyslexia.’ And so many years later I have realized that I have nothing to *overcome*.” Dealing with dyslexia is not always fun and not always easy, but within it, there can be so much joy. It all depends on how one defines *genius* for themselves. Jamie shares with young people, “I wish I knew earlier that there are so many ways to be a genius.” Adding to the conversation, Taylor shares that “passion outweighs any disadvantage you have. There are restrictions in the world, but if you really want something, there are usually ways to figure it out. Get creative with how you navigate things.” These dyslexic individuals value creativity and exude passion for life. Dyslexia has many gifts and dyslexic individuals are *smart* in every definition of the word.

Conclusion

Dyslexia is a complex learning difference with many hardships and beauties. Based on the stories that I had the privilege of reading I found that many dyslexics can attribute their self-worth to school. This was often the result of being placed into an education system that has not been set up for a dyslexic brain. Therefore, reinforcing this need to pave one’s own path as a dyslexic in the academic world. A frustration with academics often led these dyslexics to feel stupid, or like they did not belong in academia. Additionally, folks shared their experiences with being diagnosed, learning how to learn best for their unique brain, and how to build advocacy skills in school. When listening to and reading individuals’ personal stories about having dyslexia it is impossible to not bring up school. Experiences associated with navigating education are often deeply foundational in one’s dyslexic journey. This idea of feeling stupid in the education system was also bound to a central concept that emerged throughout reading the dyslexic stories. The central theme that arose out of the struggle was redefining *genius*. If academia is not set up for a dyslexic brain then what is? These folks know that they

have many gifts that stretch beyond formal Westernized education. These gifts were often discovered after the individual dyslexic decided to redefine *genius* for themselves.

I contend that one never outgrows or overcomes their dyslexia. One learns to live with it and work around what is difficult. There are ways to make the journey through school and life easier to navigate, but that often takes effort and resources. Dyslexia typically feels like less of a burden after one is no longer in school and is provided with the space to show their knowledge in alternate ways beyond just reading and writing. I suggest that dyslexia is biological by nature but socially constructed as a learning disability. This presentation of dyslexia as a disability has been formed by the societal importance of reading and writing. If society placed greater value on people skills and creative ways of expressing knowledge, then dyslexia might be categorized as less of an academic disability or learning difference and more of a learning strength. This contributes to sociological and anthropological understandings of how we as a society define smart which is culturally bound and influenced by the times. The word smart has been socially constructed and infused with meaning. Which individuals are gifted the title of smart or genius is deeply related to the values of the society in which we live. Our culture values written communication skills and therefore has labeled dyslexia as a learning disability.

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