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Durham University
Faculty of Social Sciences and Health

Dyslexia and Entrepreneurship:

Exploring How Early Adversity, Coping Strategies, and Self-Efficacy Shape the Entrepreneurial Journeys of Individuals with Dyslexia

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Elaine Kruse

Department of Sociology

July 2025

Supervisor: Professor Stephen Macdonald

Abstract

Dyslexia is traditionally framed as a learning difficulty that impedes academic and professional achievement. However, emerging research reveals a paradoxical overrepresentation of individuals with dyslexia among entrepreneurs. This study investigates the relationship between dyslexia and entrepreneurial success by exploring the lived experiences of entrepreneurs with dyslexia. Focusing on how early educational adversity, coping strategies, and self-efficacy influence their entrepreneurial journeys, the research challenges deficit-based narratives. Through qualitative analysis, the study reveals how entrepreneurs with dyslexia leverage unique strengths—such as creativity, problem-solving, and resilience—to navigate challenges and innovate within the business world. By linking childhood experiences of dyslexia with adult entrepreneurial outcomes, this work fills a critical gap in the literature and reframes dyslexia as a source of both difficulty and advantage. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how learning differences can foster entrepreneurial potential and suggest practical implications for supporting dyslexic individuals in business environments.

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1. Introduction

Dyslexia is often framed as a barrier to academic and professional success, yet a growing body of research suggests that, paradoxically, individuals with dyslexia are disproportionately represented among entrepreneurs. This raises important questions about the relationship between learning differences and entrepreneurial potential; why so many people with dyslexia pursue self-employment, what strengths they bring to business, and how they navigate the challenges posed by traditional educational and professional systems. My study explores these issues by examining the lived experiences of entrepreneurs with dyslexia, focusing on how early adversity, coping strategies, and self-efficacy shape their entrepreneurial journeys. In doing so, I challenge deficit-based narratives and contribute to our understanding of dyslexia as a source of both difficulty and innovation.

1.1. Justifications for Study

This study will occupy a unique space in the literature concerning dyslexia. Although research into entrepreneurs with dyslexia exists, there is currently no compelling link between childhood experience of dyslexia, coping strategies, and self-efficacy among entrepreneurs with dyslexia. This study builds in part on research in which Logan (2009) found a significant incidence of dyslexia in entrepreneurs compared with the normal corporate management population in the UK and US: 35% of the entrepreneurs in her sample were dyslexic, while the same figure for the neurotypical population is 15%. In the UK, the figures are 19% and 10% respectively (Logan, 2012). My study

investigates the experiences of entrepreneurs with dyslexia, explores the difficulties they face in running their own businesses, and unearths the strategies they use to combat these difficulties.

1.1.1. Addressing a Gap in the Literature

While some research has explored the prevalence of dyslexia in entrepreneurship, there remains a lack of deep analysis on the mechanisms that link dyslexia and entrepreneurial success. Studies like Logan (2009; 2012) have identified that individuals with dyslexia are more likely to pursue entrepreneurship compared to the neurotypical population, but there is limited understanding of why this is the case beyond broad statistical observations. This study delves deeper into how early experiences of dyslexia, including struggles in education, shape the coping strategies that contribute to entrepreneurial success. This will provide a new lens through which to view dyslexia – not as a disability that hinders success but as a condition that fosters resilience, creativity, and entrepreneurial traits. This is a key contribution because it shifts the narrative from seeing dyslexia as a barrier to seeing it as a catalyst for innovation in business. This study aims to understand how entrepreneurs with dyslexia leverage their unique strengths (such as creativity, problem-solving, risk tolerance) through specific coping strategies to navigate the business world, thus extending beyond previous research that primarily focused on the challenges of dyslexia in traditional employment.

1.1.2. Focusing on Strengths, Not Deficits

Traditional dyslexia research has often been framed around the challenges associated with literacy, academic failure, and low self-esteem. This deficit-based approach overlooks the considerable strengths individuals with dyslexia possess, especially in skills that are well-suited to entrepreneurship, such as creativity, visual thinking, and strategic problem-solving (Eide & Eide, 2011). This study reframes dyslexia from a strengths-based perspective, aligning with recent trends in the neurodiversity movement. By focusing on the coping strategies and compensatory mechanisms that entrepreneurs with dyslexia develop – like delegation, verbal communication skills, and innovative thinking – this study will offer practical, positive insights into how individuals with dyslexia thrive in business. These findings can support individuals who may be struggling to see dyslexia as an advantage, helping them tap into their potential by embracing these strengths.

1.1.3. Expanding the Concept of Self-Efficacy in Dyslexia

Self-efficacy is foundational to entrepreneurial success (Bandura, 1997). This study explores how individuals with dyslexia develop self-efficacy through the coping strategies they use to overcome early educational and societal barriers. This is important because self-efficacy plays a central role in how people perceive their abilities to navigate risk, face setbacks, and achieve business success. By linking self-efficacy to entrepreneurship, this study highlights the coping strategies that individuals with dyslexia use to develop resilience and confidence despite negative school experiences and repeated academic failure. These become crucial assets in their entrepreneurial ventures (Alexander-Passe, 2016). The focus of this study on self-efficacy not only builds on Bandura's theory but also provides empirical evidence of how early life experiences contribute to entrepreneurial behaviour in people with dyslexia. This expands the understanding of self-efficacy within neurodiversity and entrepreneurship.

1.1.4. Understanding the Role of Compensatory Strategies

This study investigates the specific coping strategies used by entrepreneurs with dyslexia to compensate for literacy challenges in business, such as difficulties with reading, writing, and administration. Research has shown that delegation, networking, and creative problem-solving are among the strategies entrepreneurs with dyslexia use to navigate these challenges (Logan, 2012). However, further research is needed to understand how these strategies work in practice and what new approaches might emerge from the experiences of entrepreneurs with dyslexia. This research is important because it provides actionable insights that can be used to support other individuals with dyslexia who may be considering entrepreneurship but feel constrained by their literacy-related challenges. By investigating how successful entrepreneurs with dyslexia delegate tasks, use technology, or leverage their verbal communication skills, this study will offer practical advice on coping strategies for overcoming common barriers faced by entrepreneurs with dyslexia. This can lead to the development of tailored entrepreneurial training programs or support networks.

1.1.5. Challenging Traditional Educational Models

People with dyslexia often face marginalization in traditional education systems, which prioritize reading, writing, and standardized assessments – areas in which individuals with dyslexia typically struggle. The repeated academic failure experienced by many people with dyslexia leads to low self-esteem and can discourage them from pursuing conventional career paths. This research highlights how many individuals with dyslexia opt for entrepreneurship because it allows them to leverage their

strengths and avoid the literacy barriers that hinder them in traditional jobs (Logan, 2012; Miller & Kass, 2023). By examining how negative educational experiences shape self-efficacy and entrepreneurial choices, this study will shed light on how coping strategies help neurodivergent learners navigate the shortcomings of traditional educational models. This can contribute to broader discussions about the need for more inclusive education systems that recognize and nurture the strengths of individuals with dyslexia. The implications of my findings could influence educational reform, with potential policy recommendations for improving accessibility and support for neurodivergent students, ensuring that their talents are recognized and developed from a young age.

1.1.6. Contributing to the Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship Fields

This study will contribute to the growing field of neurodiversity by highlighting the coping strategies used by entrepreneurs with dyslexia in business. As the concept of neurodiversity becomes more widely recognized in corporate and entrepreneurial environments, there is a growing interest in understanding how neurodivergent individuals, such as those with dyslexia, can contribute to innovation and business success. By focusing on how entrepreneurs with dyslexia redefine success and use their neurodivergent traits to drive business innovation, this study provides insights into how organizations can support and harness neurodiverse talent. This is important for creating more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems that value cognitive diversity and recognize the benefits of alternative ways of thinking.

1.2. Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to explore strengths, not weaknesses. If, as research suggests, individuals with dyslexia are 'disabled by the attitudes and organisation of wider society and their inability to contribute in a normative way' (Thompson *et al.*, 2015), there must be factors at work which enable some people with dyslexia to successfully run their own businesses. Through interviews with successful entrepreneurs with dyslexia, this study seeks to find answers to the following questions:

1. In what ways are people with dyslexia suited to entrepreneurship?
2. How do past experiences shape the coping strategies entrepreneurs with dyslexia use in their business?
3. How do entrepreneurs with dyslexia use coping strategies to manage their difficulties in the context of their work?

My intention is to contribute to knowledge of dyslexia and entrepreneurship by identifying strategies and coping mechanisms that may support other adults with dyslexia with starting their own business. Following a model developed by Blaikie and Priest (2016), my study contains three stages which chart its progression from conceptual genus to robust theory. First, a descriptive stage that states an idea of what to look for, but which can offer no clear vision of what to expect. Second, a theoretical stage, where emerging patterns from data are scrutinised in order to hypothesise a causal mechanism responsible for those patterns. Third, an evidential stage, where I look for evidence of this mechanism.

1.3. Aims

This study aims to explore the unique relationship between dyslexia and entrepreneurship, focusing on how individuals with dyslexia navigate challenges and leverage coping strategies in business environments. By examining the roles of self-efficacy and compensatory strategies, the research seeks to understand how entrepreneurs with dyslexia overcome barriers in education and employment, contributing to broader discussions on neurodiversity in business:

1. To explore the influence of dyslexia on entrepreneurial development, focusing on how dyslexic individuals navigate and succeed in business.
2. To investigate the role of self-efficacy and compensatory strategies in helping entrepreneurs with dyslexia overcome traditional educational and occupational challenges.
3. To understand the unique entrepreneurial attributes and challenges of individuals with dyslexia, contributing to broader discussions on neurodiversity in business.

1.3.1. The Influence of Dyslexia on Entrepreneurial Development

The first aim is to explore the influence of dyslexia on entrepreneurial development, focusing on how individuals with dyslexia navigate and succeed in business. The literature (Logan, 2012; Miller & Kass, 2023) highlights that dyslexia can lead to significant challenges in traditional employment and education but can also foster unique strengths like creativity and adaptability. Logan's (2012) work specifically identifies that individuals with dyslexia are more likely to pursue entrepreneurship due to barriers in traditional employment. By exploring how people with dyslexia navigate and succeed in business, this study will build on Logan's findings, providing further evidence of how dyslexia influences entrepreneurial paths. This aim is linked to my first research question; in what ways are people with dyslexia suited to entrepreneurship?

1.3.2. Self-efficacy and Compensatory Strategies in Entrepreneurial Development

Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy is foundational to understanding how individuals persist through adversity. The literature (Burden & Burdett, 2007; Alexander-Passe, 2016) emphasizes that self-efficacy is critical for individuals with dyslexia who have faced negative educational experiences, because of the way in which it helps develop resilience and pursue entrepreneurial ventures. Alexander-Passe (2016) focuses on how entrepreneurs with dyslexia turn early trauma into self-efficacy, highlighting the importance of this psychological trait in overcoming challenges. This study will extend this by investigating how self-efficacy shapes entrepreneurial success. This aim ties in with my second research question; how do past experiences impact the way entrepreneurs with dyslexia approach their business?

1.3.3. Neurodiversity in Business

The neurodiversity movement (Eide & Eide, 2011) has emphasized how dyslexia and other conditions can offer cognitive advantages, such as innovative thinking and problem-solving. Research shows that individuals with dyslexia often display entrepreneurial traits like creativity and risk-taking, while also facing challenges in literacy-based tasks (Logan, 2009; Smith, 2008). By understanding these unique attributes, this study will add depth to discussions of neurodiversity in business, furthering the work of Eide & Eide (2011) and Logan (2009). This ties with my third research question; how do entrepreneurs with dyslexia manage their difficulties in the context of their work?

1.4. Objectives

To achieve this study's aims, the following specific objectives have been identified. These objectives focus on analysing key literature, assessing the impact of early experiences on entrepreneurs with dyslexia, and evaluating the role of self-efficacy and coping strategies in their success.

1. Analyse existing literature on the link between dyslexia and entrepreneurship, identifying key personality traits and coping mechanisms associated with success.

Logan's (2009) study found that 35% of entrepreneurs in her US sample were dyslexic, compared to only 15% in the general population, suggesting a significant link between dyslexia and entrepreneurial traits. Smith (2008) also connects the resilience developed during their school years to their entrepreneurial mindset. My objective to review and synthesize these findings will provide a clearer picture of how dyslexia fosters traits like risk-taking, creativity, and resilience, confirming and expanding on Logan's (2009) conclusions.

2. Assess the impact of early educational experiences on the career paths of individuals with dyslexia and how these experiences shape their self-efficacy and decision to pursue entrepreneurship.

Studies like Ingesson (2007) and Singer (2008) show that individuals with dyslexia often face repeated academic failure, leading to low self-esteem. However, Burden & Burdett (2007) found that positive

self-efficacy can emerge in environments that foster strengths. Miller & Kass (2023) also highlight how negative school experiences often push individuals with dyslexia toward entrepreneurship as a form of autonomy. Assessing the impact of these early experiences will illuminate the process by which self-efficacy grows and influences career choices, building on these studies.

3. Explore the specific coping strategies (e.g., delegation, networking, creativity) employed by entrepreneurs with dyslexia to compensate for literacy-related difficulties in business.

Logan (2012) and Miller & Kass (2023) both emphasize how entrepreneurs with dyslexia use compensatory strategies like delegation, verbal communication, and networking to manage their business tasks. For example, Logan (2012) found that many entrepreneurs with dyslexia use delegation to mitigate the impact of literacy difficulties. Investigating these strategies will provide practical insights into how individuals with dyslexia successfully navigate the entrepreneurial world, confirming the findings of Logan and extending them with new data.

4. Evaluate the role of self-efficacy in sustaining entrepreneurial ventures, particularly in the face of challenges related to dyslexia.

Self-efficacy is a key factor in entrepreneurial persistence, as noted by Bandura (1997) and later applied to entrepreneurship by Hsu (2015). The literature review also discusses how individuals with dyslexia, despite facing chronic difficulties (Maughan *et al.*, 2020), develop a strong sense of self-efficacy through repeated successes in non-academic domains (Alexander-Passe, 2016). Investigating how this self-efficacy sustains entrepreneurial ventures will shed light on what drives entrepreneurs

with dyslexia to persist, despite the challenges they face, building on Bandura's theory and its applications in dyslexia research.

1.5. Overview of Chapters

In the chapter titled *Literature Review: Dyslexia*, I present a concise account of dyslexia: starting with a brief history, I then offer an account of the difficulties researchers have had in establishing and agreeing on a definition of the condition, and how it has been understood from a medical and educational perspective. Next, I explore some of the primary symptoms associated with dyslexia, such as reading, writing, and spelling difficulties, and the secondary symptoms like low self-esteem, anxiety, and other emotional effects that stem from those academic challenges (Jacobson, 1999; Shaywitz *et al.*, 1999). I also discuss some of the positive aspects of dyslexia, such as the theory that many people with dyslexia demonstrate increased creativity, and how this can be linked to compensatory mechanisms.

Next, I discuss how individuals with dyslexia, despite their challenges, often exhibit enhanced creativity and problem-solving abilities. These strengths are frequently cited as assets in entrepreneurial endeavours (Logan, 2012; Eide & Eide, 2011). I go on to emphasize the emotional toll of dyslexia, especially the impact on self-esteem and self-efficacy, drawing on Bandura's work on self-efficacy (1997) and other studies (Burden & Burdett, 2007), showing how self-efficacy plays a role in determining whether individuals with dyslexia can overcome barriers and find success. I break down the key models of dyslexia: the medical model in which dyslexia has its roots; the social model, which has risen in popularity to counter the prevailing focus on physical limitations; the educational model, which focuses principally on a person's experience in school; and the social relational model; which is the key theoretical lens for this study.

In my third chapter, *Literature Review: Dyslexia in Business*, I discuss how dyslexia can lead to low self-esteem due to academic struggles, which often continues into adulthood. This lack of confidence affects individuals' ability to exert control over their lives, causing anxiety and depression (Bandura, 1997; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). However, those who develop self-efficacy early on are more likely to succeed in their careers (Lee & Mortimer, 2009). Self-esteem and early educational experiences are key to understanding why many individuals with dyslexia are drawn to entrepreneurship. Traditional education often exacerbates feelings of inadequacy, pushing individuals towards paths like self-employment where they can leverage their unique skills without being hindered by literacy challenges. This section sets the foundation for linking dyslexia with entrepreneurship, as individuals with low self-esteem in conventional settings may thrive in roles that offer autonomy.

Next, I explain how dyslexia continues to evolve during a person's life to impact on many aspects of adulthood, including the pursuit of employment. Individuals with dyslexia face marginalization during their school years due to repeated academic failures, which often carries over into employment (Singer, 2008), and studies show that these individuals are often steered towards manual or unskilled jobs, but some are able to overcome these barriers through self-efficacy and support systems (Taylor & Walter, 2003; Burden & Burdett, 2007). This section highlights the external challenges that individuals with dyslexia face, particularly in systems that don't cater to their needs, which shows why many choose entrepreneurship as an alternative to traditional employment.

I go on to explore how entrepreneurs with dyslexia can employ compensatory strategies like delegation, networking, and creative thinking to overcome their literacy difficulties. I reference Logan's (2012) research, which shows how these individuals rely on others to handle tasks such as writing while focusing on their strengths in verbal communication and innovation. Understanding these strategies reveals how individuals with dyslexia use their unique strengths to turn their weaknesses into opportunities. This insight is important for showing how entrepreneurs with dyslexia adapt to their business environments in practical ways. This leads to a discussion about traits such as

entrepreneurial qualities like creativity, innovation, and risk-taking (Logan, 2009) which individuals with dyslexia can use them to overcome barriers and thrive in industries where problem-solving is valued (Eide & Eide, 2011). Highlighting these strengths is critical because it frames dyslexia as not just a disability, but as a potential advantage in entrepreneurial contexts.

Having established that people with dyslexia are often marginalized during their school years, I discuss secondary symptoms of dyslexia, such as low self-esteem. In a section pertaining to neurodiversity, I explore different conditions which exist under the umbrella of neurodiversity, and the links between aptitude for entrepreneurship and ADHD, ASD and Asperger's syndrome, and finally dyslexia. I also offer a critique of studies which dispute the link between dyslexia and the likelihood of pursuing entrepreneurship. The groundbreaking work of Logan is explored, followed by a discussion of the appeal of entrepreneurship. Finally, I establish the link between dyslexia and self-efficacy.

My fourth chapter, *Methods*, opens with my research questions. I evaluate my research paradigm, beginning with the ontological and epistemological basis for my research. Then, I present my reasoning for the critical realist theoretical basis for my study. I explain my methods, including my sample, and the method by which I coded and thematically analysed my data.

My fifth chapter marks the first of three analyses of my interview data. First, in *Data Analysis: Educational Experiences Linked to Entrepreneurship*, I explore themes relating to education and educational experiences, with a focus on educational labelling and stigmatization, an education system that proactively disables children with additional needs, and the impact of educational failure. In my sixth chapter, *Data Analysis: Employment Experiences Linked to Entrepreneurship*, I explore the employment experiences of my respondents, focusing on themes of difficulty finding and maintaining paid employment, the impact of their experience in paid employment as a driver for entrepreneurial action, and the barriers they faced in that pursuit of entrepreneurship: specifically, the financial barriers, difficulties with bookkeeping and administration tasks in relation to their dyslexia, and their perceived lack of support for entrepreneurs.

In the seventh chapter, *Data Analysis: Success in Business*, I explore the success my respondents have had in starting their own businesses, examining the strategies and resources they have used to help mitigate the difficulties experienced in entrepreneurship. This includes a study of their secondary symptoms of dyslexia in adulthood, and their coping strategies such as the use of informal mentoring, delegation of administrative and written tasks, and the creative problem-solving skills they have developed since childhood. The chapter concludes with a section relating to self-efficacy and how this manifests in the robust determination of my respondents to be successful in spite of the challenges they have faced as a result of their dyslexia.

In my final chapter, *Concluding Discussions*, I draw on the data analyses to present discussions framed in three key conclusions drawn from my study: first, that children with dyslexia must survive a disabling education system and, in doing so, will develop a number of coping strategies which can help to mitigate the secondary symptoms of dyslexia in adulthood; second, that there is an irrefutable link between the lived experience of dyslexia and the development of determination which equips them with the self-efficacy needed to pursue entrepreneurship; and third, that the business startup support available in this country is inadequate and in need of reform. I close this study with recommendations for future research.

1.6. Terminology

1.6.1. Dyslexia / Dyslexic

Throughout this study, I have chosen to use the terms *dyslexic/dyslexia* rather than *neurodivergent/neurodiversity*. There are three reasons for this decision. First, dyslexia refers to a

specific learning difference characterized by difficulty with reading, spelling, and writing despite normal intelligence (Stanovich & Siegel, 1994; Stanovich, 1996). It provides clear and specific nomenclature for individuals who experience and continue to be impacted by these particular challenges.

Second, my interest lies specifically in the lived experience of people with dyslexia. For the individuals who participated in my study, the term *dyslexia* may hold personal significance and resonance. Therefore, it serves as a validating term that acknowledges their unique learning profiles while also highlighting their unique strengths. Dyslexia also has defined diagnostic criteria based on research and clinical practice and, as all of my participants have received a formal dyslexia diagnosis, the specificity of this terminology reflects this.

Third, I am using the term *dyslexia* in the interests of research consistency. There is a significant body of research into many aspects of dyslexia, including discourse around the challenge of agreeing on its definition, conflicting models concerning the precise nature, causes, and implications of dyslexia, and the impact on individuals with dyslexia across their lives (Castles, Bates, *et al.*, 2006; Coltheart, 2006; Olson, 2006; Hudson, High, *et al.*, 2007; Ehardt, 2009). I address each of these in my study. In contrast, neurodiversity is an emerging concept that encompasses a range of neurological variations (Chapman, 2020), including dyslexia, and is still relatively new in academic and scientific discourse. By using the term *dyslexia*, I am drawing on a well-established and robust foundation of empirical evidence, allowing me to leverage existing research findings and build on them to contribute new insights and understanding.

Finally, I have chosen to use person-first language in this study, referring to ‘individuals with dyslexia’ rather than ‘dyslexic individuals.’ This aligns with Evans (2013), who explored how language can shape identity among individuals navigating the social and systemic challenges associated with dyslexia. Participants preferred phrases that emphasized their personhood over their condition, with one respondent stating, ‘I’m not a dyslexic person. I’m a person with dyslexia’ (Evans, 2013, p. 366). This

quote reflects a desire to distance oneself from labels that might perpetuate deficit-based understandings of dyslexia. This approach is consistent with the social relational theory of disability, which emphasizes the dynamics of disablement over individual deficits. As such, I will adopt person-first language except when using direct quotations.

1.6.2. Neurodiversity / Neurodivergent

Neurodiversity is not an umbrella term for the spectrum of cognitive differences (Doyle, 2024), rather it refers to the fact that cognition itself is diverse. As a distinct term, *neurodivergent* indicates that someone has an atypical cognitive ability profile, and neurodivergent profiles include dyslexia, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum condition (ASD/ASC), Asperger's syndrome, and dyspraxia. Silberman (2015, p. 17) offers this definition of neurodiversity:

... the notion that conditions like autism, dyslexia and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) should be regarded as naturally occurring cognitive variations with distinctive strengths that have contributed to the evolution of technology and culture rather than mere checklists of deficits and dysfunctions.

Silberman's belief is that the people best positioned to study and theorise about neurodiversity are neurodivergent people themselves. Indeed, the term 'neurodiversity' was first espoused by neurodivergent people seeking a classification that reflected their distinct styles of cognition and perception (Wakefield *et al.*, 2020). In Silberman's definition, he makes a clear statement that

neurodiversity is not about deficits, it is about differences. Chown (2021) draws a useful distinction between the meanings of neurodivergent and neurodiversity: where neurodivergent refers to individuals who are not neurotypical, neurodiversity refers not only to people who are neurodivergent, but also to people who are neurotypical. It is the combination of both neurotypical people and neurodivergent people that makes a given population neurodiverse.

As a term, neurodiversity means that we are all neurologically different, but it also serves to highlight the fact that 'the way society is set up, there are some people who experience unfair barriers that can limit their access to society, education and, significantly, to work' (Smith & Kirby, 2021, p. 2). Viewed through the lens of the medical model, neurodivergent traits are seen as deficits or dysfunctions that need to be corrected. Jurgens (2020) argues that this model puts pressure on individuals to conform to neurotypical standards, without addressing how societal structures exacerbate their challenges. Many of the difficulties faced by neurodivergent individuals stem from societal expectations. Jurgens (2020, *ibid*) favours the social model of disability, in which the focus shifts away from fixing neurodivergent people and places responsibility on society to become more accommodating.

However, it is the social relational model of disability which underpins the neurodiversity movement, emphasizing strengths and challenging the pathologization of disability without denying the impairment associated with a given disability (Chapman, 2021). Further discussion of models of disability will be explored in *Chapter 2*.

1.6.3. Entrepreneur / Entrepreneurship

For the purposes of this study, entrepreneurship is defined as someone starting and running their own business (Mille & Le Breton-Miller, 2016). The concept of entrepreneurship is of course complex.

Levine and Rubinstein (2017) draw a distinction between incorporated and unincorporated entrepreneurs. In such a disaggregation, they consider only the former to be entrepreneurs on the basis of the additional costs and legal liabilities required of a corporation. In this differentiation, those individuals running unincorporated businesses are stripped of their entrepreneurship. Elsewhere, La Porta and Shleifer (2014) argue that entrepreneurs can be distilled into formal and informal: usually educated, formal entrepreneurs pay taxes and follow government regulations, whereas informal entrepreneurs are presented more as hobbyists than serious businesspeople.

Many researchers perceive a connection between education and entrepreneurship. Some research suggests a strong link between higher education levels and entrepreneurial intent, career choice, and performance (Van Der Sluis *et al.*, 2008; Eesley & Roberts, 2012; Lofstrom *et al.*, 2014). Others conclude that while education may be conducive of entrepreneurial talent, formal education is not a necessary or sufficient condition for entrepreneurial skills, even if it contributes to confidence with key entrepreneurial skills like marketing and finance (La Porta & Shleifer, 2008). This link between education and entrepreneurship is nuanced. Struckell (2019) highlights a link between education and entrepreneurial intent, action, and success, but she bases this on findings by Martin *et al.* (2013). The research by Martin *et al.* (2013) specifically concerned entrepreneurship education and training (EET) rather than education more generally: by centring on the outcomes of educational activities specific to entrepreneurship, the Martin *et al.* metanalysis positively links EET to intentions to pursue entrepreneurship and start-up outcomes in entrepreneurship.

Lofstrom *et al.* (2014) draw further distinctions in relation to entrepreneurship and education, noting that education levels steer individuals towards particular types of new venture and away from others – what they term ‘high barrier’ and ‘low barrier’ industries. High barrier industries are those that present at least one demanding requirement for entry, such as fixed capital, technical knowledge, or innovation. The examples offered by Lofstrom *et al.* (2014) are airlines and pharmaceuticals, industries into which it is likely impossible to gain entry except for the limited few who possess abundant

financial resources. Low barrier industries are those that require less capital at entry, and in which less differentiation is required from other incumbent products or services, such as hairdressing. However, these barriers can be overcome with the cognitive skills and knowledge gained in formal education. In fact, Lofstrom *et al.* (2014) propose that capital-based barriers to entry into entrepreneurship can be overcome with cognitive skills and knowledge, just as gaps in knowledge and cognitive skills can be overcome with financial capital.

These studies reflect the complexity of entrepreneurship and highlight the importance of establishing an operational definition of what an entrepreneur is. The current study is concerned with the lived experiences of entrepreneurs with dyslexia, and it aims to unravel the difficulties they face in running their own businesses, to explore the likely negative experiences they had at school, and to investigate any links between the strategies they developed to combat these difficulties as children and as adults. The precise nature of their businesses is considered immaterial to the focus of this study, and to dwell on entry points and whether respondents entered high or low barrier industries would obfuscate the true focus of why individuals chose to start their own business rather than pursue or persist in paid employment. A more in-depth analysis of entrepreneurship can be found in *Section 2.7*.

Although there are parallels between the current study and the work of Logan (2001; 2009; 2012), we use different definitions of the entrepreneur. In Logan's first study of the incidence of dyslexia among entrepreneurs and owner-managers, she adopted Bolton and Thompson's (2000, p. 16) definition of an entrepreneur: 'a person who habitually creates and innovates to build something of recognised value around perceived opportunities'. There is no stipulation in the current study that participants must have created more than one business, nor is there any attention paid to the value of said business. While, as Glaeser (2007) notes, self-employment literature tends to draw little distinction between the types of activities being undertaken and the people undertaking them, such that Michael Bloomberg and a street vendor are at either end of a shared self-employment continuum, the focus is

squarely on the motivations for pursuing entrepreneurship and the manner in which any challenges relating to dyslexia are mitigated.

1.6.4. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the belief people have in their causative capabilities (Bandura, 1995), that is, their ability to make things happen. Self-efficacy theory has its roots in a gradual evolution of how we understand our personal control over our lives. White (1959) hypothesised that some forms of motivation cannot be attributed to primary drivers such as pain and fear, and instead have their genesis in the pursuit of efficacy. Our motivation to achieve has been explained using the affective arousal model, which reasoned that motivation is borne out of the link between our perception of an act and our expectation of success (McClelland *et al.*, 1953), and by the expectancy-valuation model, which argued that the degree of achievement motivation rests on the subjective probability of success and the incentive to try (Atkinson, 1957).

Self-efficacy is therefore a faith in one's abilities to achieve something greater than what they have already accomplished. Self-efficacy beliefs feeds into motivation and perseverance, and the greater someone's belief in their capabilities, the more persistent they will be. Bandura (1989) explained that if people's self-efficacy beliefs centred solely on what they could already do as a matter of routine, they would scarcely muster the effort to surpass what comes easily. They will rise above setbacks and refuse to settle for mediocrity. Self-efficacy has been found to be one of the most influential factors indicating entrepreneurial intent (Liñán *et al.*, 2010), which I discuss in detail in *Chapter 2*.

1.6.5. Summary

This chapter highlights the unique space this study occupies in the literature on dyslexia and entrepreneurship. While research like Logan's (2009; 2012) has established a higher incidence of dyslexia among entrepreneurs compared to corporate managers, this study focuses further on how early childhood experiences, self-efficacy, and coping strategies influence entrepreneurial success in individuals with dyslexia. This approach builds on the concept of strengths rather than disabilities, echoing the need to rethink how dyslexic traits are framed in business. The contribution this study makes lies in exploring the practical strategies entrepreneurs with dyslexia use to compensate for literacy challenges, such as delegation, creative problem-solving, and networking. These strategies, as discussed in the literature (Logan, 2012; Miller & Kass, 2023), will provide actionable insights for others facing similar challenges.

By linking the personal experiences of entrepreneurs with dyslexia with their compensatory strategies, this study will expand on Logan's research and contribute valuable new insights to the field. The focus on strengths, early experiences, and coping mechanisms aligns with the broader goal of advancing discussions on neurodiversity in business, while supporting individuals with dyslexia in navigating entrepreneurial environments.

2. Literature Review: Dyslexia

2.1. Introduction

This chapter examines the multi-faceted nature of dyslexia, expanding beyond its clinical and neurological definitions to consider broader psychosocial impacts, compensatory mechanisms, and intersections with creativity and self-perception. At its core, dyslexia is traditionally characterized by challenges in phonological processing and reading fluency, but contemporary research emphasizes a more nuanced understanding, particularly the way in which individuals navigate and thrive within their limitations. This chapter interrogates these themes.

I begin with a historical overview of how dyslexia has been conceptualized, tracing its development from ‘word-blindness’ in the 19th Century to its contemporary understanding as a complex cognitive disorder with genetic, neurological, and environmental underpinnings. This evolution highlights both progress and persisting ambiguities in defining and diagnosing dyslexia (*Section 2.1*), setting the stage for further exploration of its cognitive and emotional dimensions.

Next, the chapter delves into the pathology of dyslexia, tackling ongoing debates about its cognitive deficits – particularly around intelligence and phonological processing (*Section 2.2*). Here, the tension between deficit-focused and compensatory models emerges, in particular as it pertains to educational outcomes. This tension is crucial for understanding how individuals with dyslexia adapt to their learning environments, using both external tools and internal strategies to mitigate their reading challenges.

The third section shifts focus to the secondary symptoms of dyslexia, notably its comorbidities with other disorders like ADHD, and the psychological toll it takes in the form of anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem (*Section 2.3*). These issues, while often seen as secondary, are critical to

understanding the broader impact of dyslexia on social and emotional wellbeing. The comorbidity between dyslexia and other developmental disorders complicates diagnosis and intervention, reinforcing the need for a multidimensional approach.

Next, I explore dyslexia as a hidden disability (*Section 2.4*). Despite being largely invisible, dyslexia profoundly affects personal and professional lives, particularly in how people with dyslexia manage disclosure and navigate social stigmas. This hidden nature complicates both self-advocacy and access to resources, framing dyslexia not just as a learning difference but as a social issue deeply embedded in structural inequalities.

In the fifth section, I examine the relationship between dyslexia and creativity (*Section 2.5*). Drawing from theories of compensatory strengths, this section explores whether the cognitive challenges associated with dyslexia might also foster heightened creative abilities. While the ‘paradox of dyslexia’ is often cited – where individuals with dyslexia excel in non-verbal problem-solving and creative thinking – the evidence remains mixed, pointing to a complex interplay of cognitive deficits and adaptive strengths.

Finally, this chapter evaluates the critical role of diagnostic labels and how they shape the identity and educational trajectories of those with dyslexia (*Section 2.6*). While some argue that a diagnosis can empower individuals by providing clarity and access to accommodations, others suggest that labels can be stigmatizing and reduce expectations. This section engages with this debate, analyzing the implications of labelling for self-concept, self-efficacy, and academic aspirations.

In summary, this chapter aims to broaden the discussion on dyslexia by examining its multifaceted nature – from historical definitions and cognitive pathologies to its social, emotional, and creative dimensions. Each section contributes to a holistic understanding of dyslexia, illustrating the ongoing need for nuanced research and targeted interventions that acknowledge both the challenges and the strengths of individuals with this learning difference.

2.2. A History of Dyslexia

2.2.1. 1877–1972

In 1877, Adolph Kussmaul, a German professor of medicine, first identified the reading and spelling challenges now recognized as dyslexia, coining the term ‘word-blindness’. The same phenomenon was later observed by ophthalmologist Rudolf Berlin (1887), who used the word ‘dyslexia’ to align it with other diagnoses of the time, such as alexia and paralexia. Both are reading disorders characterised by difficulty comprehending written language, and both conditions were associated with brain injury. Berlin believed the two conditions were distinguished more in degree than in kind (Wagner, 1973), and he theorized that it must result from a disease or injury in the brain.

By the 1890s, British physicians such as James Hinshelwood furthered the study of dyslexia. William Pringle Morgan provided a notable early account, describing a boy who struggled with reading despite excelling in other areas. Hinshelwood documented similar cases, suggesting that such reading difficulties must stem from a congenital deficiency in a person’s visual memory for words. No consensus on these ideas was forthcoming. Hinshelwood (1896) differentiated between ‘word-blindness’ and its French (*‘cécité verbale’*) and German (*‘wordblindheit’*) equivalents, and ‘dyslexia’, arguing that word-blindness was a misleading descriptor of the characteristics of dyslexia. While he admitted to misuse of the term, he argued it was valuable when properly understood. This early debate over defining specific and general reading difficulties positioned dyslexia as a multi-dimensional disorder, a theoretical position which endures to this day (Ramus *et al.*, 2013).

The late 19th Century saw the advent of compulsory schooling with the passing of the 1870 *Education Act*, and reading difficulties became a significant issue due to the increasing importance of literacy. The *Feeble-Minded Child and Adult* report of 1893 (Charity Organisation Society) made clear the mounting social issue of children struggling in school, and by the time of the 1904 *Royal Commission*

on the *Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded* (McDonagh, 2008), those struggles received state recognition as a problem that required a solution.

It was research by Samuel Orton (1937) that shifted our understanding of dyslexia as a psycho-educational condition, the effects of which could be ameliorated through particular teaching methods. Indeed, it was Orton's work that led to dyslexia being considered primarily a part of educational discourse, falling under the auspices of local education authorities with the passing of the *Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970* (s44, 26/2). The Act marked the beginning of early efforts to secure legal recognition for dyslexia. Indeed, it represented the first legislative mention of dyslexia. However, the Act referred to 'acute dyslexia', implying a condition that comes on suddenly, rather than more accurately regarding it as a lifelong condition often present from birth (Miles, 2006). Additionally, far from being compulsory, provisions for children with dyslexia were to be made available 'so far as is practicable'.

The inclusion of dyslexia in the *Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act* led to the formation of the Tizard Committee, which was tasked with investigating the issue further. However, their report was sceptical about the existence of a distinct dyslexic syndrome and referenced specific reading difficulties to describe children who struggled with literacy despite average or above-average intelligence. It is little wonder that so much subsequent legislation has failed adequately to address the needs of people with dyslexia. Miles (2006) notes that the narrow focus on reading overlooked the broader cognitive issues associated with dyslexia, such as difficulties with writing, spelling, and numeracy, which were mentioned but not fully integrated into the committee's recommendations. Miles (2006, *ibid*) further notes that it was the later *Warnock Report* of 1978 that scrapped categories of handicap, introduced the concept of broader special educational needs, and in doing so finally provided machinery with which the needs of children with dyslexia could be met. The *Warnock Report's* recommendation to focus on the individual needs of students, rather than fitting them into pre-specified categories, was crucial in advancing the recognition of dyslexia.

Organizations like the British Dyslexia Association and the Dyslexia Institute, both founded in 1972, played a central role in helping to place children in specialist schools to support children with dyslexia. Both were founded partly in response to the lack of sufficient government action on dyslexia. The British Dyslexia Association was established as a parent-led organization aiming to advocate for the recognition and support of children with dyslexia, addressing the failure of official reports like the *Tizard Report* to acknowledge the specific needs of those with dyslexia. The Dyslexia Institute, meanwhile, focused on providing practical educational support and teacher training to help students with dyslexia.

2.2.2. 1981 to present day

Significant shifts have occurred since 1972 that have directly affected neurodivergent individuals. These policies, while aiming to improve inclusion and support, conversely presented both advancements and ongoing challenges for neurodivergent students. The 1981 *Education Act* was pivotal in embedding special educational needs (SEN) into UK law, shifting the educational landscape by mandating that children with SEN be educated, where possible, in mainstream schools. Although this was a positive step for children with dyslexia owing to the emphasis on inclusive education, the law placed responsibility on local authorities to assess needs, resulting in inconsistent support due to varied local interpretations of dyslexia and funding constraints. While the *Education Act* opened doors to mainstream education that would otherwise have remained closed, it raised concerns about whether schools were adequately resourced to support children with dyslexia. Many mainstream teachers lacked the training necessary to address the specific needs of neurodivergent learners, leaving a gap between policy and implementation.

The introduction of the National Curriculum under the *Education Reform Act* of 1988 was a landmark in educational policy, introducing standardization to what was taught across schools the UK. While the aim was to provide a uniform education for all, the rigid structure posed challenges for neurodivergent students. Children with dyslexia often struggled with literacy-heavy subjects, and the curriculum's emphasis on standardized testing created additional barriers. Hence, while the curriculum did not initially account for neurodivergent learners, its introduction spurred further debate about how education systems must adapt to be more inclusive. This laid the groundwork for future reforms aimed at accommodating diverse learning needs.

The *Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)* of 1995 was the first piece of legislation directly to address discrimination against disabled people in various areas, including education. It marked a significant step forward by recognizing dyslexia as a disability and protecting neurodivergent individuals from discrimination. Schools and higher education institutions were required to make 'reasonable adjustments' (*DDA*, 1995, S18B) to accommodate students with disabilities. While the *DDA* theoretically benefited students with dyslexia by mandating reasonable accommodations, its implementation was patchy. Schools often struggled to understand what 'reasonable adjustments' actually required for neurodivergent students, and many continued to face barriers due to lack of resources and teacher training. Additionally, the *DDA's* approach was reactive, leaving many neurodivergent students unsupported unless they or their families actively pursued legal redress.

In 2001, the *Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice* offered a considerable overhaul that sought to ensure better identification and support for students with SEN, including dyslexia. It required early identification of children with learning difficulties in order to create Individual Education Plans (IEPs) tailored to their specific needs. The Code was groundbreaking in emphasizing the importance of multi-agency collaboration in a child's education. Nevertheless, the policy's effectiveness was limited by inconsistent implementation across schools and relied on teachers having the training to recognize and address dyslexia.

The *Equality Act* 2010 consolidated anti-discrimination laws and offered stronger legal protection for individuals with dyslexia. Dyslexia was finally explicitly recognized as a disability, and schools were required to provide appropriate accommodations. This helped to ensure children with dyslexia received suitable support, particularly in higher education where institutions had a responsibility to provide access to assistive technologies and learning accommodations. However, the gap between policy and practice continued to be a challenge. Schools and universities often varied in how they interpreted and applied the requirements of the Act, and some schools were better resourced than others to provide assistive technologies, which created inequalities.

The *Children and Families Act* 2014, alongside the revised *SEND Code of Practice*, marked a significant shift in special education by introducing Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs) to replace the previous Statement of SEN, offering a more holistic approach by integrating educational, health, and social care services. Although this was a significant development for children with dyslexia, the roll-out of EHCPs has faced criticism for delays and bureaucratic inefficiencies, as well as being underfunded, leading to uneven access to resources. Furthermore, while the policy recognized dyslexia as a condition that could warrant an EHCP, many schools continue to under-identify students with dyslexia. More recently, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Dyslexia and other SpLDs (APPG, 2019) found that schools were extremely unlikely to provide a diagnostic assessment for dyslexia, and that support in mainstream schools is inadequate.

Educational policy in the UK has evolved significantly since 1972, with a gradual shift towards recognition and accommodation for neurodivergent learners. While policies such as the *DDA*, the *SEN Code of Practice*, and the *Children and Families Act* represent milestones in inclusion, the practical challenges of implementation continue to hinder their full potential. A persistent theme is the gap between policy intentions and real-world outcomes, driven principally by inconsistent funding, inadequate teacher training, and the complexities of the bureaucratic system. For future policies to

truly benefit children with dyslexia, there must be a more concerted effort to ensure that schools are equipped with the necessary resources and expertise to support neurodivergent learners effectively.

Inclusive teaching should move beyond reactive accommodations and towards the adoption of a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework that anticipates and embraces neurodivergent needs (Spaeth & Pearson, 2023). The neurodiversity paradigm (Singer, 1998; Chapman, 2020) challenges the notion of a normal brain and promotes the idea that educational systems should adapt to learners, not the other way around. UDL (Spaeth & Pearson, 2023) is a proactive educational framework that reduces the need for students to disclose diagnoses, encourages flexibility in teaching and assessment, and recognizes above all else that students may demonstrate learning in diverse ways. In that sense, it is a blueprint for how educational policy in the UK could evolve in the future.

2.3. Dyslexia and Its Pathology

2.3.1. Establishing a Definition of Dyslexia

The issue of intelligence must be considered when seeking to arrive at a definition of dyslexia. It is believed that poor readers of high intelligence differ from poor readers of lower intelligence, and the label dyslexia is reserved for those showing discrepancies between intelligence and reading ability. Research into dyslexia has tended to focus on the associated limitations. The condition is characterized by phonological processing deficits (Stanovich, 1991), difficulty in translating written letters into their representative sounds and breaking down words into – and then manipulating – individual phonemes (Stoodley, 2016). Consequently, dyslexia is generally defined in terms of the challenges it presents. It

is primarily considered a disadvantageous disorder that is familial, inheritable, and incurable (Castles, Bates *et al.* 2006; Coltheart, 2006; Olson, 2006; Hudson, High, *et al.* 2007; Ehardt, 2009).

People with dyslexia often have to contend with the frustration of not being able to read and write at a level commensurate with their mental acuity (Elliott & Place, 1998). The notion of dyslexia as a 'specific learning disability' stems from a discrepancy between a person's actual reading attainment and what would normally be expected of them given their age and IQ (Snowling, 2020). Stanovich and Siegel (1994) suggest that defining dyslexia in relation to a discrepancy between aptitude and achievement has served as a useful shortcut to finding a distinct group of poor readers with genetic or neurological disabilities. However, Stanovich (1991) has also argued that children who are good at reading will tend to read more, which will have a positive impact on their verbal skills and vocabulary. As such, the verbal skills of children who do not read as much will not keep pace with their peers.

The British Psychological Society (2005) defines dyslexia as being evident when 'accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops incompletely or with great difficulty', where that difficulty focuses on 'literacy learning at the "word level" and implies that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities'. While this is a serviceable account of the difficulties with reading fluency that characterize dyslexia, it fails to take account of the myriad other characteristics, such as difficulty paying attention, dysfluency in reading, inaccuracy with both long and short words, difficulty with spelling, grammar and organization, and handwriting difficulties, plus a number of longer-term secondary symptoms I will address later. Morton and Frith (1995) warn against identifying a single symptom as being the most important whilst either casually ignoring other symptoms or assuming other symptoms derive from the same learning difference.

As well as clarity on the working definitions of dyslexia, we must consider whether participants in studies have a formal dyslexia diagnosis. Zuppardo *et al.* (2023) cite a study by Rosalina and Nasrullah (2020) as evidence that people with dyslexia have low self-esteem, but the Rosalina and Nasrullah study concludes only that there is a correlation between self-esteem and reading comprehension of

the university students who participated. There is no mention of any of the students having a diagnosis of dyslexia – a fact which has given other researchers cause to exclude studies from their analyses (Bear *et al.*, 2002). If the reading comprehension element of their study was in some way used to assess for dyslexia, Rosalina and Nasrullah (2020) make no mention of it. In the longitudinal study conducted by Maughan *et al.* (2020), two sample groups were distinguished: one whose reading skills formed part of a general pattern of intellectual difficulties; and one whose problems appeared specific to reading. The researchers suggest that the profile of this latter group is the same as the profile of children with dyslexia, while noting that none of the participants had a formal dyslexia diagnosis. Again, this is an assumed correlation.

There is still further variation in how participants are even selected for studies in this field. Polychroni *et al.* (2006) and Novita (2016) both drew their samples from schools. However, the results of even just these two studies are difficult to compare because while Polychroni *et al.* (2006) state that they used six mainstream primary schools to collect their sample, Novita (2016) gives no indication whether the sample in her study was taken from mainstream or special schools. The implication is that she used a mainstream school, but she notes a failure to control for children working in mainstream or special classes in her study. This has an impact on reported self-concepts and self-perceptions because children with dyslexia in special education classrooms, whether those be in a special school or as a provision in a mainstream school, have been found to have higher academic self-concept than children with dyslexia in mainstream classrooms (Bear, 2002).

What emerges from research evidence is that dyslexia is a genetically determined, multifactorial learning difference, which means that they have many contributing factors such as genetics, but also lifestyle and environmental factors. Such factors can overlap, and different disorders can therefore share elements of each other's etiology (see *Section 2.3.3*). Miciak *et al.* (2014) criticise approaches that take several factors into account when diagnosing dyslexia. They write about the broader continuum of learning disabilities without ever directly addressing dyslexia, while they raise concerns

about the validity and reliability of identifying learning disabilities using patterns of cognitive strengths and weaknesses. Indeed, Miciak *et al.* (2014) themselves highlight the limited applicability of their findings. Their study is representative of the confusion and lack of clarity that pervades the literature surrounding dyslexia. There remains no reliable consensus about the cut-off between dyslexia and poor reading (Snowling, 2020), as evidenced by findings by Siegel and Hurford (2019).

There are disparate views of dyslexia in terms of the nature of its underlying deficits. The core deficit view is that dyslexia is a phonological processing disorder which is not affected by intelligence (Stanovich & Siegel, 1994; Stanovich, 1996). The ability to read high level words is due to less severe phonological deficits rather than cognitive strengths. An alternative view is the twice-exceptionality theory, which contends that both cognitive strengths and weaknesses can impact on word-level reading, accounting for individuals with very low word-level reading but very high intelligence. According to this theory, cognitive strengths lessen the impact of a risk factor for dyslexia through a compensatory method.

However, Pennington (2006) asserts that there is a need for a Multiple Deficit Model because behaviourally defined developmental disorders like dyslexia and ADHD do not have single causes, and such disorders are frequently comorbid because of partly shared genetic and cognitive risk factors. There is a particular issue that Pennington describes, which is particularly salient to Logan's (2001; 2009; 2012 – see *Section 3.7*) research, and to any such research that might follow in its footsteps. This is the problem of applying double dissociation logic to developmental disorders.

One way to define and explain double dissociation is in the context of surface and phonological dyslexia, two distinct classes of dyslexia. Phonological dyslexia is characterized by poor reading aloud of non-words (Behrmann & Bub, 1992), while surface dyslexia is characterized by poor reading aloud of words with irregular spelling-to-sound construction (Funnell, 1983). Double dissociation occurs where two components of a cognitive system operate independently and therefore make independent contributions to the behaviour of that system. As such, a change in one of those

components will not affect the behavioural contributions of the other component (Sibley & Kello, 2005). Surface dyslexia and phonological dyslexia represent one example of a double dissociation. With double dissociations in mind, Pennington (2006) argues against studying dyslexia and another condition, such as ADHD, with a model of single cognitive deficit. Pennington argues that there should be a double dissociation between the two conditions. He asserts that dyslexia would have a phonological deficit but not an executive deficit, while for ADHD the reverse would be true.

In conclusion, research into reading disabilities shows a complex interplay between intelligence and reading ability, shaping our understanding of dyslexia (Stanovich, 1994). Traditionally defined by phonological processing deficits (Stanovich, 1991; Stoodley, 2016), dyslexia also involves challenges like attention, spelling, and handwriting difficulties (Morton & Frith, 1995). While the British Psychological Society's definition focuses on word-level literacy (2005), it misses broader issues. The discrepancy model identifies dyslexia through gaps between expected and actual reading performance, but inconsistencies remain across studies (Stanovich & Siegel, 1994; Snowling, 2020). Miciak *et al.* (2014) critique the focus on cognitive strengths and weaknesses, advocating for a broader understanding. Pennington's (2006) Multiple Deficit Model, highlighting shared genetic and cognitive risk factors between dyslexia and ADHD, cautions against single cognitive deficit models and stresses considering double dissociation. Despite progress, defining and diagnosing dyslexia remains challenging, necessitating ongoing exploration and refinement.

2.3.2. Symptoms of Dyslexia

Dyslexia is characterized by specific difficulties in the fluency and accuracy of the grapheme-phoneme transcoding process, despite normal intelligence, and irrespective of education and socio-economic status (Lyon *et al.*, 2003). In evidence of this, Maughan *et al.* (2020) conducted a series of longitudinal

studies which offer a notion of the prevalence and correlates of reading disabilities. The first phase took place in 1964, with a sample of 2,334 children aged 9–11. The persistence of their reading difficulties was observed in a follow-up study when the same children were 14–15 years old. While their comprehension skills and reading accuracy were levelled at a minimum of 28 months below their chronological age at the beginning of the study, this divergence had worsened by the time of the follow-up study, with the children aged 14+ reading at levels expected of a 9-year-old.

However, Maughan *et al.* (2020, p. 433) noted that dyslexia is genetically determined and, whilst there was a multifactorial element in their own findings, the progress made by the specifically reading-impaired group was ‘significantly poorer’ than their low ability poor reading counterparts. Yet, Siegel (1992) conducted a meta-analysis of studies of readers with dyslexia and poor readers, and found no significant differences between the reading, spelling, and phonological processing abilities of the two groups. More recently, Siegel and Hurford (2019) cite a number of studies which seemingly prove the correlation between children with dyslexia and children whose intelligence is commensurate with their age but whose reading ability is judged to be poor. However, these studies miss the point that these poor readers may have undiagnosed dyslexia.

Amid debate over how precisely dyslexia is defined, Collinson (2022) questions whether we should even be looking for a definition of dyslexia. He argues that words like ‘literacy’, ‘othering’, and ‘discrimination’ depend on context, and it would be problematic to define them outside a specific context. This implies that the words might have multiple definitions to fit different contexts. Dyslexia is variously used as a social construct, a psychological defect, and a medical diagnosis (Kirby, 2018), and Elliott (2020) highlights that dyslexia is not solely understood as a clinical phenomenon but is influenced by social factors which lead to disparities and inequalities in its assessment and treatment.

Collinson (2019) introduces the notion of *Lexism*, which he describes as an umbrella term for the attitudes, beliefs, and practices relating to literacy which ‘other’ and discriminate. This is not, Collinson (2022) insists, a definition, and indeed he refuses to define Lexism, arguing that a technical definition

would be inappropriate. By coining the term Lexism and asserting that the scientific paradigm is insufficient to measure or even coherently define dyslexia, Collinson challenges the scientific/medical approach. He explores the term dyslexia as a Lexist theory to explain the existence of people with dyslexia, arguing that people with literacy difficulties are 'othered' and discriminated against by an unsympathetic, unaccommodating society. Collinson cites research by Tanner (2009), in which he notes that Tanner considers it problematic to think about dyslexia in terms of a scientific/medical condition.

Part of the basis of Collinson's argument lies in the fact that many of the difficulties experienced by people with dyslexia are also experienced by people who are not dyslexic but who nevertheless have reading difficulties, and by people without reading difficulties at all (Elliott & Place, 1998). Since its early classification, dyslexia has been regarded as an umbrella term for multifarious difficulties with the process of reading (Wagner, 1973). Elliott (2020) outlines four different prevailing conceptions of dyslexia: as a word-level reading difficulty; as a clinically derived subgroup of poor decoders of text; as a persistent resistance to reading interventions; and as neurodiversity more broadly. Arguments against uniting these phenomena under a more general umbrella term of *reading disability* are, Elliott (2020) asserts, not entirely dissuasive.

In their study of reading and phonological processing skills and intelligence among a sample of first graders, Hurford *et al.* (1994) identified two groups of children, one group at risk for reading difficulties, and a second group at risk of being poor readers. The waters are muddied somewhat by the authors' resistance to use the term *reading disability*, and so the distinction in their methodology between being a poor reader and having reading difficulties is one of semantics. Stanovich (1991) argues that it is very difficult to differentiate discrepancy-defined readers with dyslexia from poor readers and describes research evidence as muddled.

While there is clearly an interplay between dyslexia as a clinical phenomenon and dyslexia as a social construct, ultimately Elliott dismisses dyslexia as a social construct, one which is inconsistently

diagnosed, and which therefore disproportionately excludes large numbers of people who struggle with reading but who fail to meet the unreliable criteria for a dyslexia diagnosis. Such discrepancies undermine the reliability and validity of dyslexia diagnoses, which in turn challenges the scientific rigor of dyslexia research and practice. This variability reflects the challenges of establishing a clear and consistent definition of dyslexia within the scientific community. Such diversity in conceptualization complicates efforts to develop standardized criteria for diagnosis and intervention, which are essential components of a scientific paradigm. What becomes apparent from these studies is that dyslexia is dimensional, with no clear cut-off from poor reading, just as there are no cut-offs for other dimensional disorders such as hypertension or depression. Dyslexia therefore needs to be untethered from the other forms of learning difficulty with which it has been connected.

2.3.3. Comorbidities

Comorbidity refers to any separate and distinct condition that has been present or may arise during the clinical progression of a patient who has the primary condition being studied (Feinstein, 1970). Comorbidity in general affects health outcomes and, although not so in all combinations of conditions, consistent associations have been found (Gijsen *et al.*, 2001). Kaplan *et al.* (2001) found that a co-occurrence of reading disability, DCD (Developmental Coordination Disorder/ Dyspraxia), or ADHD was present in a sample of children who met the criteria for at least one of those conditions. Researchers have frequently revealed the occurrence of other developmental disorders in their research (Kadesjo & Gillberg, 2001; Iversen *et al.*, 2005; Haslum & Miles, 2007; Willcutt *et al.*, 2007). Additionally, dyscalculia has been diagnosed in research subjects with dyslexia at a rate of frequency greater than in the general population (Knopik *et al.*, 1997; Dirks *et al.*, 2008), as has SLI (Specific Language Impairment) (Pennington & Bishop, 2009).

An epidemiological study by Pauc (2005) of 100 children found that patterns of comorbidity between dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, OCD, and Tourette's syndrome occurred very frequently. In fact, Pauc concludes his paper with a recommendation that these conditions be downgraded from disorders to symptoms of some more general umbrella developmental delay disorder. The evidence we have considered up to now would certainly seem to suggest some validity to this recommendation, but it would be rash to agree or disagree with such a sentiment. As Pauc points out, the diagnostic tests are likely very different for dyslexia, ADHD, OCD, dyspraxia, and Tourette's syndrome, and children diagnosed with one condition are unlikely to have been tested for all the others. There is a good deal of research left to do before such conditions can be formally grouped together as being symptomatically similar enough as to suggest a greater umbrella condition of which these might only be an indicator.

Some academics (Caron & Rutter, 1991) have suggested that failing to heed a comorbidity can lead researchers to draw misleading conclusions. The reasons they put forward are as follows. First, that the study of condition A could produce findings that are actually largely a consequence of comorbid condition B. For example, in the case of conclusions drawn by Logan concerning dyslexia and a subject's aptitude for entrepreneurship, this could in fact be an account of the aptitude of people with ADHD. Second, when comorbidity B goes ignored, there is therefore an implied assumption being made that the perceived behaviours associated with condition A would be the same regardless of whether comorbidity B existed or not. Logan's studies are explored in *Section 3.7*.

The solution, however, is not to exclude comorbid cases and, as in the case of the present study, focus on cases of pure dyslexia. There is an issue of overlap between dyslexia and ADHD, where individual non-specific symptoms are shared by disparate diagnoses resulting in a potential overlapping diagnosis. People with either condition may have difficulty paying attention. They will probably have difficulty with reading and their reading is likely to be dysfluent; people with dyslexia will struggle with accuracy with both long and short words, while people with ADHD will tend to skip over punctuation

and lose their place. They will find writing difficult and will struggle with spelling, grammar, and organization. They will likely have handwriting difficulties. Clearly these issues all overlap, as is inevitable when one is presented with a number of non-specific indices of psychopathology, which form part of the criteria for different disorders (Fendrich *et al.*, 1990).

Focusing on cases of pure dyslexia would likely mean investigating very small, atypical samples – assuming that a sample could realistically be found where there was categorically no comorbidity. It would also remove the opportunity to investigate possible reasons for comorbidity. Indeed, because ADHD and dyslexia share some common symptoms, there is an argument that if these could be regarded as existing as separate entities on the same spectrum, the person cannot be classified as having comorbidity (Valderas *et al.*, 2009). Dyslexia and ADHD may indeed be different points on the same spectrum.

Various authors have tested and assessed different methods for measuring comorbidity (Extermann, 2000a; Extermann, 2000b; Guralnik, 1996; Gijzen *et al.*, 2001), but such studies have tended to raise more questions than they answer. In situations where comorbidities are detected, it is unclear which should be designated the index and which should be designated as comorbid, and whether it is possible to ignore overlapping symptoms and focus only on those symptoms specific to a given condition. Studies of ADHD by Milberger *et al.* (1995) and Biederman *et al.* (1995) attempted to remove symptoms which overlapped with the criteria for other conditions (depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder in the case of Milberger *et al.*, and ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder) in the case of Biederman *et al.*). Neither was able to eliminate comorbidity, and both concluded that the conditions they studied were all discrete disorders in spite of shared symptoms, which implies that comorbidity is more than simply an element of overlapping criteria for diagnosis.

There appears to be an undeniable connection between dyslexia and ADHD, and it is likely that certain facets of these two learning disabilities are significantly similar that they will return comparable results regardless of which condition is being studied. Indeed, it is entirely possible that if Logan had surveyed

people about ADHD rather than dyslexia, similar results may have been produced, and a discussion might instead arise about comorbidity with undisclosed dyslexia. Comorbidity in reading disabilities, notably between dyslexia and ADHD, shows the complexity of diagnosing and understanding these conditions. Studies highlight frequent overlaps, such as shared difficulties in attention, reading, and writing, which challenge the clarity of singular diagnoses. While some advocate for recognizing comorbidities to avoid misleading conclusions (Kaplan *et al.*, 2001; Pauc, 2005), others reveal indistinct boundaries between readers with dyslexia and poor readers (Siegel & Hurford, 2019). It is therefore wise to conclude that any research into such closely linked learning disabilities must take account of comorbidity, particularly if that research is going to conclude with generalizations about one disability without reference to the possible impact of the other.

2.3.4. Secondary Symptoms of Dyslexia

There is an established association between poor reading and poor self-concept (McArthur *et al.*, 2020). Children with dyslexia experience significant emotional and social challenges, with reading difficulties consistently leading to increased symptoms of depression (Willcutt & Pennington, 2000; Maughan *et al.*, 2003; Mammarella *et al.*, 2016) and anxiety (Tsovili, 2004; Carroll & Iles, 2006; Martinez & Sermud-Clikeman, 2006; Goldston *et al.*, 2007; Mugnaini *et al.*, 2009;), due in no small part to the sense of powerlessness and ineffectiveness experienced at school (Ihbour *et al.*, 2021). Mammarella *et al.* (2014) propose likely causes of anxiety to include being required to read aloud in class, and the expectation of performing badly in lessons.

Novita (2016) regards the problems of anxiety and depression as secondary symptoms of dyslexia. She also refers to these phenomena as secondary consequences of dyslexia, and accounts for the fact that in societies where so much stock is placed on academic performance, it is inevitable that people who

struggle with reading and writing will be vulnerable to low self-esteem and high anxiety. Novita found the self-esteem and anxiety profiles were similar between children with and without dyslexia except in the school contexts where children with dyslexia reported lower self-esteem and higher anxiety than the children without dyslexia.

Rather than classifying them as secondary symptoms of dyslexia, a better way of framing those issues might be to take the stance that children with dyslexia are at an elevated risk of internalizing problems such as emotional symptoms, and externalizing problems like undesirable behaviour. Boyes *et al.* (2020) found that internalizing problems include low self-esteem, difficulties in emotional regulation, poor social skills, bullying victimization, and difficulties with peer relationships. However, their study relied wholly on parent reports and there was a lack of participants without dyslexia with whom to compare their findings. Indeed, Maughan and Carroll (2006) argue that parents may be unaware of internalizing problems.

Arnold *et al.* (2005) found that self-reported depression, anxiety, somatic complaints, and inattention were higher among children classed as poor readers than for children with typical reading ability, while parents in the same study reported no difference, indicating that parents tend to report internalizing symptoms less frequently than do children themselves. Meer *et al.* (2016), whose study of the relationship between reading disability (RD) and anxiety employed both self-report data and physiological measures, found that adults with a reading disability did not differ from skilled readers in self-reported anxiety, findings which echo those of Nelson and Gregg (2012).

Novita (2016) notes that many of these secondary problems cannot be proven because the impact of different contexts and experimental designs generally produces different results. Comparing the results of studies in this field involves a degree of assumed equivalence across a number of dimensions, and we need to consider how terms like dyslexia and self-concept are being defined. McNulty (2003) conducted a study with participants with a mean age of 33–34 years old and found that if they had struggled at school, as grown-ups they all suffered with self-esteem problems. Yet, in

a study of children with a mean age of 12.2 years, Cosden *et al.* (1999) found no correlation between self-esteem and scholastic competence. Other studies found no difference in terms of self-esteem between children with and without dyslexia, whether participants had a mean age of 17.2 years (Lamm and Epstein, 1992) or 10.5 years (Miller *et al.*, 2005).

The association between poor reading and poor self-concept highlights significant emotional and social challenges faced by children with dyslexia. These challenges include increased symptoms of depression and anxiety, largely stemming from feelings of powerlessness in academic settings. Novita (2016) suggests that the societal emphasis on academic performance exacerbates these issues, leading to lower self-esteem and higher anxiety among children with dyslexia in school contexts. While some studies indicate that dyslexia increases the risk of internalizing problems, the variability in research methodologies and definitions complicates the comparison of findings. Despite these challenges, understanding the secondary symptoms of dyslexia is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems.

2.3.5. Coping Mechanisms

Coping is not a fixed trait or a singular skill – rather, it is a socially, relationally, and culturally embedded process (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016). Coping strategies emerge, shift, and are constrained or supported by individual, relational, and systemic factors – particularly in the context of learning differences and disability. Rather than viewing coping as a static set of responses, we regard it as a repertoire of adaptive processes that individuals draw upon to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behaviours in response to stress (Raine, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Skinner, 2023). Often viewed as an indicator of competence, coping is best regarded as a set of adaptive processes or mechanisms. Coping

mechanisms are the fundamental adaptive processes that enable people to manage stressful situations and navigate challenges in their environment (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016).

These mechanisms encompass an array of strategies, both behavioural and cognitive, that individuals use to mitigate the adverse effects of stressors. To understand how individuals manage stress and adversity, we must first explore the foundational theories that have shaped the study of coping.

2.3.5.1. Transactional Models of Coping

Transactional models of coping, which still dominate the field, define coping as ‘constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person’ (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). These models emphasize the importance of the demands a person faces and the individual's appraisal of those demands. Coping unfolds in cycles, iterations, or episodes over time (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). This is at odds with any conceptualization of coping as something that can be universally categorized. The study of individual differences divides ways of coping into adaptive and maladaptive. While this helpfully distinguishes adaptive ways of coping, such as problem-solving and negotiation, from maladaptive approaches, such as escape and avoidance, approaches such as seeking help or support do not appear to fit easily into either category.

2.3.5.2. Developmental Approach to Coping

While transactional models have provided a foundational understanding of how individuals respond to stress, they often overlook how these responses evolve over time. To address this limitation, developmental approaches offer a more dynamic lens, emphasizing how coping strategies emerge and transform across the lifespan.

Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2016) argue that being able to illustrate the reciprocal relationship between coping and development requires ‘developmentally friendly’ conceptualizations, and account for how coping is shaped by developmental changes and, in turn, how coping influences development. They argue for a shift from static, adult-centric models to dynamic, integrative frameworks that can capture the evolving nature of coping across different stages of life. Compas (1999) introduced the dual-process model of regulation, distinguishing between stress reactivity and regulatory capacities, and emphasizing the balance between immediate emotional responses and the ability to modulate these impulses under taxing circumstances.

While foundational theories offer valuable insights into the mechanisms of coping, they can overlook how these mechanisms evolve over time. A developmental perspective allows us to trace the emergence and transformation of coping strategies across the lifespan, revealing how individuals broaden their repertoire of coping mechanisms as they mature.

2.3.5.3. The Development of Coping Mechanisms Across Life Stages

Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2007) chart the development of coping mechanisms across life stages, a framework that provides a comprehensive perspective on how coping mechanisms evolve from infancy through to adolescence. They emphasize the progression of coping strategies as children grow, starting with basic physiological responses in infancy, such as reflexive reactions to stress, and moving on through stages where children develop more sophisticated strategies. Around 18–24 months of age, infants start to control their own behaviour voluntarily, which is a vital phase in the development of coping strategies (Bronson, 2000; Kopp, 1989). For toddlers, coping strategies are primarily influenced by their interactions with caregivers, who help them to understand their emotions and teach them appropriate ways to express and manage these emotions (*ibid*, pp. 136–138).

Early childhood, approximately ages 5–7 years, is characterized by changes in memory, cognition, social relations, emotion, and self-understanding (Sameroff & Haith, 1996), which collectively provide the foundation to understand the causes and consequences of emotions. Children are better equipped to cope autonomously and better able to use mental as well as physical forms of coping, with caregivers providing less direct intervention. Children begin to understand the causes and consequences of emotions, which enhances their ability to regulate their responses to stress. Children begin to use strategies like distraction and cognitive restructuring to manage stress. The role of social partners evolves, with caregivers providing less direct intervention and more guidance, allowing children to develop a sense of autonomy (*ibid*, pp. 143–160).

Coping strategies further develop during middle childhood, which typically spans 6–12 years of age. During this period, children develop problem-solving, negotiation, and accommodation strategies (Compas *et al.*, 2001). This stage is characterized by the integration of cognitive reappraisal, and the influence of peers and teachers becomes stronger. The development of executive functions, such as

working memory and cognitive flexibility, supports more sophisticated coping mechanisms (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016).

The final stage, adolescence, perhaps heralds the greatest changes of all. During the ages of 10–12, preteens experience physiological changes, new vulnerabilities, and a shifting world view (Feldman & Elliott, 1990). In the middle of adolescence, around the ages of 14–16, we see increasing autonomy and the development of individual identity (Zimmer-Gembeck *et al.*, 2011). As adolescence transitions to adulthood, around the ages of 18–22, we see a wealth of new challenges like leaving home, pursuing education or career paths, and the formation of intimate relationships (Zimmer-Gembeck & Gallaty, 2006). Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2016) note that many of the progressive differences in the organization of coping strategies and capabilities are based on normative improvements commensurate with maturation at these different life stages.

2.3.5.4. Developmental Framework

The developmental trajectory of coping reveals a pattern of increasing complexity, autonomy, and contextual sensitivity. Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2007) introduce a detailed developmental framework that maps out how coping strategies evolve from infancy through adolescence. The authors highlight key transitional periods, such as infancy to toddlerhood, ages 5–7, late childhood to early adolescence, and adolescence. They conceptualize coping as ‘regulation under stress’, linking coping to the development of emotional, attentional, and behavioural self-regulation. By framing coping like this, Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2007) offer a more integrated approach that encompasses various aspects of self-regulation. This conceptualization is further refined through the introduction of dual-process models that distinguish between stress reactions (immediate, automatic

responses) and coping (volitional, intentional regulation efforts). These models help show the interplay between reactive and regulatory processes in coping.

The 2007 study also elaborates on the hierarchical systems of action types proposed in the 2003 study. It reaffirms the identification of approximately a dozen core families of coping, such as problem-solving, support-seeking, escape, distraction, cognitive restructuring, rumination, helplessness, social withdrawal, emotional regulation, information-seeking, negotiation, opposition, and delegation. Importantly, the authors introduce the concept of developmentally graded members within each coping family, demonstrating how different ways of coping serve the same functions but manifest differently at various developmental stages. This approach allows for a more dynamic understanding of coping, recognizing that strategies evolve and adapt as children grow.

Another significant contribution of the 2007 study is the exploration of contributors to coping development. The authors examine the role of temperament, socialization, and normative developmental changes in shaping coping strategies. They emphasize the importance of social partners, particularly parents, in the development of coping, discussing how these influences change as children develop new capacities. This focus on the socialization of coping provides valuable insights into the mechanisms through which social relationships and contexts impact coping development.

Finally, the 2007 study outlines future research directions, emphasizing the need for longitudinal studies to trace developmental pathways of coping, investigate the effects of coping on development, and develop interventions to promote adaptive coping. The authors call for research that explores differential pathways of development and the power of coping episodes to shape short- and long-term developments. By providing a comprehensive framework for understanding coping as part of a complex adaptive system, the 2007 study offers a more holistic and integrated approach to studying how children and adolescents deal with stress and adversity.

But, while these developmental models offer a robust account of how coping evolves, we must also integrate developmental theory with disability research to better understand how coping capacities are shaped and reshaped in the context of lifelong challenges.

2.3.5.5. Conceptualization and Classification of Coping Strategies

Understanding how coping develops across life stages raises important questions about how these strategies are best conceptualized and categorized. To make sense of the diversity of coping behaviours, researchers propose various classification systems that attempt to organize coping strategies according to their functions and forms.

The conceptualization and classification of coping strategies have been the subject of considerable debate. Skinner *et al.* (2003) argue that the field has been fragmented by inconsistent terminologies and taxonomies, with many coping systems lacking theoretical coherence or psychological utility. Prevailing efforts in the pursuit of a structure of coping have taken two main approaches. Inductive (bottom-up) approaches emphasize the granular aspects of coping, such as specific behaviours, thoughts, and emotions, and how they are employed in different situations. These are effective in extracting a finite set of lower order coping categories – essential in constructing a taxonomy (Skinner *et al.*, 2003). However, these approaches generally fail to converge on a common set of categories, leading to difficulties in comparing results across studies (Ayers *et al.*, 1996; Schwarzer & Schwarzer, 1996).

Deductive (top-down) approaches take broad, overarching frameworks and apply them to specific instances. Examples include primary versus secondary control coping (Rothbaum *et al.*, 1982). Primary control refers to efforts to change an environment or circumstances to fit one's goals, desires, or

needs, such as persisting in studying in order to pass an exam; secondary control refers to adjusting one's goals or preferences in response to constraints in the environment, such as changing one's career aspirations in the face of failure. These are also known as assimilation and accommodation respectively (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990). Within these two fields we find problem solving and instrumental action forming primary control coping measures, and acceptance and cognitive restructuring within secondary control coping measures (Connor-Smith *et al.*, 2000). However, Skinner *et al.* (2003) argue that although top-down approaches are useful for identifying higher order categories, these approaches struggle with conceptual clarity and mutual exclusivity.

In response, Skinner *et al.* (2003) advocate for a functionally based structure, proposing twelve 'families' of coping strategies. These families, which include mechanisms such as problem-solving, emotion regulation, support seeking, and avoidance, are grouped by their adaptive functions – such as coordinating action under stress, regulating emotion and motivation, and managing self and relationships. By organizing coping strategies into these families, the framework helps to clarify how different coping responses can be functionally related, even if they appear distinct on the surface. This categorization also facilitates the study of coping across different developmental stages (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). This model moves beyond categorizations by bringing the motivational and functional underpinnings of coping behaviours to the forefront and offering a theoretically grounded alternative to previous descriptive lists.

2.3.5.6. Hierarchical Systems of Action Types

Building on the functional families model, which organizes coping strategies according to their adaptive purposes, Skinner *et al.* (2003) propose hierarchical systems of action types to organize coping strategies based on their functions and adaptive processes. They recommend moving away

from traditional distinctions like problem-focused vs. emotion-focused coping, and instead suggest organizing coping strategies into three main classes of concerns: competence (control), relatedness (attachment), and autonomy (self-determination). Each class includes four families of coping: for competence, these are problem solving, information seeking, helplessness, and escape; for relatedness, they are support seeking, self-reliance, delegation, and social withdrawal; and for autonomy, they are accommodation, negotiation, opposition, and submission. These families are designed to be functionally homogeneous and distinct, ensuring that each category serves a unique adaptive function in helping individuals manage stress. This approach aims to provide a more comprehensive and functional framework for understanding coping mechanisms.

While structural models offer valuable taxonomies of coping strategies by offering a framework for categorizing coping strategies by their functional roles and psychological concerns, they gain further explanatory power when integrated with developmental insights. Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2015) bridge these perspectives by situating coping within a maturational framework that accounts for both functional organization and developmental change.

This structural perspective is complemented by a developmental approach in Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2015), who conceptualize coping as a dynamic, maturational process embedded in the interaction of neurobiological growth, cognitive development, and socialization. They delineate a trajectory of coping development that begins with basic neurophysiological regulation in infancy and progresses through sensorimotor actions, representational coping in early childhood, and rule-based and reflective coping in later years. Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck challenge simplistic dichotomies of adaptive versus maladaptive coping, emphasizing instead the contextual fit between coping strategy and stressor. Coping is not a static set of behaviours, but an evolving, functionally organized system of regulation that is deeply embedded in both the individual's developmental trajectory and their social-ecological context.

Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2016) conceptualize coping as action regulation under stress, a model grounded in lifespan development. They emphasize the hierarchical organization of coping strategies into twelve functionally distinct families that evolve through age-graded shifts, shaped by neurobiological maturation, cognitive development, and socialization. Rather than treating coping as a fixed set of strategies, they view it as a dynamic, adaptive system that reorganizes in response to developmental transitions and environmental demands. Social relationships, particularly with caregivers and peers, are seen not as external buffers but as integral contexts that scaffold the development of coping capacities.

For people with disabilities, integrating distinct but complementary theoretical frameworks enables us to understand coping as both a developmental process and a response to disability-related stress. McColl and Skinner (1995) approach coping and social support as parallel psychological resources that mediate the relationship between stress and adjustment in adults with disabilities. They identify three core orientations of coping: problem-orientated, emotion-orientated, and perception-orientated. These mirror three types of social support: instrumental, emotional, and informational. This parallel structure reflects a functional analogy: coping is conceptualized as self-directed regulation of stress, while social support represents externally provided regulation. They emphasize the importance of measuring these constructs with population-specific tools and demonstrate that both coping and support significantly influence psychosocial outcomes in rehabilitation contexts.

McColl and Skinner (1995) offer a practical taxonomy for use in adult rehabilitation, one that is well-suited to understanding how adults with disabilities manage stress. However, it lacks a developmental lens and does not account for how coping capacities emerge or change over time. In contrast, Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2016) provide a rich, theoretically grounded account of how coping develops from infancy through adulthood, but their model is less directly applicable to adult disability contexts without adaptation.

Despite these differences, the two models are not incompatible. McColl and Skinner's emphasis on the functional structure of coping and support can be enriched by Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck's developmental insights. The coping repertoires observed in adults with disabilities may reflect earlier developmental trajectories shaped by temperament, attachment, and socialization. Conversely, the developmental model could benefit from greater attention to how coping is reorganized in response to life-altering events such as the onset of disability. Integrating these perspectives allows for a more comprehensive understanding of coping as both a product of lifelong development and a critical resource in the face of disability-related stress.

This synthesis also has practical implications. Interventions aimed at enhancing coping in adults with disabilities could draw on developmental principles to rebuild or expand coping repertoires, particularly in cases where early adversity or disrupted development has limited the range of available strategies. At the same time, rehabilitation programs could benefit from recognizing the developmental origins of coping and tailoring support to align with individuals' capacities and histories. By bridging developmental theory and disability research, a more holistic and responsive approach to coping can be achieved – one that acknowledges both the continuity of development and the transformative impact of disability.

2.3.6. Coping and Disability

Children and young people with learning differences face a number of academic, emotional, and social challenges. However, the presence of a learning difference alone does not predetermine negative developmental outcomes. What determines life outcomes is the individual's capacity to cope adaptively with the challenges posed by the learning disability (Firth *et al.*, 2013). Coping is conceptualized as the cognitive and behavioural effort to manage internal and external stressors

(Frydenberg *et al.*, 2012). In the context of learning differences, these demands often include academic stresses and emotional challenges.

Firth *et al.* (2008; 2013) recognize coping as a gateway to intervention, and without support people can develop maladaptive coping patterns such as social withdrawal, aggression, or internalizing symptoms like anxiety and depression (Firth *et al.*, 2008). These responses not only hinder academic performance but also compromise social relationships and emotional development. The persistence of such patterns can lead to a cycle of failure and disengagement, reinforcing the very difficulties that coping strategies are meant to mitigate. Such patterns often emerge when students perceive a lack of control over their academic outcomes or experience repeated failure despite effort. Conversely, students who develop effective coping strategies are more likely to maintain engagement, self-esteem, and academic motivation, even in the face of difficulties.

Students with intellectual disabilities are significantly more likely to exhibit challenging behaviours, ranging from aggression to self-injury, often as a result of communication difficulties, comorbid mental health conditions, and environmental stressors (Biliás-Lolis & Martin, 2020). As we have seen, coping strategies can evolve developmentally and become more adaptive over time, but Biliás-Lolis and Martin (*ibid*) warn that such progression is not guaranteed if there are unaddressed behavioural needs and systemic barriers. Challenging behaviours often serve communication or regulatory functions when students lack the cognitive or linguistic tools to express frustration or to seek help.

Rather than necessarily reflecting underdeveloped skills, maladaptive coping strategies may be the most accessible or effective options available to a student in a given context. Systemic support is essential to prevent students being locked in cycles of reactive behaviour that are misinterpreted as defiance rather than distress. Biliás-Lolis & Martin (2020) call for compassionate, trauma-informed, inclusive educational practices, supporting the notion of the social embeddedness of coping implied by Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2007; 2016) and Marchand and Skinner (2007). The development of coping is not only a psychological process but also a pedagogical and institutional responsibility.

2.3.6.1. Attribution, Help-Seeking, and Self-Advocacy

Attribution theory offers further insight into the coping processes of students with learning differences. Tabassam and Grainger (2002) and Bender (2008) found that many such students exhibit an external attribution style, attributing success or failure to factors beyond their control, such as luck or task difficulty. This externalization of control is associated with learned helplessness, diminished motivation, and a reluctance to engage with challenges. In contrast, students who attribute outcomes to internal, controllable factors like effort are more likely to engage in adaptive coping and persist through challenges.

Seeking help is a coping strategy which was once viewed as maladaptive because it represented a dependency on other people (Marchand and Skinner, 2007). Yet Marchand and Skinner (2007) found that students who were more likely to seek help when facing academic challenges were those who perceived themselves as competent, autonomous, and connected to their teachers; conversely, those with diminished self-perceptions were more prone to conceal their difficulties, a strategy that predicts declines in both behavioural and emotional engagement. Furthermore, and significantly, students who sought help elicited increased teacher support, while those who concealed their struggles experienced a withdrawal of support. Likewise, Skinner *et al.* (2013) emphasize that seeking assistance from teachers, peers, or support staff enables students to re-engage with learning tasks and fosters a sense of agency. This strategy not only addresses immediate academic challenges but also contributes to the development of self-advocacy skills, which are critical for long-term success.

These findings mirror the developmental trajectory outlined by Givon and Court (2010), who illustrated the developmental nature of coping among students with learning differences. They identified a progression through four distinct coping stages: avoidance, rebellion, reconciliation, and determination. Students initially distanced themselves from their difficulties, often denying the impact

of their learning differences. As academic pressures mounted, some responded with frustration and defiance, externalizing blame onto teachers or the educational system itself.

Over time, many began to reconcile with their challenges, acknowledging their limitations and seeking constructive ways to manage them. A subset of students reached a final stage of determination, marked by resilience, self-advocacy, and proactive engagement with learning. Reflecting a shift from maladaptive to adaptive coping, this trajectory shows the importance of early diagnosis and sustained support. Givon and Court (2010) surmise that coping evolves in response to both internal growth and external scaffolding, echoing the multidimensional models of coping by Skinner *et al.* (2003) and the motivational resilience described by Skinner *et al.* (2013).

Yet findings by Vaccaro *et al.* (2024) counter the notion of a linear progression from maladaptive to adaptive coping, finding that students with learning differences rely on strategies such as concealment or emotional withdrawal well into adulthood, not due to immaturity or lack of development, but as a rational response to hostile or invalidating environments. Students in their sample avoided requesting accommodations or disclosing their disabilities to avoid stigma, even when such avoidance jeopardized their academic success. This suggests that coping strategies cannot be evaluated in isolation from the social context in which they are used, and what might appear maladaptive in theory may in reality be protective in some situations.

The effectiveness and adaptiveness of coping strategies must therefore be understood in relation to systemic barriers and the emotional demands of navigating stigma. In the context of learning differences, coping is not only a psychological process but also a pedagogical and institutional responsibility. The coping strategies used by students are shaped by their experiences of support, stigma, and success. Adaptive coping is fostered not just by internal resilience, but by environments that validate difference, encourage help-seeking, and provide meaningful scaffolding. Conversely, environments that pathologize or ignore learning differences can incite maladaptive patterns.

2.3.6.2. Compensation Strategies: Functional and Psychological Adaptations

While coping encompasses the broad range of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural strategies that individuals may employ to manage stress, compensation strategies represent a more targeted and often skill-based extension of coping. Compensation focuses on proactively adapting to persistent cognitive challenges. Compensation builds on the foundation of coping by moving from reactive regulation to proactive adaptation. The theory of compensation stems from the idea that the cognitive deficits associated with dyslexia remain present beyond childhood but can be compensated for. These unique compensatory strategies have been found to include obtaining hard copies of lecture slides to avoid having to shift their gaze back and forth, and making audio recordings of lectures (Pino & Mortari, 2014). Other strategies highlighted by Pino and Mortari (*ibid*) include enlisting someone to type their notes for them or borrowing lecture notes from other students. Time management strategies also proved common, such as creating essay plan diagrams or scheduling study periods for when they individually felt at their most productive.

In addition to uncovering similar strategies in their study, MacCullagh *et al.* (2017) found that many students sought online videos to supplement their course material or to replace prescribed course reading. These compensatory strategies reveal a depth of self-awareness and understanding of their individual experience of dyslexia (Pollack, 2004). The term 'compensated dyslexics' refers to those who achieve higher than expected literacy in spite of phonological deficits (Law *et al.*, 2015). Research suggests that while there may be a gradual decrease in the underlying deficits related to dyslexia, cognitive strengths contribute more significantly to compensated dyslexia (van Vierssen *et al.*, 2019).

There are two forms of compensation, at a functional level and at a psychological level. Functional compensation involves leveraging areas of strength to counteract cognitive limitations (Palombo, 2001), while psychological compensation focuses instead on coping with the distress and low self-

esteem associated with learning difficulties. Palombo's (1994; 2001) view is that people with learning difficulties create self-narratives, sets of beliefs they construct in order to make sense of their emotions and experiences (Cozolio, 2006). This is not necessarily a conscious endeavour, rather it occurs as people face failures and humiliations (Palombo, 2017). Nor does it occur in a vacuum, instead they draw structure and meaning from the contexts in which they evolve, such as school or work. For people with dyslexia, low self-esteem pervades their self-narratives (McNulty, 2003).

McNulty (2003) identifies four types of compensation: tentative compensation, alternative compensation, gifted overcompensation, and compensation. Of these, compensation aligns with conventional wisdom concerning the concept, and those people McNulty considers to have undergone a process of compensation are ones who achieve gradual success adapting to difficulty and achieve academic credentials that properly reflect their intelligence. In contrast, alternative compensation refers to those people who find a niche for themselves in an area which is unaffected by their learning disability, something McNulty differentiates from gifted overcompensation where people find a niche in an area of giftedness whilst overcompensating for past experiences of failure. The final type, tentative compensation, refers to people who continue in their personal lives or employment to experience difficulties similar to those they experienced at school.

McNulty (2003) also reports that the participants in his study reported an extra dimension of overarching self-consciousness and low self-esteem not accounted for elsewhere in his findings, which they experience because of a lifetime of struggles as a result of their dyslexia. These feelings, he notes, are often inconsistent with how competent and successful these people may appear in adulthood. The concept of compensation in dyslexia reveals a multifaceted approach to managing cognitive challenges throughout life. From functional strategies that capitalize on cognitive strengths to psychological adaptations aimed at mitigating emotional distress and low self-esteem, individuals with dyslexia demonstrate remarkable resilience and resourcefulness. The strategies identified, such as using assistive technologies, time management techniques, and leveraging personal strengths, offer a

proactive approach to navigating academic and professional environments. Despite the persistent cognitive deficits associated with dyslexia, the notion of compensation highlights not only the adaptive capabilities of individuals but also their capacity to redefine success on their own terms.

2.3.7. Dyslexia and Higher Education

When Mammarella *et al.* (2014) found that children ages 8–11 years with a diagnosed reading disability experienced more social anxiety than a comparable group of developmentally typical children the same age, the emphasis being on social anxiety rather than generalized anxiety may be because children fear social evaluation to an increasing degree as they get older (Westenberg *et al.*, 2004; Lawrence *et al.*, 2015), accounting for the failure to find an association between reading difficulties and social anxiety in much younger children (Grills-Taquechel *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, adults with dyslexia experience higher levels of anxiety than those without dyslexia (Carroll & Iles, 2006; Plakopiti & Bellou, 2014), and Klassen *et al.* (2011) found that learning disabilities continue to impact on the psychological and emotional wellbeing of adults irrespective of whether they pursue post-secondary education.

When we consider the experiences of students with dyslexia as they continue into tertiary education, research concerning higher education students with dyslexia paints an uncertain picture of just how far their experiences during their school days continue. Some studies suggest that students in higher education experience a decline in the discomfort they felt during their formative school years, due in part to persistence and to their struggles (Stampoltzis & Polychronopoulou, 2009; Meer *et al.*, 2016). Conversely, students in higher education with dyslexia have been found to fear stigmatization and experience feelings of inadequacy and of not being understood, alongside problems with short term memory (Clouder *et al.*, 2020). They fear separation from the rest of their class, no doubt an echo

from their school days. Indeed, such findings suggest there is little doubt that formative negative experiences intrude on later life and cause insecurities.

This theory is further evidenced by Soares (2023), who found evidence of distinct anxiety linked to reading which negatively impacted academic achievement among university students, consistent with findings by Gibby-Leversuch *et al.* (2019). Even where their reading difficulty was unrelated to their academic achievement, students who had struggled with reading in childhood remained anxious about the impact it would have on them academically. Reading, of course, is a fundamental skill in higher education (Halldórsdóttir, 2015) where poor readers are exponentially more likely either to fail courses or withdraw from them altogether (Bergey *et al.*, 2017), and anxiety about reading may exacerbate these difficulties (Piccolo *et al.*, 2017).

The disparity in these findings could be explained through findings elsewhere which show that students with dyslexia employ creative strategies to overcome their difficulties, with an emphasis on developing strengths rather than correcting weaknesses (Richardson, 2021). In support of this theory, Klassen *et al.* (2011) found that adults with learning disabilities show significantly higher levels of internalizing problems compared to those without learning disabilities. He hypothesizes that these problems will either lessen over time due to the decline in academic stress and greater freedom, or they will continue into adulthood due to continued academic demands and persistent emotional issues stemming from childhood and adolescence. The latter appears more likely, with cognitive deficits having the potential even to affect a person's performance in employment (McDermott *et al.*, 2009).

In a meta-analysis of studies, Maag and Reid (2006) report that while students with learning disabilities have been shown to have significantly higher depression scores than students without learning disabilities, this difference does not equate to students with learning disabilities experiencing more *clinical* (emphasis in original) depression than their peers. However, this is a bold conclusion as most of the studies in their analysis rely on inventory scores rather than clinical evaluations to confirm

depression diagnoses. Furthermore, the studies included in their meta-analysis include students in the US equivalent of both primary and secondary schools, and some studies do not account for the ages of the children involved at all. As such, these findings are difficult to generalize, particularly in light of research which accounts for a change in levels of anxiety and depressions as children progress through school. Casey *et al.* (1992) found that positive wellbeing was inversely correlated to chronological age among children with reading disabilities, such that measures of anxiety decline as those children get older.

The relationship between dyslexia and anxiety therefore is complex and persists across the lifespan, affecting both children and adults. Studies indicate that children with dyslexia often experience higher levels of social anxiety, which may stem from fears of social evaluation that intensify with age. This anxiety can persist into adulthood, where it continues to impact psychological wellbeing and academic performance. Despite the potential for a decline in discomfort and anxiety as students transition to higher education, many still fear stigma and feel inadequate, suggesting that negative experiences from earlier school years leave lasting impressions.

2.3.8. Dyslexia and Creativity

In recent years there has been a growing emphasis on trying to understand the connection between dyslexia and talent (Sherman, 2002). It is what Shaywitz (2008, p. 117) describes as the 'paradox of dyslexia', where profound and persistent difficulties in learning to read are experienced by very bright people. Indeed, there is a view that 'difficulty in learning to read is not a wholly tragic life sentence but is often accompanied by great talents' (Rice & Brooks, 2004, p. 54). The strengths associated with dyslexia are not allied with the characteristics of dyslexia itself (Fung, 2024), and so the risk with

focusing on reading difficulties is that problems with reading may obscure ability – or indeed talent – in other fields (Fink, 2002).

There is a well-established theoretical propensity for people with dyslexia naturally to exhibit creative thinking and intuitive strategies (Cancer, 2016). Eide and Eide (2011) found that dyslexia predisposed people to several important mental functions: three-dimensional spatial reasoning and mechanical ability; the ability to perceive relationships such as metaphors, implications, gaps, and imbalances; the ability to remember personal experiences and to understand abstract information; and the ability to perceive and take advantage of subtle patterns in complex and constantly shifting systems.

Age appears to play a role in the findings in studies seeking to correlate dyslexia with heightened measures of creativity. In a study by Kapoula *et al.* (2016), children were selected from three schools, and the resulting scores for creativity were found to be higher among the children and teenagers with dyslexia and/or other similar learning differences than in the non-dyslexic cohorts. Similarly, Tafti *et al.* (2009) found that children aged 7–11 years performed better in creativity tasks, and Cancer *et al.* (2016) found that children with dyslexia aged 10–15 years were much more inclined to think creatively than a developmentally normal control group.

Conversely, in a fourth study conducted by Everatt *et al.* (1999), dyslexic and non-dyslexic participants were drawn from primary and secondary schools, and no significant difference between the two cohorts was found. Everatt *et al.* (1999) conclude that adults with dyslexia have higher creative scores than controls, while the difference between teenagers with dyslexia and controls is negligible. These findings echo Alves and Nakano (2014), whose study of children aged 9–11 found no correlation between dyslexia and creative characteristics. Kapoula *et al.* (2016) reason that this could be because compensatory mechanisms have not yet developed, which lends weight to the argument by Everatt *et al.* (1999) that improved creative abilities are the result of the innovative thought processes used to develop the compensatory strategies necessary to overcome the difficulties associated with dyslexia as a person grows into adulthood.

In three studies conducted by Everatt *et al.* (1999), samples were drawn from colleges and local dyslexia associations, adult students, and adults in tertiary education. In all three studies, participants with dyslexia outperformed non-dyslexic participants in tasks measuring creativity and innovation, and they showed better performance in problem solving tasks. In a study of higher education students by Kapoula *et al.* (2016), participants were drawn from universities devoted to decorative art, industrial creation and design, and engineering. These are all subjects where one might reasonably expect to find a higher-than-average level of creativity among respondents. Creativity in students with dyslexia was found to be higher than in non-dyslexic students. This correlates with the higher-than-average occurrence of dyslexia among art students over other disciplines (Padgett & Steffert, 1999; Wolff & Lundeberg, 2002). Wolff and Lundeberg (2002) acknowledge that the correlation between dyslexia and the pursuit of art studies should not be taken to imply causation, but nevertheless interpret that pursuit as recognition of 'extraordinary talents' rather than an effort to avoid more literacy-heavy courses.

Offering a contrary view of dyslexia and creative talent, Erbeli *et al.* (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of the effects of mean and variance differences in creativity between groups of people with and without dyslexia. Three of the four hypotheses tested by Erbeli *et al.* relate to specific neurobiological mechanisms that fall wide of the parameters of the focus of this literature review. However, their exploration of enhanced creativity linked to compensatory coping strategies is pertinent to my own research. They find that creativity fluctuates across the population and is not characteristic of the dyslexic community as a whole. However, they do find a significant trend towards non-verbal/figural creativity among people with dyslexia compared to control groups.

Erbeli *et al.* (2021) cite studies by Alves and Nakano (2014) and Łockiewicz *et al.* (2014) to show there is no evidence of a creative advantage among people with dyslexia over non-dyslexic peers. However, this is not as clear-cut as they suggest. Erbeli *et al.* are accurate in stating that the study found no evidence to support a hypothesis of creative or visuospatial superiority among adults with dyslexia.

However, participants in the Łockiewicz *et al.* study overwhelmingly were university students and graduates (83% of their sample). Students with dyslexia account for just 4% of the higher education population in the UK (Packer, 2020) and those individuals with dyslexia who go to university may have developed self-belief, determination, and confidence to levels far beyond the general dyslexic population. Erbeli *et al.* (2021) note that conclusions about the general dyslexic population cannot be drawn from studies where university students are regarded as a population of adults with dyslexia, and particularly not if their specific fields of study are not stipulated (Everatt *et al.*, 1999; Łockiewicz *et al.*, 2014; Kapoula *et al.*, 2016).

Mourgues *et al.* (2014, p. 2) drew their sample from higher education students in Chile and acknowledge that admission to these universities is a 'highly selective process' and that those who attend are 'higher-achieving'. In a study of university students conducted by Cavalli *et al.* (2016), the control group outperformed the students with dyslexia. The younger cohort in the Kapoula and Vernet (2016, p. 33) study came from schools which were selected because they offered 'special programs for dyslexic children and teenagers'. In the Cavalli *et al.* (2016) study, 90% of the participants with dyslexia had received remedial training at school for an average of 5.4 years. One must question how far the performance of these children can be ascribed to the general dyslexic population, many of whom will not have the same access to such support. These studies also raise the question of whether the participants with dyslexia had already developed coping mechanisms in order to get to where they are.

What these numerous studies may suggest is that strong creative abilities are the result of the innovative thought processes used to develop the compensatory strategies necessary to overcome the difficulties associated with dyslexia: difficulties, for example, like those which might prevent one from reaching higher education. While we should therefore consider the evidence of enhanced creativity among children with dyslexia to be compelling but inconclusive, evidence to the contrary is far from entirely dissuasive. Much of the research suggests that children and young adolescents with

dyslexia think more creatively than their developmentally normal peers, but this phenomenon is less evident as they enter adulthood. Many of these findings support the concept of compensatory mechanisms put forward by Everatt *et al.* (1999) and Kapoula and Ve Kapoula *et al.* (2016). One such mechanism might be the propensity for innovation people with dyslexia develop in response to the challenges posed by a world which ‘emphasizes literacy skills’ (Everatt *et al.*, 1999, *ibid*, p. 43). This is something I address in *Section 3.2*.

Clearly, the connection between dyslexia and talent, particularly creative talent, is both complex and multifaceted. Shaywitz’s (2008) ‘paradox of dyslexia’ emphasizes that individuals who struggle with reading can simultaneously possess significant abilities in other areas, a duality supported by various studies indicating enhanced creative and intuitive thinking among those with dyslexia (Eide & Eide, 2011; Cancer, 2016). Research by Kapoula *et al.* (2016) and Tafti *et al.* (2009) suggests that children with dyslexia often outperform their non-dyslexic peers in creative tasks, indicating a natural propensity for innovative thought processes. However, the evidence is not conclusive. Everatt *et al.* (1999) found no significant creative advantage among younger individuals with dyslexia, and Erbeli *et al.* (2021) argue that while dyslexia may not universally enhance creativity, there is a trend towards non-verbal and figural creativity among people with dyslexia. It appears that the development of those creative abilities is influenced by the need to navigate and compensate for reading difficulties, and the extent to which these abilities are inherent, or a coping mechanism, remains unclear. Thus, while the evidence of enhanced creativity among children with dyslexia is compelling, it is not definitive.

2.3.9. Dyslexia, Diagnosis and Labelling

Elliott (2005) argues that children with a diagnosis of dyslexia receive adjustments such as extra time in exams and access to assistive software, all of which adds up to an unfair advantage over poor

readers without a diagnosis, thereby stigmatising not those individuals with a learning disability, but those without. While his proposal at first seems altruistic and egalitarian, being dyslexic is a social identity not merely an educational label, and by denying children with dyslexia the right to a diagnosis, Elliott is advocating the stripping away of that identity.

There are numerous studies which show that the lack of a diagnosis of dyslexia leads to feelings of failure (Madriaga, 2007; Gibson & Kendall, 2010; Glazzard, 2010), attributable to a lack of understanding of the reasons for a person's struggles. Yet, Frederickson and Jacobs (2001) failed to find the same negative impact in children with literacy difficulties but without any form of diagnosis. By extension, research also suggests that children feel that having a label provides a way to explain their challenges to their peers, and the term 'dyslexia' offers a reason for their difficulties. Consequently, children with a diagnosis of dyslexia no longer perceive themselves as unintelligent (Glazzard, 2010). One respondent in the Glazzard study is quoted as saying:

Now I'm dyslexic I know why I'm behind. In primary I didn't know why I was behind, but now that I do, it's a bit easier. Before the diagnosis my teachers had made me feel bad about myself. I felt stupid. From the day I got the diagnosis I felt better about myself.

(Glazzard, 2010, p. 67)

Glazzard (2010) interviewed 9 students aged 14–15 years who had received a formal diagnosis of dyslexia and had been placed in a mainstream school. Glazzard describes the receipt of a diagnosis as a turning point for his respondents and argues for an early diagnosis because of the damage that can be done to a child's self-esteem, confidence, and self-concept when they are left to struggle in school with no understanding of why. Yet there are those who argue against his findings. Knight (2021)

presents findings which are a counterpoint to the conclusions drawn by Glazzard. She argues that the label of dyslexia not only negatively affects how children rate themselves in relation to their literacy abilities, but that the same is true of their ability in mathematics, even though mathematics skills are not generally directly associated with dyslexia.

Knight drew her data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a longitudinal research project conducted in the UK to follow the lives of a cohort of children born between September 2000 and January 2001. Data collection has been conducted in waves since the project's commencement, gathering data about the participants when they were aged approximately 9 months, and then 3, 5, 7, 11, and 14 years. In terms of assessing the impact of a dyslexia diagnosis, Knight compared quantitative data relating to academic self-concept (how well children ranked their abilities in different subjects) and academic aspirations (how likely children felt they were to pursue university). In each wave of data, either a child's parents or teachers were asked if a given child had dyslexia, but Knight notes that it was not always the same person answering that question in each wave, and therefore children were inconsistently labelled as dyslexic. This incongruity would seem to suggest that not all children being labelled as dyslexic had actually received a formal diagnosis. In trying to unravel the implications of this, it seems unlikely that parents would have their child assessed and not share the outcome of that assessment with the child's teacher. Similarly, one would reasonably expect parents who have separated to share this information with one another should one parent pursue a dyslexia assessment without the involvement of the other, and the child's teacher would plainly not go through this process themselves. Therefore, one is left to deduce that this aspect of the data perhaps relies on assumptions being made by either the child's parents or the child's teacher.

Where this poses a problem for Knight's findings is that, for the purposes of her study, a child was deemed to be dyslexic if they were identified as such in at least one of the three waves of data being used. However, as outlined above, we cannot be certain that all of the children really were dyslexic. Knight indicates an interest in examining how being labelled with dyslexia affects a child's perception

of their academic ability and aspirations, and her findings do indeed seem to relate to a sample of children for whom one of the adults in their life had a plausible justification for labelling them dyslexic. It is unclear how many of the children in her sample truly were dyslexic by any accepted diagnostic measure: indeed, throughout her study Knight refers to diagnoses multiple times in reference to other studies, but only ever uses the term 'labelled with dyslexia' when discussing her own sample and findings.

This is not to suggest that the impact of a dyslexia diagnosis is necessarily entirely positive. Doikou-Avlidou (2015) reported mixed responses to diagnosis, with some respondents describing relief that a diagnosis reassured them in regard to their intelligence, while others described feeling frustration and inferiority. However, most participants reported that on a personal level their diagnosis boosted their sense of self-awareness and helped them to understand their abilities and rationalize their difficulties. Doikou-Avlidou notes on a social level a diagnosis was sometimes reported to have led to negative comments and attitudes from peers. Here, though, the impact of diagnosis on the individual was broadly positive, it was the impact of attitude of other people to that diagnosis which had negative connotations.

Lithari (2018) conducted qualitative interviews with 20 participants in order to explore the personal narratives of people with dyslexia at different stages of their lives, from those who had graduated from higher education to younger participants who had just received their diagnoses. She similarly found that the process of acquiring a diagnosis was a positive experience, describing how for some of her participants the stigma they experienced disappeared once they had a diagnosis. Ingesson (2007) conducted a study with 75 teenagers and young adults, all of whom had received a formal diagnosis of dyslexia relatively late in childhood, around the age of 12 years on average. Of the 46 participants who could remember getting their diagnosis, there was an even mix between those who had found it humiliating and therefore a negative experience, and those who felt a sense of relief at having an explanation for their academic difficulties. Ingesson notes that the diagnosis itself is therefore of less

importance than the identification and acknowledgement of their difficulties. Ingesson also speculates that even those people who reported a negative reaction to their diagnosis will likely have received more help and understanding about their difficulties, which may in turn have had a longer-term positive effect on their self-view.

In their systematic review of studies around dyslexia and self-perception, Gibby-Leversuch *et al.* (2019) found differing views concerning reactions to the receipt of a diagnosis of dyslexia, and Armstrong and Humphrey (2009) theorize a continuum on which an individual either resists or accommodates their diagnosis. Where someone lies along this continuum seems, in part, to be determined by their prevailing experience of labelling, and to their attitude to dyslexia specifically. Armstrong and Humphrey (2009, p. 100) cite one interviewee, Jamie, who stated:

No I don't see myself as dyslexic. I might have dyslexia but it doesn't like define who you are or mean that you can't do what you want to do.

In their view, those people for whom dyslexia had positive connotations tended to embrace their diagnosis, whereas those who had learned to equate dyslexia with lower intelligence would tend to resist the label. Leitão *et al.* (2017) found that prior to their receipt of a diagnosis of dyslexia, children reported negative self-concepts and feelings of frustration derived from struggling with academic work but not understanding why they were experiencing these difficulties. Inevitably, they viewed themselves as lazy, or dumb, and unable to grasp things their peers seemed to be able to comprehend easily. Leitão *et al.* describe a complete shift of attitude in the majority of their participants following their diagnosis. The quotes from their interview transcripts reveal a sense of hope, with many of their participants giving voice to a more positive attitude to their learning and their prospects for success. Others expressed concern that their struggles would be a lifelong affliction, and their diagnosis only

served as a reminder that they were different from their peers. The impact of the label of dyslexia therefore cannot be overstated.

Knight (2021) asserts that the impact of their dyslexia diagnosis is reflected in how children rated their belief in their likelihood of going to university. She reaches this conclusion after consideration of the fact that not only did those children identified as being dyslexic have lower expectations regarding their chances of attending university, but their parents and teachers also had significantly reduced expectations for this group. Her assertions are therefore based on the fact that the teachers and parents in her study had lower expectations for the academic future of children labelled as dyslexic but held higher expectations for children with similar characteristics who were not labelled as dyslexic. This latter group was also matched to the group with dyslexia on attributes such as socioeconomic class and level of parent education, in order to mitigate for the influence of such variables on parent and teacher expectations.

However, there are several other correlating variables that were not controlled for, and which could significantly influence the differences observed between children with and without dyslexia. In terms of socioeconomic factors, children from less financially secure backgrounds may have less exposure to information about higher education, which may influence their ability to accurately respond to the question of whether they foresee themselves attending university in the future: and, as the children in the study were 14 years old at the time of the research taking place, university was at least four or five years in the future, but possibly even more than that.

Asking a child, 'how likely do you think it is that you will go to university?' is a broad question, and if children are not yet making decisions which will affect their eligibility for higher education – such as choosing their A-levels – their responses may be less reliable indicators of their true aspirations or self-perceptions. The question's abstract nature, the significance of external influences which are not accounted for in the data, and the multifaceted nature of academic self-concept can all affect the reliability and validity of responses given to such a question. Children's views may also be heavily

influenced by their parents' attitudes and expectations – and those of their teachers – rather than their own independent thoughts.

Asking a child about their future educational prospects need not necessarily directly reflect their attitudes towards their dyslexia diagnosis. A child's academic self-concept is likely to be influenced by many aspects of their identity and experiences, not just their dyslexia. As such, their response might not isolate their feelings about dyslexia. They may, for example, be of the misapprehension that people with dyslexia are not able to go to university, which may be in some way influenced by their own experience of their academic challenges, but this does not necessarily indicate a fatalistic view of their own academic outlook.

The data used by Knight does not indicate when a diagnosis was received. She states that children were labelled as dyslexic at ages 7, 11, and 14, although she only taps into data from the ages of 11 and 14, and data relating to teacher views were only taken from age 11. There will therefore be some unevenness in terms of how far children have developed the coping strategies frequently associated with students with dyslexia who are able to mitigate their difficulties with coping strategies which enable them to successfully navigate higher education (Everatt *et al.*, 1999; Kapoula & Vernet *et al.*, 2016). In studies of higher education students with dyslexia, many of the samples were notably 'higher achieving' (Mourgues *et al.*, 2014) or heralded from schools that had special support programmes for students with dyslexia (Cavalli *et al.*, 2016; Kapoula & Vernet *et al.*, 2016). It is conceivable that children in Knight's study believed that having dyslexia simply precluded them from aspiring to university. The adults in their lives may not have considered the support that could be made available to them in light of their diagnosis. Therefore, the label of dyslexia was handed to the children like a millstone rather than a stepping stone to resources and accommodations that could help them succeed academically.

Pollack (2004) notes that most literature about dyslexia is focused on children, but it takes a neuropsychological stance, and very little places the point of view of the person with dyslexia at the

centre. To truly understand the impact of a dyslexia diagnosis, future research should employ more targeted, nuanced methodologies that focus on the personal experiences and perceptions of dyslexic individuals themselves. Such methodologies should involve detailed, context-specific questions that delve into the lived experiences of those diagnosed with dyslexia, providing a more comprehensive picture of how the label affects their lives. Not only would this approach yield more accurate and meaningful data, it would also honour the voices and identities of those with dyslexia, moving beyond a purely neuropsychological perspective to a more holistic understanding of their experiences. By placing the person with dyslexia's point of view at the centre of research, as Pollack (2004) advocates, future studies can better capture the nuanced realities of living with dyslexia.

2.4. Models of Dyslexia

This section explores some of the different models of dyslexia, and of disability more broadly. Distinctions will be drawn between the medical model and the social model. The biologically determinist medical model conceptualizes disability as being a deviation from the norm and takes a curative stance, viewing the individual as the cause of their own disability. The social model of disability contends that the label of disability is a social and environmental construction, attributing accountability for disability to society.

2.4.1. The Medical Model

The medical model of dyslexia holds that dyslexia is a neurological impairment, the effects of which can be ameliorated by certain interventions, with a focus on 'fixing' the pathology of the individual rather than any perceived disabling barriers around them. Medical model theorists tend to leave structural and institutional factors unexamined, seeking instead to individualize and pathologize disability (Knight, 2018). For them, disability is regarded as an individual medical problem or a 'personal tragedy' (Barnes, 2012, p. 14). Withers (2012) asserts that the medical model has been entrenched and institutionalized such that it governs the allocation of resources and defines people's rights, while a key argument against the medical model is that attributing dyslexia to pathological defects individualizes dyslexia and leads to a view that change needs to happen in the person rather than in the environment (Macdonald, 2019).

Here, it will be useful to draw a distinction between impairment and disablement, concepts which in turn represent the distinction between the biomedical model and the social model. Framed in terms of the medical model, impairment is a description of a flaw in the physical body (Oliver, 1997). The World Health Organization defines impairment as 'deviation from some norm in the individual's biomedical status' and characterizes it as causing 'losses or abnormalities that may be temporary or permanent' through the existence or occurrence of 'an anomaly, defect, or loss in a limb, organ, tissue, or other structure of the body, or a defect in a functional system or mechanism of the body, including the systems of mental function' (World Health Organization, 1980). Dyslexia as a dysfunction is believed to have a biological or physiological cause, and accordingly is something to be cured. While studies have suggested that tinted lenses present an effective cure for dyslexia by virtue of their effectiveness in reducing visual perceptual distortions and therefore making reading easier (Chivers, 2006; Dore, 2008), this represents an intervention more than it does a cure (Hoddell, 2000). The biological model dominates societal attitudes towards dealing with impairment, and the removal of impairment is seen as the solution to personal tragedies (Crow, 1994).

In terms of the biology of dyslexia, Fletcher (1992) found nothing to refute a possible biological basis for reading disability, while Collinson (2014) makes the assertion that there is no evidence of literacy being attached to any biological norm by which dyslexics can therefore be judged abnormal. He cites Stanovich's (1994) argument that the supposition of biological norms is the inevitable result of using non-neutral terms when accounting for early literacy acquisition. Stanovich (1994) gives the example of 'emergent literacy', suggesting that language acquisition is natural and will progress at a normal rate without formal tuition. Indeed, Whitmore *et al.* (2005) cite evidence that children learn to read and write before they have any formal instruction, with researchers Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) stating it would be absurd to think otherwise.

It is difficult to state whether there is a biological norm for developing literacy skills, and dyslexia cannot be diagnosed until a child's reading difficulties manifest during their early school years. Even then, there are those who argue that even a formal diagnosis of dyslexia is theoretical, an individual-by-individual estimation of probability of the presence of an unprovable biological cause (Rice & Brooks, 2004). In *Section 2.3*, I highlighted the persistent reading difficulties associated with dyslexia, but Snowling (2020) warns against the trend of using the term dyslexia as shorthand for reading disorder: rather, the term dyslexia should refer to difficulties with decoding and spelling fluency, and those difficulties are persistent from early school years and throughout a person's life. But as Seidenberg *et al.* (1986) note, such difficulties are also characteristic of early readers, and of poor readers who do not meet the threshold for a dyslexia diagnosis.

Examples in the literature show children learning because they live in urban environments rich with written stimulus (Neumann *et al.*, 2011), or in homes in which songs and stories and rhymes are abundant (Campbell, 2004). Catts *et al.* (2005) note that poor readers read less than good readers, and so have different language learning opportunities, whilst failing to consider that children who are good at reading will tend to read more, which will have a positive impact on their verbal skills and vocabulary (Stanovich, 1991). As such, the verbal skills of children who do not read as much will not

keep pace with their peers. Such impact is further dependent upon normal visual development (Glass, 2002), and we should also question whether the impact would be the same for children brought up in deprived areas.

Withers (2012) asserts that the biological model constructs disabilities in ways that reaffirm the beliefs, biases, values, and opinions of the scientists who conduct the research. Consequently, disabled people face an uninterrupted cycle of marginalization and oppression. Responses to impairment are, according to Crow (2010), made without the input or expertise of those who have impairments. Crow further argues there is little regard for the individual experience of impairment, and that in much of the disability research that follows the biological model, attention is given wholesale to impairment with no consideration of disability: resources are funnelled into curing a person who – for example – is unable to walk, without looking at the social factors that problematize the inability to walk. Little distinction is made between a person's individual experience of impairment and the more general aspects of a single impairment. An advantage of the biomedical model is that as dyslexia is understood as a neurological impairment, interventions can be put into place to help support people with their acquisition of literacy skills (Macdonald, 2019). However, interventions for dyslexia are not one-size-fits-all, because as a multi-deficit learning disability, dyslexia is itself not universal (Pennington *et al.*, 2012; Ring and Black, 2018).

The medical model of dyslexia presents an individualistic view that focuses on neurological impairment and seeks to 'fix' the pathology of the person with dyslexia. This approach, as Knight (2018) and Macdonald (2019) argue, overlooks broader structural and institutional factors that contribute to the lived experience of dyslexia. By pathologizing dyslexia, the medical model exacerbates the stigma and marginalization of individuals, framing their learning differences as personal tragedies (Barnes, 2012) and fostering a narrative that change must occur within the individual rather than in the environment.

Whilst acknowledging the neurological basis of dyslexia does offer pathways for support through targeted interventions aimed at enhancing literacy skills (Macdonald, 2019), a more holistic understanding that integrates both medical and social perspectives could better address the challenges faced by people with dyslexia. This involves not only providing personalized interventions but also fostering inclusive environments that reduce societal barriers, thereby promoting a more equitable and supportive framework for all learners.

2.4.2. The Social Model

The social model of disability marks a move away from the prevailing focus on physical limitations, towards the way disabled people are limited by social and physical environments (Oliver, 1983). According to the social model, an increasingly text-based society presents barriers which create dyslexia (Macdonald, 2009). The view is that disability stems not from an inability to adapt to the social structures built around us, but rather from a failure to adjust those structures to the needs of disabled people (Hahn, 1986). Disability was previously regarded as an individual medical problem and disabled people were systematically removed from mainstream social and economic life (Barnes, 1997). The social model focuses on the disabling barriers which cause disability, and on the individual type of impairment, and shift which Gleeson (2000) described as 'profound'.

While impairment may be biological in nature, disability is imposed on top of an impairment through isolation and exclusion in society (UPIAS, 1976). Disablement, therefore, is a result of social oppression (Oliver, 1997). Oliver (1996) and Brewster (2004) argue that it is society which disables impaired people, whether their impairment be intellectual or physical. From this perspective, disability is imposed on top of impairments, meaning disability imposes restrictions on disabled people, whether it be prejudice on an individual level or wholesale institutional discrimination. This is echoed by Breen

et al. (2008), who assert that while a person may have a physical, intellectual or emotional impairment that is at odds with societal norms, society puts in place those barriers which affect the impaired person's real-world access to social opportunities.

2.4.3. Social-Relational Origins of the Social Model

Historically, the social-relational model, developed by Finkelstein and Hunt in the 1970s, laid the foundation for the social model of disability (Thomas, 2004). They argued that disability is a form of social oppression, created by societal barriers and exclusion. This model shifted the focus away from the individual's impairment and reframed disability as a result of environmental and social factors. According to this perspective, impairments exist, but it is society's failure to accommodate these impairments that creates disability. This social-relational understanding of disability, which Finkelstein and Hunt introduced, directly influenced the social model's development.

The social-relational origins of the social model assert that disability arises when individuals with impairments encounter socially imposed limitations on their activities. Thomas (1999) argues that over time, this core idea has been diluted. She suggests that the social model has become too closely associated with the notion that impairments themselves do not cause social restrictions. While it is undeniable that impairments can impose limitations, Thomas maintains that these limitations do not constitute disability. Instead, disability results from the social barriers that exacerbate or create additional challenges for individuals with impairments. However, Thomas critiques the social model's evolution, explaining that it has become too simplified over time. The original complexity of the social relational model was lost as the social model increasingly focused exclusively on social barriers while neglecting the role that impairments play in people's lived experiences. While the social model argues

that all disability is caused by societal barriers, Thomas contends that both effects of impairment and social oppression interact to disable individuals.

Thomas (1999) calls for a revival of the social-relational model, which acknowledges both the role of impairments and the oppressive social structures that exclude people with disabilities, but Shakespeare (2013) critiques this interpretation, noting that such a stance leads disability research to assume that disabled people are inherently oppressed by society. This essentialist view, criticized by Goethals, De Schauwer, and Van Hove (2015), oversimplifies the lived experiences of disabled individuals. Shakespeare highlights that the question should not be whether disabled people are oppressed, but rather to what extent they experience oppression (Davis, 2017).

Thomas's approach, which allows individuals to be considered disabled in some contexts and merely impaired in others, introduces empirical challenges. By incorporating impairment into her definition of disability, Thomas is seen as the founder of the social-relational model. An example of this perspective can be seen in the recent study by Wissell *et al.* (2022), where participants with a formal dyslexia diagnosis were considered impaired. These individuals reported feelings of self-consciousness, stress related to their dyslexia, and sensory overload, all of which impacted their self-confidence and self-esteem. Such effects are rooted in social barriers that hinder their full participation in society (Shakespeare, 2017). Wissell *et al.* (2022) further attributed workplace difficulties to participants' reluctance to disclose their disability or advocate for themselves. Similarly, Smart and Wegner (2000) found that individuals who conceal their stigmas may experience a 'private hell', suffering more than they outwardly show.

A key criticism of the social model is that social barriers do not affect everyone in the same way. Different levels of support, such as those received during education, lead to varied experiences of disability (Oliver, 1997). While anti-discriminatory legislation and assistive technologies aim to reduce disabling barriers (Macdonald, 2009), they are not always fully effective. For example, Nind (2005) discusses how the focus on diagnosis and individualized programmes, such as Individual Education

Plans (IEPs), form the foundation of special needs education. However, despite these accommodations, research still shows that individuals with dyslexia often struggle with negative self-perceptions related to their academic abilities (Gibby-Leversuch *et al.*, 2019).

Ultimately, Thomas argues that the social-relational model takes better account of the ways in which people are disabled both through discrimination and social exclusion, as well as through the direct impacts of their impairments. She advocates for a return to this more nuanced understanding of disability, recognizing that while social oppression plays a major role in creating disability, impairments themselves can also impose restrictions on individuals' activities. The social-relational model offers a broader framework for understanding disability, one that acknowledges both social barriers and impairment effects in shaping the experiences of disabled people. Impairment means different things in different contexts and discourses (Soder, 2009). Not every barrier can be overcome, and some adaptations that make life easier for some disabled people are counterproductive for others: for example, the steps and defined curves that suit the visually impaired are more difficult for wheelchair users.

While the *Equality Act* 2010 (s20 and s21) ingrained the need to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people, there is the view that such legislation merely doubles down on discrimination by reinforcing impairment and 'pitying' the individual (Bunbury, 2019). Although it is apparent that the judiciaries in Europe and the US have begun to adopt the social model approach (Bunbury, 2019), legislation does little to challenge ingrained attitudes and perceptions. One respondent in the Gerber and Price (2012) study noted that discrimination cannot be policed and that employers can simply find a way around legislation. During the interviews conducted in the Wissell *et al.* (2022) study, many respondents also gave accounts of traumatic experiences and, furthermore, spoke directly about being affected by systemic organizational barriers, which is entirely consistent with any reasonable definition of oppression. In a similar study by Gerber and Price (2012), most respondents found the self-disclosure process to be negative, even detrimental to their experience in the workplace.

Unlike the medical model, the social model of disability shifts the focus from individual physical limitations to the societal and environmental barriers that create disability (Oliver, 1983). This model proposes that disabilities arise not from personal failings but from a failure to remove discriminatory structures/barriers to meet the needs of people with disabilities (Hahn, 1986; Oliver, 1996; Brewster, 2004). Yet, despite advancements such as the *Equality Act* 2010, societal attitudes and perceptions continue to perpetuate discrimination (Bunbury, 2019). Studies show that disabled people still face significant challenges, including stigma, self-consciousness, and systemic barriers in workplaces and schools (Gerber and Price, 2012; Wissell *et al.*, 2022).

As to whether these continued difficulties stem from limitations within the social model of disability or the shortcomings of policy implementation, the answer is ambiguous. The social model originally sought to move away from medicalizing disability by focusing on societal barriers, but this dilutes the focus on how impairments themselves affect individuals in real-life contexts (Soder, 2009; Shakespeare, 2013). Wissell *et al.* (2022) found that participants with dyslexia experienced workplace difficulties, not just because of societal barriers but also due to their impairments, such as mental fatigue and sensory overload. Hence, while the social model provides a useful framework for understanding the external barriers faced by disabled people, it doesn't fully account for the intrinsic challenges of living with impairments.

Nevertheless, the role of anti-discrimination legislation is pivotal to understanding why disabled people continue to face significant challenges. Legislation like the *Equality Act* 2010 mandated reasonable adjustments for disabled individuals, yet systemic barriers persist (Gerber & Price, 2012; Bunbury, 2019). IEPs have been foundational in special education settings (Nind, 2005), yet children with dyslexia, even taking advantage of these accommodations, continue to struggle with negative self-perceptions and barriers to full participation in education (Gibby-Leversuch *et al.*, 2019). The persistence of barriers faced by people with dyslexia can therefore be attributed to both the limitations of the social model and inadequacies in policy.

2.4.4. The Impact of Models of Disability on Educational Policy and Practice

As discussed in *Section 2.2*, there is a long history of laws and policies that gradually mandated inclusive practices and sought to protect the rights of children with disabilities. The first mention of dyslexia in UK legislation came with the *Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act* (DfES, 1970), which helped to promote dyslexia as an educational disability, but made no provision whatsoever for local authorities to provide adequate support within mainstream schools. Macdonald (2013) notes that the passing of the *Disability Discrimination Act* 1995 required schools to treat children with dyslexia – and indeed any disability – no less favourably than their non-disabled peers (DfES, 1995, Part IV, 29(2)). The subsequent *Education Act* (1996) outlined the specific duties and responsibilities of schools to cater to the needs of children with dyslexia (Orton, 2004) and established the responsibilities of Local Education Authorities to oversee the assessment, statement, and placement processes for children with dyslexia (Konur, 2006).

The *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act* 2001 (DfES, 2001) mandated that teachers make reasonable adjustments to their practice to ensure that children with disabilities were able to integrate fully. The *Act* required schools to take ‘reasonable steps to ensure that disabled pupils are not placed at a substantial disadvantage’ (DfES, 2001, s13, para 79), and stated that children with disabilities should be included in mainstream schools, providing this is deemed compatible with ‘the provision of efficient education for other children’ (DfES, 2001, s1, para 46).

There have been a number of reforms to existing legislation intended to further reduce educational inequality in the UK. With the implementation of the National Curriculum under the 1988 *Education Reform Act*, there was a significant reduction in the disparity of educational opportunities between children attending mainstream and special schools, although some argue that it increased pressure

for schools to segregate children with disabilities, particularly where integration policies and resources were not adequately allocated as to make this avoidable (Reiser, 2018b).

The *Disability Discrimination Act* 2005 introduced several significant changes and enhancements to the existing *Disability Discrimination Act* 1995, including placing further emphasis on the duty of educational institutions to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate disabled students, in order to ensure they are not placed at a substantial disadvantage compared to non-disabled students. It also required schools and educational institutions to develop and implement accessibility plans and strategies to improve access to education for disabled students.

The 2001 *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* emphasized the necessity for schools to remain adaptable, ensuring flexible policies, improved communication access, and suitable physical environments (DfES, 2001, para 7:62). This legislation aimed to eradicate discrimination and prioritize inclusive education practices. The *Disability Equality Duty (DED)*, an amendment to the UK *Disability Discrimination Act* 2005, required public authorities to actively promote disability equality. It imposed a general duty to eliminate discrimination and harassment, promote equal opportunities, foster positive attitudes, and encourage disabled people's participation in public life. A key requirement was the development of Action Plans within a Disability Equality Scheme (DES), created with input from disabled individuals. These Action Plans detailed specific steps, timelines, and responsibilities for promoting disability equality, and authorities were required to regularly monitor, review, and report on their progress to ensure effectiveness and accountability. Uptake of these was poor, however, with 46% of schools failing in this most basic aspect of the DES's provisions to embed proactive and inclusive practices within public sector organizations (Reiser, 2008).

In 2011, the *DED* was integrated into the broader *Single Equality Duty (SED)* under the *Equality Act* 2010, unifying it with other equality duties related to various protected characteristics. The *SED* imposed a general duty on public authorities to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations across all protected characteristics. It required public bodies to

publish equality objectives and information demonstrating compliance, emphasizing practical outcomes over processes. This integration provided more flexibility and a streamlined approach to promoting equality and addressing discrimination across multiple characteristics. In spite of all this legislation, however, there is an argument that children with disabilities are still not being adequately served and that the education system is still more concerned with assessing the individual than with assessing the extent to which schools are successfully managing and removing barriers to inclusion (Reiser, 2018b).

Reiser (2018b) reveals an unexpected paradox, whereby children with disabilities who are educated with their non-disabled peers in mainstream settings achieve better or the same outcomes than those children with disabilities who are educated in a specialist setting (Dyson *et al.* 2004; Hehir *et al.*, 2016). One would expect, with evidence pointing to the fact that mainstream settings are not making the necessary strides to support children with disabilities, that children placed in specialist settings would make greater progress than children with disabilities educated in mainstream settings. What the data reveal is that inclusion is not simply about educating children with and without disabilities in the same classroom. It is, Hehir *et al.* (2016) state, more about a forensic understanding of the individual needs of every student, so that the curriculum can be delivered in multiple ways to accommodate every learner rather than in a catch-all manner designed with the typical student in mind.

Finkelstein (1980, p. 9) wrote about disability as a social relationship between people with impairments and the way in which society excludes them from the process of creating the material conditions of life. Gerber (2011, p. 32) suggests that for children, learning disabilities can be viewed as an entirely educational construct. Gerber and Price (2012, p. 137) claim that for children, schools are legally mandated to provide special education services, while adulthood spans several phases, each with unique developmental challenges and milestones in domains such as employment and family, requiring nuanced understanding and support tailored to individual needs.

Christensen and Baker (2005) note that the field of education is extremely resistant to consideration of the social analysis of learning disabilities, instead holding steadfast to the psychological perspectives which have always pervaded: oppressive perspectives which are grounded in the notion that people are disabled not by systemic shortcomings but by individual pathology and incapability (Goodley, 2001). Children are processed from 'normal' to 'learning disabled' by social machinery and Christensen and Baker (2005) argue that psychological approaches cannot adequately explain the educational practices that form part of that machine.

Rieser (2018) suggests that in order for teachers to be effective practitioners, they have to adopt the social model way of thinking about disability. In schools, teachers make judgements about children and classify them based on their academic performance. Those judgements are deeply entrenched in their daily routines, and the social and institutional processes that separate the more and less successful students from each other are not easily articulated (Carrier, 1990). Christensen and Baker (2005) suggest that the way in which children are judged to have learning differences has much to do with the social processes in the classroom. However, when speaking about their own study of a class of children aged 7-8 years, Christensen and Baker (2005) suggest that children who give correct answers during question-based assessments in lessons were judged to be competent whereas those who gave incorrect answers were viewed to have learning disabilities. Indeed, Christensen and Baker's (2005) conclusion appears to be that the matter is as binary as children being either clever or learning disabled, with no gradation in between. This approach typifies a system in which assessing children is a social process, driven by cultural expectations of what is considered normal (Carrier, 1990).

2.4.5. The Educational Model

With the biological model theorising dyslexia as a pathological defect, the environment plays a crucial mediating role between the differences in explanation for the origins of dyslexia (Frith, 1999). The education model intersects with the social model of disability by conceptualizing dyslexia as a learning difficulty, the symptoms of which can be mitigated by adjustments and accommodations within the education system (Elliot, 2005). Using the education model, as dyslexia is a specific learning difference that generally manifests during a person's school years, children are therefore disabled by deficient school environments, inadequate teaching methods, and inadequate exposure to literacy (Riddick, 2001). The effects of this can be mitigated by accommodations made at school, but the disabling barriers in schools are systemic and require change to come from legislation.

The concept of inclusion, rooted in the social model of disability, has emerged as a key framework aimed at challenging systemic inequalities and promoting fair participation for people with disabilities, scaffolded by legislative developments such as the 2008 *United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities*. The *Convention* is underpinned by the social model of disability (Liasidou, 2014). According to Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, 2004, para 72), the government body responsible for overseeing the inspection and regulation of schools, the approach to inclusion hinges on what resources are available. This suggests that constraints in resources prevent teachers from effectively delivering teaching suitable for children with disabilities. As a result, the aim of planning shifts towards keeping these children engaged rather than supporting them to 'improve their understanding and skills' (Ofsted, *ibid*). So making provisions for the needs of children with disabilities demands not only dedication but also resources. Gross (2006) observes that this process may necessitate professional training, the adoption of new planning methods, and collaboration with specialist staff. These measures come at a cost and place a further burden on a school's constrained budgets.

Research has shown that successful inclusion relies heavily on classroom support staff (Lacey, 2002), but that their role is principally to prevent children with disabilities from being too burdensome for

the teacher (Marks *et al.*, 1999). Webster *et al.* (2010) argue that classroom support staff have essentially taken on the role of primary educators for children with disabilities, resulting in decreased academic progress. Although support staff have a positive impact in the classroom, children generally make less progress on average the more support they receive (Howes, 2003). This may be because for some children that type of support can be stigmatising, and Giangreco *et al.* (2001) found that the presence of an extra adult in such close proximity in the classroom often caused embarrassment. Martin and Alborz (2014) further question whether such staff have been adequately trained to deliver what is required for them.

The gap between 'inclusion rhetoric' and 'classroom reality' continues to be broad (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Research into the effectiveness of inclusion suggests that children with disabilities make marginal gains when included in mainstream settings (Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Dessementet *et al.*, 2012) compared to children in specialist settings. There were concerns that children without disabilities might be adversely affected by inclusion if teachers must focus their attention on the children with additional needs (DfE, 1997). However, inclusion has been found to have no discernible effect on the academic performance of children without disabilities (Staub & Peck, 1994; Ruijs *et al.*, 2010).

Disability nevertheless continues to be framed as an individual problem requiring 'reasonable accommodations' rather than being a result of structural inequality (Claiborne, *et al.*, 2011). Such adjustments commonly take the form of extra time in exams, a scribe, or even the allocation of a separate room for students with disabilities, measures which Liasidou (2014) argues are completely at odds with a discourse of inclusion: far from reacting to learner diversity, inclusion is instead resorting to segregation and stigmatization. As discussed, fear of stigma can lead students with disabilities to not disclose their condition (Grimes *et al.*, 2019).

Moriña and Carnerero (2022) conducted a thematic meta-analysis of 18 disability studies to explore conceptions of disability amongst teachers and students across various stages of education, revealing that most conceptions align with the medical model and view disability as an individual problem rather

than a systemic issue. Consequently, they assert that the prevailing view in many of the studies they examined is that disabled students should adapt to their educational context rather than those institutions transforming their policies and practices to be more inclusive (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011; Cunnah, 2015). Elliott (2005) proposes a shift from education as it currently looks, to a system where no children with literacy difficulties are underestimated, and money is invested in individual intervention programmes for every child rather than being wasted on diagnoses.

This model argues that dyslexia, and disability more broadly, are exacerbated by social structures that fail to accommodate diverse needs. Legislative efforts, such as the *Disability Discrimination Act* and the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act*, have aimed to promote inclusivity and reduce discrimination, but these laws often fall short in practice, with schools sometimes inadequately implementing necessary adjustments. Inclusive education may lead to better or similar outcomes for children with disabilities in mainstream settings compared to specialist settings, but true inclusion requires more than placing children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Inclusion requires a nuanced understanding of each student's needs. Despite the legislative push for inclusivity, many schools remain entrenched in outdated, medical models of disability, viewing it as an individual problem rather than a societal one. This perspective reinforces a system where children with dyslexia are assessed and labelled based on their academic performance, perpetuating stigma and exclusion.

2.5. Dyslexia and Neurodiversity

The biological/medical model of disability is concerned with the pathology of personal tragedy, and the social model concerns itself with how society disables the impaired through its failure to accommodate their impairments. There remains a persistent desire to position suffering and the need for care as a natural phenomenon rather than one that exists due to societal demands (Verhoeff,

2012). The rising neurodiversity paradigm is a shift towards conceiving of cognitive disability as a difference rather than a deficit.

Neurodiversity is a name coined by Singer (1998) and includes developmental neurological disorders such as dyslexia, ADHD and autism. Olivieri (2023) suggests we regard neurodiversity as the full spectrum of brain functions, including those we might deem different (or neurodivergent) when compared to what society considers 'normal'. The purpose of coining the term was to steer the study of disability away from deficit and towards an exploration of unique skills and abilities, something I explore in more detail in *Section 2.3.7*.

The ethos of neurodiversity is that people's brains develop differently and that neuronal differences therefore naturally occur. Rather than considering such differences as requiring treatment or cure, these differences should be embraced. For simplicity, I turn to Chapman (2020, p. 57) for a definition of neurodiversity as the 'brute fact of neurocognitive variation among the human species'. Cameron (2015) argues that our understanding of neurodiversity remains dependent on the biological/medical model of disability, yet much of his account of dyslexia speaks to its social construction as a label, and about ideological discourses which categorize people along a continuum of what is deemed 'normal'. While this continuum could be considered a bell curve (Williams, 2010), the reality according to Withers (2012) is that most conditions are defined solely in terms of an absence of normality, yet the notion of any kind of ideal is less a theory and more an ideology, one which is 'patently deficient, clearly counterfactual and counterproductive' (Mills, 2005, p. 172).

Unlike the notion of an ideal, the notion of a norm implies that most people should align with it. If we did regard that continuum as a bell curve, as a normal distribution would imply, normality would be considered to be the majority of people, positioned under the arch of the curve. When we come to question what precisely is considered normal, Davis (1995) highlights that the issue is about how the problem of disability has been created as a byproduct of the construction of a concept of normalcy. It should be noted that the words normality and normalcy bear the same meaning, although the latter

entered common parlance slightly later. Davis (*ibid*) concludes that we need to bring forth alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal.

This is, perhaps, because the abnormal can at least be defined and explored. When McRuer (2006) talks about normalcy, he notes the compulsory yet illusory nature of being able-bodied – and by extension, able-minded. Able-bodiedness, he claims, is the natural order of things, and as such has no tangible identity of its own. He describes ableism as ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’, echoing Simpican’s (2015) account of ‘compulsory capacity’, where there is an established norm of capacity which is impossible to attain for which people falling further from it are punished. One might reasonably tether able-mindedness to that definition. Just as being able-bodied means that one is capable of the normal physical exertions required to participate in society, so too can we extrapolate that able-mindedness means being capable of the necessary expression of agency and autonomy (McDonough & Taylor, 2021). Neurodivergence, then, is any deviation from that norm.

The evolving discourse on disability highlights the shift from the traditional biological/medical/social models to the more inclusive and progressive frameworks of the neurodiversity paradigm. The concept of neurodiversity represents a significant departure from deficit-focused views, advocating for the recognition of neurological differences as variations rather than abnormalities. Neurodiversity proposes that differences are natural and should be embraced for the unique skills and abilities they bring (Chapman, 2020; Olivieri, 2023). This paradigm shift is essential for fostering a more inclusive society that values diverse cognitive functioning. The constructs of normalcy and able-bodiedness may still be compulsory yet illusory ideals (Davis, 1995; McRuer, 2006) which impose unrealistic standards of physical and mental capacity, and which marginalize those who deviate from these norms (Simpican, 2015). Neurodiversity challenges these constructs by advocating for the acceptance and celebration of cognitive differences.

2.6. The Social-Relational Model

In considering the opposing social and medical models of disability, what is clear is that they share an interest in the subjective experiences of symptoms and impairments whilst differentiating between body and identity. The medical or individual model represents an account of personal tragedy which places responsibility for disability and the attendant limitations in the hands of the individual (Oliver, 1996). The social model represents a rejection of this idea, arguing that disability is a blanket term for those things which restrict disabled people, from institutional discrimination to the absence or deficiency of appropriate adaptations. Neither, however, offers a complete picture. Davis (2017) observes that the same simplicity that makes the social model such an ideal political ideology – being used as it is to define public policy (Oliver, 2012) – is also its key weakness. In disavowing impairment, the social model suggests that people are disabled not by their impairments but by society itself. This, Davis claims, is less of an issue for people whose impairments do not cause medical complications. For them, the suggestion that their struggles are entirely at the behest of social barriers is reductive and unhelpful.

What connects the medical and social models is the notion of some deviation from a pre-determined norm. With the medical model, which regards disability as something which needs to be cured, a worldview is being promoted in which disabled people are presented as tragic or personally deficient (Knight, 2018). The nature of a norm is that it is a feature of a particular kind of society rather than a human feature (Davis, 2017), and there is a fluidity to impairment, meaning people could be defined in and out of impairment according to changing societal norms and perceptions of what constitutes normal (Crow, 1994). Disabled people have long objected to having their disabilities constructed and defined by bureaucrats whose understanding is frequently ‘inaccurate and offensive’ (Gleeson, 2000). Simpican (2015) notes that although personal experience should not be the only lens through which

we regard disability, the voices and actions of people with intellectual disabilities is imperative if we are to disrupt the theorizing of some sort of ideal.

From a public health perspective, with which the biomedical approach is inexorably linked, McKie *et al.* (2016) argue that the views on the quality of life of disabled people should be disregarded if they come from individuals who have adjusted to their condition. They seem to turn the medical model into a self-fulfilling fallacy by suggesting the only voices we should hear are those for whom disability is in fact a tragedy. Bagenstos and Schlanger (2007) assert that what is best for disabled people is generally decided by non-disabled parents, teachers, doctors, and employers. The impact is the denial of opportunities for disabled people to work and to have autonomy in making their own decisions. The social model requires people to perceive themselves as disabled and to regard themselves as part of an oppressed group, which itself places upon them a demand for self-awareness and acceptance (Simplican, 2015).

When it comes to favouring one theory over another, Shakespeare (2013) advocates a plurality of approaches to the analysis of disability, arguing that people are disabled by their bodies *and* by society. Rather than defining disability as either a deficit or a disadvantage imposed by society, Shakespeare (2014) adopts a critical realist approach in suggesting disability be seen as an interaction between the intrinsic experience of disability and the extrinsic social context. In essence, Shakespeare believes people are disabled by both their own bodies and by society. Although he acknowledges that oppression has much to do with hostile social environments and disabling barriers, Williams (2001) notes that to label disability as social oppression and suggest it has nothing to do with the body is self-interested and is an incomplete account of what people experience. The only plausible conclusion is that the experience of disability cannot be divorced from the social, cultural and historical context in which it is experienced (Pinder, 1995).

Barnes (1997) argues that technology for disabled people can actually be disempowering, having the opposite of its intended impact. Davis (2017) notes that the social model, focused entirely on the

environment, can be unhelpful when considering the complex interplay of environmental factors and individual experiences of disabled people – factors which are inextricable. The social relational model therefore represents a possible answer to the need for a more nuanced approach to social research relating to disability.

While people with disabilities are discursively constructed in terms of what they cannot do, as employees in the world of work they are expected to be able to create value (Jammaers, *et al.*, 2016). The social relational model permits consideration of disablement through three effects: impairments and how they are experienced by the individual; the socially imposed environmental or economic barriers faced by people who are labelled as impaired (Cologon and Thomas, 2014); and the intended or unintended demeaning words and social actions of any social actor, whether they be parents, teachers, or even strangers (Thomas, 2007). Deacon *et al.* (2020) cite participants with dyslexia who recall being called ‘stupid’ and ‘thick’ by their teachers, and quote one participant who said:

... in the back of your head you always know that you're not as good as everybody else, there's just things that other people are doing a lot quicker than you and you notice it so then subconsciously you become aware of the fact that perhaps you can't do things very well.

(Melissa, 29)

The authors note that such labels shaped the self-perception of their participants and continued to do so into adulthood. The social-relational model therefore focuses on the interplay between impairment and disabling factors at a micro-level, theoretically bridging the social, the biological, and the psycho-emotional (Deacon *et al.*, 2020). Hence, we see children struggling at school due to the difficulties they experience with reading and writing due to their dyslexia (what we might also think of as being the

impact of impairment), being adversely affected by their perceptions of their own failure (what we would consider the psycho-emotional impact), and then continuing to experience persistent difficulties which affect their pursuit of employment (the socially imposed environmental or economic barriers previously discussed).

2.7. Conclusion

If it is society which disables people, then logically – if rhetorically – one might hypothesize the outcomes for people born into a society which is not disabling. Collinson (2022) raises the question of whether someone with dyslexia could be born into a culture which does not disable them, and if it would therefore be more accurate to say they have an impairment. He reasons that if someone who is non-dyslexic is born into a culture which disables them by virtue of the norms of literacy, they are dyslexic as a consequence. In another paper, Collinson (2012) goes so far as to suggest that if the education system included and accepted children with dyslexia, they would cease to exist as people with dyslexia. However, Collinson's theory is inconsistent. He acknowledges that dyslexia has a biological causation (2012), but states that 'dyslexics exists ... because of Lexism' (*ibid*, p. 65), a statement that divorces dyslexia from any kind of biological cause. Crow (1994) notes that impairments would prevail even if all disabling societal barriers were removed. Physical and mental limitations associated with those impairments would continue to be impactful, and therefore it is vital we acknowledge the legitimacy of people's experiences of their bodies.

Stanovich and Siegel (1994) point out that defining dyslexia in relation to a discrepancy between aptitude and achievement has served as a useful shortcut to finding a distinct group of poor readers with genetic or neurological disabilities. Snowling (2020) suggests that dyslexia need only be disabling to people if they cannot cope with their studies or work even when adjustments are put in place to

help mitigate their difficulties with literacy. Collinson fails to explain how removing the label of dyslexia will be anything other than detrimental given that research shows the use of such labels helps in establishing entitlement to and pursuit of additional support and interventions (Gillman, Hayman & Swain, 2000; Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007).

There is a compelling argument against the broadly negative view of impairments. Crow (1994) mentions creative or intellectual talent being associated with some impairments. In fact, Bagenstos and Schlanger (2007) argue that we tend to over-estimate the negative effects of disability and underestimate the quality of life of people with disabilities. They suggest that we predict how we ourselves would feel in unfamiliar circumstances, rather than explore the feelings of those for whom those circumstances are a reality. The societal view of disability as a tragedy is therefore due in part to this misapprehension, yet research shows that far from accepting their disabilities as a curse, many members of the disabled community take pride in their identity, parading rather than closeting (Shapiro, 1993). Crow (2010) makes a personal account of how the social model of disability has helped her on the grounds that it promotes the individual worth of disabled people and affords them a collective identity.

Where traditional approaches to disability have been individual and medical in nature, Shakespeare (2013) argues that the phenomenon of disability cannot be reduced to any particular perspective, be that physical, biological, cultural, or socio-economic. Rather, he proposes an approach in which disability is an interaction between the individual and social structures, between intrinsic experience of impairment and extrinsic social factors. Williams (1999) proposes that the notion of personal tragedy is an extreme model which attributes the cause of disablement squarely on the physical body. He argues that the endorsement of disability solely as social oppression is viewed by some as erroneous and one-sided (Williams, 1999). The biomedical and social models reduce the body to the biological or to the social, and he argues that disability involves interaction between physiological impairment, structural constraints, and socio-cultural propagation.

What is apparent is that both the biological and social models are fundamentally reductionist. The experience of any form of disability is more nuanced and, significantly, more subjective and personal than these theories can accommodate. The social-relational model of disability will therefore be the key theoretical lens for this study, drawing on a critical realist perspective because I will demonstrate that the importance of exploring personal accounts and individual lived experiences of dyslexia cannot be overstated. Impaired people will apply their own meanings to their experience of impairment (Crow, 2010), and people need not necessarily regard their impairment as something negative which needs to be cured.

3. Literature Review: Dyslexia in Business

3.1. Introduction

This chapter explores the intricate relationship between dyslexia and business, focusing on how individuals with dyslexia navigate professional landscapes. It offers insights into the cognitive challenges faced by individuals with dyslexia, the resilience they demonstrate, and the unique entrepreneurial spirit they often possess. By addressing various dimensions such as education, employment, and entrepreneurial attributes, the chapter highlights both the barriers and opportunities presented by dyslexia in the world of business.

First, I examine how the academic struggles faced by people with dyslexia can have long-lasting consequences, shaping their self-esteem and professional pathways. This section explores the impact of early academic failure on self-perception, emphasizing the challenges individuals with dyslexia face in traditional education systems and how these challenges steer them away from academic careers and towards more vocational and entrepreneurial paths. I explore the emotional and psychological toll that dyslexia takes over time, such as anxiety and low self-esteem, which can persist into adulthood. Studies reveal how these secondary symptoms, compounded by societal expectations, can limit individuals with dyslexia in areas beyond literacy, affecting their confidence in professional and personal tasks.

Next, I address how individuals with dyslexia experience post-traumatic growth as they navigate life after leaving school. While the challenges faced in education can lead to adverse effects, many people develop resilience, adaptability, and the ability to overcome setbacks. This section links trauma with

the personal growth that people with dyslexia often experience, particularly as they move into professional environments and entrepreneurship.

In the next section, I critically examine what constitutes success for individuals with dyslexia in business. Drawing on the work of Alexander-Passe (2017), this section challenges traditional measures of success, arguing that for many adults with dyslexia, success is defined not by conventional achievements but by the ability to overcome personal limitations, reframe failure, and develop support systems to navigate the workplace. I then address the professional challenges people with dyslexia encounter in traditional corporate structures. Employees with dyslexia often face marginalization and struggle to secure positions that align with their strengths. This section explores the barriers that prevent them from thriving in corporate settings, such as the emphasis on literacy-based tasks and the lack of accommodations for neurodiversity.

My focus then shifts to the neurodiversity movement and how businesses are beginning to recognize the strengths that individuals with dyslexia possess. This section examines how entrepreneurship offers a unique space for neurodivergent individuals to leverage their creativity and problem-solving abilities, with businesses benefiting from a diverse workforce that approaches problems from different perspectives. The chapter then explores the reasons why so many people with dyslexia gravitate towards entrepreneurship, highlighting how the flexibility and autonomy of entrepreneurship allow people with dyslexia to capitalize on their strengths, such as creativity, risk-taking, and big-picture thinking, while avoiding many of the literacy-based challenges encountered in traditional employment.

Next, the chapter investigates the role of self-efficacy and risk-taking in driving entrepreneurial success. Many entrepreneurs with dyslexia credit their resilience and adaptive strategies – developed in response to early academic struggles – as crucial to their ability to navigate the uncertainties of entrepreneurship.

Finally, I look at the motivations that drive individuals with dyslexia toward entrepreneurship, exploring the psychological needs that entrepreneurship satisfies, such as the desire for autonomy, control, and flexibility. These factors, combined with the barriers individuals with dyslexia face in traditional employment, make entrepreneurship an appealing option.

3.2. The Long-Term Impact of Dyslexia on Self-Esteem and Educational Experiences

The widely reported connection between low self-esteem and problems with reading, writing and spelling continue from childhood into adulthood (Jacobson, 1999; Shaywitz *et al.*, 1999; Novita, 2016). Research supports the notion that believing yourself unable to exert control over events which affect your life will cause anxiety and depression (Bandura, 2006; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Lightsey & Barnes, 2007; Van Dam *et al.*, 2011). Children who enter adolescence with feelings of inefficacy are likely to carry their vulnerability to stress and dysfunction into adulthood (Bandura, 1997). As intimated by the findings of Palladino, Poli *et al.* (2000), self-belief comes from a belief in one's own capabilities. Children who attain self-efficacy are likely to move into adulthood with high occupational aspirations and better prospects (Lee & Mortimer, 2009; Mortimer *et al.*, 2014; Vuolo *et al.*, 2012).

Students with dyslexia face repeated academic failure at school. Singer (2008, p. 329) found a correlation between recurrent academic failure, self-esteem, and persistence, observing that the students in her study were most concerned with protecting their self-esteem, with 'feeling good and not stupid'. Breen *et al.* (2008) argue that society builds barriers which limit the access a disabled person has to social opportunities. Indeed, some studies suggest that dyslexia is a wholly surmountable barrier. Burden and Burdett (2007) interviewed students with dyslexia in an independent special school to find out about their perception of their own self-esteem, and respondents demonstrated strong positive feelings of self-efficacy.

People with dyslexia are often marginalized during their school lives and face increasing childhood adversity as they progress through the school system (Smith, 2008). When Ingesson (2007) studied the emotional adjustment and self-esteem of children with dyslexia, there was a particular focus on the answers given to questions reflecting on optimism and/or pessimism, the impact of dyslexia on the respondent's peer relations and self-esteem, their acceptance of and openness towards dyslexia, the influence of dyslexia on everyday life, and the respondents' feelings of being different. Academic self-esteem was found overwhelmingly to be low, with Ingesson reporting that most of his respondents opted for vocational programmes in secondary school and steered away from the college route.

In a study by Kapoula and Vernet (2016), higher education students were drawn from universities devoted to decorative art, industrial creation and design, and engineering. These are all subjects where one might expect to find a higher-than-average level of creativity among respondents. While Lockiewicz *et al.* (2013) conducted a study of high school students, university students and graduates, and found no evidence to support a hypothesis of creative or visuospatial superiority among adults with dyslexia, the majority (83%) of participants were studying at university or had already graduated. These studies raise the question of whether the people with dyslexia taking part had already developed coping mechanisms in order to get to where they are.

Research supports the notion that believing yourself unable to exert control over events which affect your life will cause anxiety and depression (Bandura, 2006; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Lightsey & Barnes, 2007; Van Dam *et al.*, 2011). Children who attain self-efficacy are likely to move into adulthood with high occupational aspirations and better prospects (Lee & Mortimer, 2009; Mortimer *et al.*, 2014; Vuolo *et al.*, 2012).

Miller and Kass (2023) offer a number of narrative accounts of experiences of coping with a disability at school. They cite H., an entrepreneur with dyslexia who was only able to succeed at school because the principal of their school showed belief in them, belief which in turn spurred their own self-efficacy.

Miller and Kass (2023) also cite Mu., a businessman with dyslexia who was largely failed by the education system, and whose experience after being diagnosed in primary school was one of abuse and humiliation. It was, in his own words, 'life changing', and something he has gone on to suppress. Mu. changed schools multiple times across different phases, resulting in deteriorating social and behavioural difficulties. He only learned to read because of the steadfast determination of his mother. His recollection of those formative years is resoundingly negative, noting that, 'At that time, the only thing that they appreciated was success at school. There was no ability to include,' yet significantly he also states that he would not give up his dyslexia, noting that 'it's due to the dyslexia that I'm very creative in business' (Miller & Kass, 2023, p. 50; p. 116).

In her 2012 study, Logan conducted semi-structured interviews with ten entrepreneurial business leaders, asking questions relating to the impact of dyslexia on their school lives, its impact on their business careers, and how dyslexia affects the way they work with others in their current businesses. One of her respondents said they 'suffered a severe lack of confidence whilst in education' and 'were branded as "stupid"' and that it also impacted on their early career. The impact of dyslexia during a person's school years is demonstrably powerful, and long-lasting. In the next section, I will explore the impact of both dyslexia and negative, disrupted school experiences on the employment chances of people with dyslexia.

In conclusion, the persistent academic struggles faced by students with dyslexia have profound and lasting impacts on their self-esteem, emotional wellbeing, and future aspirations. While societal barriers exacerbate these challenges, fostering a sense of marginalization and limiting opportunities, some studies highlight the potential for overcoming these obstacles through strong self-efficacy and support systems. However, the generalizability of such findings is limited. The negative experiences of individuals with dyslexia in education often lead to long-term adverse effects, underscoring the need for more inclusive and supportive educational practices. Addressing these challenges is crucial, not

only for the personal development of students with dyslexia but also for their long-term success and integration into society.

3.3. The Impact of Dyslexia on Self-Perception and Life Outcomes

The experience of chronic secondary symptoms is perhaps what separates dyslexia from other forms of reading difficulty. Maughan *et al.* (2020) conducted a further midlife follow-up study thirty years later, which revealed the enduring impact of poor reading and writing ability. The researchers reveal that most of their respondents went on to pursue unskilled or manual jobs, and the poor readers were more likely to have faced both unemployment and difficulties returning to work if they lost their job. In terms of life skills, childhood poor readers reported issues with writing formal letters and filling in forms in adulthood, resulting in a reliance on friends and family members for help completing official documents.

People who struggle with reading in a society where reading ability is entwined with academic achievement have been found to experience more difficulties than just those considered to be primary symptoms of their learning disability. The impact on a person's conception of themselves cannot be overstated. Studies have shown that secondary symptoms of dyslexia include anxiety and low self-esteem (Zelege, 2007; Novita, 2016). Meta-analyses of research papers conducted by Chapman (1988) and later by Bear *et al.* (2002) concluded that children with learning disabilities view themselves less favourably than children without learning disabilities.

However, as with dyslexia itself, there is broad disagreement about terminology and semantics. In much of the early literature, terms like 'self-esteem' and 'self-concept' are used synonymously (Burden, 2008). Some authors define self-concept as a person's cognitive understanding about their

abilities (Cosden, 1999), others as one's sense of wellbeing and satisfaction with oneself (Zelege, 2007). Humphrey (2003) perhaps offers the most clarity, explaining that within the notion of the self, self-concept refers to how we would describe ourselves, the ideal self is how we would like to be, and our self-esteem is our evaluation of how closely one matches the other.

In his own meta-analysis of research done since Chapman's (1988) study, Bear *et al.* (2002) note that the instruments used in many of the studies Chapman (1988) examined are no longer consistent with modern views on self-concept. Self-concept comprises our intellectual, physical, emotional, social, academic, and moral selves (Lithari, 2018), and academic self-concept is now widely viewed as multidimensional rather than an amalgamation of self-perceptions across a variety of areas (Zuppardo *et al.*, 2023). Children make distinctions in their own perception of their competence in different subjects, and children who have deficits in reading may not have deficits in other areas of the curriculum (Elbaum and Vaughn, 2006).

The enduring impact of dyslexia extends beyond the primary symptoms of reading and writing difficulties, leading to chronic secondary issues such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and reliance on others for life skills. The research highlights that poor readers often face limited employment opportunities and struggle with basic tasks in adulthood, perpetuating a cycle of dependency and marginalization. The evolving understanding of self-concept and its multifaceted nature shows the complexity of the impact of dyslexia on an individual's self-perception and wellbeing. Addressing these challenges requires an approach that considers both the academic and emotional needs of people with dyslexia.

3.4. The Impact of Dyslexia on Employment Opportunities and Personal Growth

Dyslexia evolves over the years to impact on more and more aspects of a person's life (de Beer *et al.*, 2014). Research suggests that a lack of qualifications when leaving school limits job prospects for people with dyslexia and may restrict them to manual or unskilled work (Morgan and Klein, 2000). But there remains a gap in the literature concerning how far disabling barriers actually impact on people with dyslexia attaining higher status jobs. Taylor and Walter (2003) found that people with dyslexia were predisposed towards people-orientated professions and away from management and finance. However, their research compared occupations of adults with and without symptoms of dyslexia without taking account of comorbidities or even other learning disabilities. The authors anecdotally suggest that people with dyslexia may prefer occupations where they have greater control. Crucially, they offer no suggestion of external factors which may impact on the job choices of people with dyslexia, particularly factors such as workforce barriers and outright discrimination: the existence of anti-discriminatory legislation and assistive technologies, and their ability to reduce such disabling barriers (Macdonald, 2009) does not mean they are always effective.

Research by Hitchings *et al.* (2001) showed that some college students with learning disabilities report being discouraged from following their own career choices, or being advised to take courses or programs of study in which they have little or no interest. The majority of their respondents felt unsure about their future beyond school and felt uncertainty about how their disability would affect them in the world of work. More than a third believed their difficulties in school would continue to affect them and that they would need accommodations in the workplace. One participant stated that she hated reading and 'didn't want anything to do with reading' so she chose a career where she could be outside and not have to read. However, many more of their participants reported feeling confident of successful employment providing accommodations were made.

Echoing what Stanworth and Curran (1976) found in their study of entrepreneurs, those people with dyslexia who persevere in their studies, or who use their extraordinary abilities in areas which are of particular interest to them, are able to transcend the barriers presented by their academic difficulties and go on to become successful in their chosen fields (Hall *et al.*, 2002; Taylor & Walter, 2003; West 2005). Palladino, Poli *et al.* (2000) also attest that when students with learning difficulties enjoy learning and acknowledge the link between effort and success, they experience self-belief.

This is further developed by the notion of post-traumatic growth, which accounts for how individuals can experience positive changes after trauma. While trauma often leads to negative consequences, research shows that many individuals also experience positive psychological change (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Trauma is judged to be an experience which gives someone the capacity to divide their life into distinct 'before and after' periods, a watershed moment that serves as a catalyst for cognitive engagement and, in time, growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, *ibid*). Post-traumatic growth often involves a shift in priorities and a greater appreciation for life's intrinsic values. Individuals facing crises may find that materialistic goals lose significance, while relationships and simple joys gain newfound importance.

Alexander-Passe (2016a) interviewed 20 successful adults with dyslexia, defining success as the accomplishment of an aim or goal in their chosen fields: business owners, social entrepreneurs, teachers, movie producers, etc. Alexander-Passe (2016b) notes that many of his participants devised creative methods of surviving the 'continual trauma of mainstream education'. He proposes that the success they managed to experience in non-academic subjects counter-balanced the trauma, leading gradually to their development of self-efficacy. In the case of students with dyslexia who go on to study at University, Stagg *et al.* (2018) found that students with dyslexia may have low self-efficacy for general academic ability, but higher self-efficacy in a specific subject. This may be explained by research which has found that students in higher education are better able to take control of their

learning and are better positioned to accept their limitations and overcome their prior negative school experiences (Lambersky, 2016).

The literature reveals a complex landscape for people with dyslexia navigating education and employment. While some findings suggest that dyslexia can limit career choices and lead to challenges in securing higher-status jobs, other studies highlight the resilience and adaptability of individuals with dyslexia who find success in fields aligned with their strengths and interests. Despite the existence of supportive legislation and assistive technologies, barriers such as workforce discrimination and educational discouragement continue to affect career trajectories.

Insights into post-traumatic growth show how challenges posed by dyslexia can drive personal development and shape career outcomes positively. The personal growth resulting from overcoming trauma provides a strong foundation for entrepreneurial development, enabling individuals to leverage their experiences and strengths to succeed in the business world (Sanki & O'Connor, 2021). Sanki and O'Connor (*ibid*) highlight that post-traumatic growth fosters resilience, adaptability, creativity, problem-solving abilities, self-efficacy and confidence, internal motivation and drive, empathy, and leadership skills, which are essential entrepreneurial skills. It also enables people to reauthor life narratives, which helps to construct a positive entrepreneurial identity and vision.

3.5. Defining Success and Failure

This study is concerned with the experiences of people with dyslexia and how they are able to transcend their academic struggles and become successful in business. It is therefore pertinent to explore the nature of success, particularly in relation to dyslexia. Business magnates with dyslexia, such as Richard Branson, are frequently lauded as role models by organizations devoted to dyslexic

concerns, but Alexander-Passe (2015) – himself dyslexic – questions whether this is realistic. People with dyslexia recognize that figures like Branson do not demonstrate any of the common negative effects that they themselves live with. Taking a more authentic view of what constitutes success, Alexander-Passe (2017) suggests that success in the workplace for people with dyslexia is synonymous with a fighting spirit to prove oneself beyond undefined conventional measures of success, the ability to perceive failure in a positive light, and the fortitude to overcome one's deficits through the implementation of support networks and strategies.

According to Alexander-Passe (*ibid*), less-successful adults with dyslexia will continue to be traumatized by their negative school experiences, will dwell on their weaknesses rather than recognize their strengths, will focus on their perceived limitations, and will harbour resentment toward their schools and teachers for not diagnosing their dyslexia earlier. For Alexander-Passe, it almost seems that success is measured not by how far one progresses within a particular industry or profession, but more by the mindset of the individual. Indeed, taking into account the deeply personal, individual experience of dyslexia, Alexander-Passe is one of the few researchers to invite participants to offer their own account of what they feel constitutes success.

When Alexander-Passe (2015) invited his participants with dyslexia to explain whether they viewed themselves as successful, it was with compelling results. One respondent, Rachel, obtained a degree, but later realized that having qualifications does not equate to securing employment and so questioned whether it was worthwhile. Another respondent, Trixie, was conflicted about whether she considered herself successful because, while acknowledging external markers of success such as professional recognition as a theatre critic, she also felt frustration at not fully realizing the true potential she felt she had. And a third respondent, George, believed that to an observer he would be regarded as a failure due to his unemployment, but in himself he felt satisfied that what he was doing with his life was worthwhile. These three individuals offer a striking illustration of how difficult it is to define success.

When we consider success in the world of work, there is a body of research surmising that adults with dyslexia are proportionally less likely to thrive in a corporate environment (Logan, 2001; 2009; Fitzgibbon & O'Connor, 2002). Leather and Kirwan (2012) regard success as reaching the top of one's profession, running one's own business, or simply being well financially rewarded by whatever profession one chooses. They also broaden their definition to include finding a niche in a job that suits one's skillset and interests. Fink (2002) conducted interviews with 60 highly successful adults with dyslexia. Although she offers no clear definition of success, her participants had all progressed in professions which require sophisticated reading, including an author, a Nobel laureate, and a lawyer. She found that problems with reading may obscure ability – or indeed talent – in other fields (Fink, 2002). Her findings and conclusions are consistent with other research in the same field (Leather *et al.* 2011; Leather & Kirwan 2012).

Failure is difficult to define in terms of specific characteristics and impact, and it is difficult to quantify the degree to which society creates barriers for people with learning disabilities (Tanner, 2009). It is similarly difficult to quantify the extent to which the individual characteristics of dyslexia are disabling. Tanner (*ibid*) asserts that failure cannot be seen purely in terms of its negative effects. The conundrum of failure, she argues, is that it can impact on a person's resilience and motivation and can provide a positive challenge.

Many people with disabilities possess the capability to focus on positives, to reassess their life goals, and to become successful (Albrecht & Devlieger, 1999). Success perhaps comes from the development of creative approaches and unique skills in order to solve one's problems, which are the inevitable result of failure to reach success through conventional means (Miller & Breton-Miller, 2016). According to respondents in a study by Alexander-Passe (2010), the measure of success for them was all about feeling contented and having recognition for their skills. In several studies the onus is on the individual with dyslexia to understand their dyslexia and to advocate for themselves (Leather &

Kirwan, 2012), and given the challenges faced by children with dyslexia in the classroom, success for a child with dyslexia might be more akin to survival.

The concept of success among individuals with dyslexia is multidimensional and personal (Leather & Everatt, 2024). Moving away from conventional notions of success epitomized by high-profile figures like Richard Branson, a more nuanced understanding of success is rooted in personal resilience, redefining failure, and leveraging support systems and strategies. The experiences of adults with dyslexia vary, from feelings of accomplishment despite traditional markers of success (Stanworth & Curran, 1976), to grappling with unmet professional aspirations. A broader recognition of these varied pathways to success is essential for fostering inclusive environments and supporting the diverse talents of individuals with dyslexia in achieving their full potential (Shaywitz *et al.*, 2020).

3.6. Dyslexia and Employment

3.6.1. Challenges and Barriers

The impact of dyslexia is not limited to personal and internal factors but is significantly influenced by the work environment, including relationships with colleagues and managers, workload, and access to assistive technology. The workplace can present unique challenges for individuals with dyslexia, from the recruitment process to daily job tasks and interactions with colleagues. Studies such as those by de Beer *et al.* (2022) identify numerous factors influencing work participation among individuals with dyslexia, including issues with reading and writing speed, negative self-perception, and stress. Similarly, Smith-Spark *et al.* (2022) highlight the cognitive challenges faced by adults with dyslexia, such as deficits in planning, selective-thinking, and time-based prospective memory tasks. The fear of stigmatization and discrimination can exacerbate these challenges, making it difficult for individuals to disclose their condition and seek the accommodations they need. Spirito Dalgin and Bellini (2008) find that candidates disclosing invisible disabilities received lower employability ratings, highlighting the lack of understanding among employers regarding these conditions. This is further supported by the work of Madaus (2008), who reveals that many individuals with dyslexia fear stigma and negative perceptions, resulting in low rates of formal disclosure and accommodation requests.

In their systematic review of qualitative studies relating to work participation among people with dyslexia, de Beer *et al.* (2022) identify 374 factors, categorized under functions and structures, activities, participation, environmental factors, and personal factors. A significant finding was the prevalence of negative traits and challenges, such as issues with reading and writing speed, negative self-perception, and stress, with self-disclosure emerging as a key coping strategy. The fear of stigmatization and discrimination can hinder the willingness of adults with dyslexia to disclose their

condition and seek necessary accommodations. According to de Beer *et al.* (2022), other factors include the attitude and knowledge of supervisors, the attitude and self-confidence of the individual themselves, and the actual desire for accommodations.

Smith-Spark *et al.* (2022) explore the cognitive challenges faced by adults with dyslexia in the workplace, focusing specifically on executive functions and prospective memory, which they define as the ability to remember to perform a planned action or recall a planned intention at a future point in time. They found that the participants with dyslexia performed worse on planning, selective-thinking, and time-based prospective memory tasks compared to non-dyslexic individuals. These deficits highlight the broader impact of dyslexia on workplace cognition, extending beyond literacy-related tasks. Wissell *et al.* (2022) also investigated the challenges faced by individuals with dyslexia in the workforce, including systemic barriers and difficulties in meeting job demands and managing workplace relationships. Participants discussed the high mental load and stress associated with meeting job expectations, especially when workplace literacy demands like reading, writing, and editing were not adjusted for their dyslexia. The struggle to meet these demands without adequate support led to feelings of burnout, anxiety, depression, and frustration. Participants often felt they had to work extra hours to keep up with other people, resulting in significant mental fatigue.

The secondary symptoms of dyslexia (Novita, 2016) discussed in the previous chapter continue into adulthood, with stress and self-doubt reported by Smith-Spark *et al.* (2022) and Nalavany *et al.* (2011). Indeed, Nalavany *et al.* (2011) also find that adults with dyslexia experience mental fatigue due to the excessive cognitive demands they face. Participants in their study expressed frustration with not being able to complete tasks and the constant mental ‘tug-of-war’ with their energy levels. When extra effort was required to manage dyslexia and complete work tasks, participants felt their efforts were not adequately acknowledged. These ongoing challenges, coupled with a perceived need to conceal their struggles, led participants to feel a sense of insecurity and anxiety. Wissell *et al.* (2022) also intimate that respondents felt isolated from their peers as a result of working extra hours.

Even before entering the workforce, participants in the Wissell *et al.* (2022) study reported challenges during job seeking and the recruitment process, such as pre-interview aptitude tests or writing tasks without reasonable accommodations. These experiences left many feeling disadvantaged and humiliated. Inevitably, requesting accommodations acknowledges the existence of a disability (Baldrige & Veiga, 2001; Madaus, 2008), forcing the hand of the applicant to make a disclosure. In her personal account of working in academic institutions, Morrison (2019) discusses the concept of 'who gets what and why', highlighting the conflicts and power dynamics inherent in the disclosure of a disability and the accommodation process itself. In this process, institutions control the allocation of resources and require individuals to justify their needs, often prioritizing legal and financial considerations over genuine support. These bureaucratic structures are designed to manage and limit access demands, which can marginalize and isolate individuals with disabilities.

The fear of stigmatization and discrimination can hinder adults with dyslexia from disclosing their condition and seeking necessary accommodations. Hassard *et al.* (2024) found a significant disclosure gap among employees in education workplaces due to fears of stigma, discrimination, and negative impacts on their career and their professional reputation. Spirito Dalgin and Bellini (2008) took the employer's stance in their examination of the impact of disclosing an invisible disability during employment interviews, focusing on the type of disability (none, physical, or psychiatric) and the extent of disclosure (brief or detailed). They found that candidates who disclosed a physical disability received the highest employability ratings, which they suggest may be due to a sympathy effect or positivity bias where employers wish to appear empathetic and supportive. Those disclosing invisible disabilities were rated significantly lower on employability scales and hiring decisions by the employers taking part.

Spirito Dalgin and Bellini (2008) reason that employers often lack understanding of these conditions and may be uncertain about the necessary accommodations and whether they will be able to meet these needs effectively without disrupting the workplace. Price *et al.* (2017) explored the experiences

of faculty with mental disabilities through an anonymous survey. Their findings highlight the lack of familiarity with available accommodations, the reluctance to request them due to stigma and fear of negative consequences, and the varied experiences of disclosure, which tend to be more positive when made to peers rather than institutional authorities.

Madaus (2008) explored the complexities of self-disclosing learning disabilities in the workplace, revealing that only 55% of respondents disclosed their learning disabilities to employers, with just 12% requesting formal accommodations. Many respondents feared stigma, negative perceptions, and negative relationships with supervisors or coworkers. Through the lens of his own lived experience, Pionke (2019) describes his experience of waiting nine months for an accommodation, dealing with workplace hostility, and the emotional toll of concealing a disability. He notes that concealing a hidden disability to avoid stigma and retaliation can have severe negative health impacts, including increased anxiety, depression, and physical symptoms.

The workplace can present unique challenges for individuals with dyslexia, from the recruitment process to daily job tasks and interactions with colleagues. Factors such as issues with reading and writing speed, negative self-perception, and cognitive challenges highlight the need for better understanding and accommodations (Spirito Dalgin & Bellini, 2008; Madaus, 2008). The fear of stigmatization and discrimination can further complicate these challenges, often making it difficult for individuals to disclose their condition and seek the accommodations they need (Hassard *et al.*, 2024). It is to the issue of making a disclosure that I now turn.

3.6.2. Disclosure and Its Implications

There are a number of hidden disabilities, and one can draw a duality of meanings from this term. As I will illustrate, it aptly describes the reluctance to disclose a disability due to fear of discrimination, stigmatization, and retribution (Wissell *et al.*, 2022). More properly, it refers to invisible disabilities, ones which are defined by their commonality as neurological dysfunctions, and which are generally educationally specific and located in childhood development, and to other more broadly defined learning difficulties (Macdonald, 2009). Examples of hidden disabilities include epilepsy, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and Asperger's Syndrome; and Waltz (2005) adds dyslexia to this list. Some authors classify such impairments as social constructs rather than dysfunctions, which I discussed in *Section 2.4*.

Thomas (1999) proposes that someone who cannot walk is physically impaired, but if their inability to walk means they are deemed unable to work, they are thereby *being* disabled. Williams (1999) notes that medical sociology has brought to the attention of policy makers and service providers the reality of people living with chronic conditions, taking such illnesses beyond the remit of biomedical theory. Nevertheless, the breaking down of these barriers for people with learning disabilities hasn't kept pace with the rate of inclusion for people with physical impairments. This may be because of the nature of the hidden symptoms is such that the disability and the stigma surrounding it are less visible (Goffman, 1968; Ysasi, Becton & Chen, 2018). Pinder (1995) describes how invisible conditions are incomprehensible and resistant to language and human communication while the presence of a wheelchair demonstrates someone's disability so tangibly.

Dyslexia will usually manifest during a person's school years, but the invisible nature of dyslexia means that adults have some freedom to choose whether or not to disclose. When it comes to making a disclosure about one's disability, Ragins (2008) notes that people with invisible stigmas disclose them

to different degrees across their life settings, including work and non-work. This is perhaps because it is impossible to conceal dyslexia when literacy skills are so fundamental to success in work (Macdonald, 2010). Major and O'Brien (2005) define a stigma as the perception of being flawed in some personal or physical characteristic, and as a direct consequence of that flaw being considered somehow *less*. Stoeber (2020) further delineates between public stigmas and self-stigmas. The former refers to the conventional understanding of a stigma as a view held by someone about another person's perceived flaws. The term self-stigma refers to the internalization of stigmatized views, the negative views one holds about oneself, and people with specific learning disabilities (SLDs) may become so aware of the stigma of the SLD label that they begin to endorse those negative beliefs themselves (Haft *et al.*, 2022).

The fear of stigmatization and discrimination can hinder adults with dyslexia from disclosing their condition and seeking necessary accommodations. Hassard *et al.* (2024) found a significant disclosure gap among employees in education workplaces due to fears of stigma, discrimination, and negative impacts on their career and their professional reputation. Spirito Dalgin and Bellini (2008) took the employer's stance in their examination of the impact of disclosing an invisible disability during employment interviews, focusing on the type of disability (none, physical, or psychiatric) and the extent of disclosure (brief or detailed). They found that candidates who disclosed a physical disability received the highest employability ratings, which they suggest may be due to a sympathy effect or positivity bias where employers wish to appear empathetic and supportive. Those disclosing invisible disabilities were rated significantly lower on employability scales and hiring decisions by the employers taking part.

Spirito Dalgin and Bellini (2008) reason that employers often lack understanding of these conditions and may be uncertain about the necessary accommodations and whether they will be able to meet these needs effectively without disrupting the workplace. Price *et al.* (2017) explored the experiences of faculty with mental disabilities through an anonymous survey, highlighting the lack of familiarity

with available accommodations, the reluctance to request them due to stigma and fear of negative consequences, and the varied experiences of disclosure, which tend to be more positive when made to peers rather than institutional authorities. Crucial to the impetus to make a disclosure is the perceived consequence of doing so, and this has more to do with social relationships, work pressure, and work stress. Disclosure of dyslexia brings the threat of 'potentially deleterious outcomes' (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010), whilst non-disclosure may protect people with dyslexia from intolerant environments (Pachankis, 2007).

Madaus (2008) explored the complexities of self-disclosing learning disabilities in the workplace, revealing that only 55% of respondents disclosed their learning disabilities to employers, with just 12% requesting formal accommodations. Many respondents feared stigma, negative perceptions, and negative relationships with supervisors or co-workers. Through the lens of his own lived experience, Pionke (2019) describes his experience of waiting nine months for an accommodation, dealing with workplace hostility, and the emotional toll of concealing a disability. He notes that concealing a hidden disability to avoid stigma and retaliation can have severe negative health impacts, including increased anxiety, depression, and physical symptoms.

Studies often report that people with dyslexia feel that they are misunderstood as being inferior and lazy (Denhart, 2007). Little wonder that people with dyslexia may feel shame and rejection when the label of *dyslexic* leads to them being stereotyped as 'stupid, cheating, lazy and mentally incapacitated' (Nalavany, 2013). Sack-Min (2007) notes that applying such a label to a child is a profound decision that affects the rest of their educational career and life. People with dyslexia tend to be aware from an early age that there is something different about them (Burden, 2005; Ingesson, 2007; Pollack, 2005). It is a theme that recurs in literature where people with dyslexia are interviewed. A portion of this research indicates an epiphany in the minds of the person with dyslexia. McNulty (2003) found that when individuals were unable to participate in more academic activities, they focused their

efforts elsewhere. In what McNulty calls an 'alternative subplot' in the narrative of their lives, individuals consciously decide to pursue other interests, which earn them validation.

I will regard disability as a social problem, where difficulties stem from disabling environments rather than from a person's physical or cognitive difficulties, although consciousness, the body, and our experience of the social world are inextricably linked (Pinder, 1995). The work environment has more bearing on intent to disclose than does a person's biology. In a systematic review of qualitative studies relating to work participation amongst adults with dyslexia, de Beer *et al.* (2022) found that the work environment accounted for more than half of the factors reported by respondents to either hinder or facilitate their willingness to work. They reason this finding renders the biomedical model unsupportable due to the significance of context, whether that be related to a person's job, their education, or the community in which they live (Gerber & Price, 2012).

Green *et al.* (2020) highlight the complexity and personal nature of the decision-making process around disclosure. Participants in their study feared being perceived differently or facing discrimination, and the decision was often mitigated by the perceived benefits of disclosure. Daily tasks and requirements, such as meeting deadlines or accessing learning platforms, often necessitated decisions about disclosing their condition. Morrison (2019) presents an account of the double bind of having to demonstrate visibly one's limitations by deliberately lowering the facade that enables them to appear qualified or suitable for the job where they now seek accommodation.

This predicament of disclosure is further exacerbated by the fact that, while a raft of workplace accommodations is possible, the primary responsibility for initiating those accommodations rests with the affected employee (Prince, 2017). People may fail to disclose their dyslexia to an employer for myriad reasons. White *et al.* (2012) suggest this may be because, having escaped the pressures of regular testing during higher education, students simply adapt well to their respective workplaces. However, it seems more likely that those individuals have developed coping strategies. Research has found that students in higher education are better able to take control of their learning and are better

positioned to accept their limitations if they can overcome their prior negative school experiences (Lam, 2016). The other suggestion made by White *et al.* (2012, *ibid*), that people experience anxiety about the outcome of making a disclosure, seems more plausible.

Gerber (2011) somewhat frivolously describes the quandary of disclosure as a decision over whether 'to be or not to be' dyslexic. But the harsh reality of disclosure is laid bare in the testimonials of trainee teachers in a study by Jacobs *et al.* (2021): one respondent describes disclosing her dyslexia to the parents of the children in her class and having to explain that her dyslexia would 'not negatively impact the pupils she taught'; another respondent talks about her fears that her dyslexia would harm her professional persona, describing self-disclosure as shooting herself in the foot. It comes as little surprise, then, that Martin and McLoughlin (2012) found less than one fifth of people with specific learning difficulties (SLDs) make a disclosure to their employer, with the most common reason being a belief that their dyslexia was not relevant to their work. The authors surmise that a significant proportion of their participants must associate dyslexia with education and not the workplace. However, they do not draw any links between this response and the type of work those participants are in. One might reason that certain jobs over others will require literacy skills, and respondents who do not perceive a need to disclose their dyslexia may feel that way because of their particular role.

It is also noteworthy that the majority of the participants in their study got their dyslexia diagnosis at university, but Martin and McLoughlin (2012) can only speculate as to why this is. One consideration is that their participants would have been at school during the 1990s and 2000s, a time when early identification of dyslexia was far from perfect. When, in 1997, the government commissioned the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to review the instruments being used in primary and special schools to identify children at risk of later literacy problems, it found 91 different schemes in operation across the country. Some of these had been subject to rigorous testing, but many of them had not, and many of them were unique to the Local Education Authority in which they had been developed (Lindsay, 2004). The purpose for which these tests were administered varied widely, with many

teachers not using them as a diagnostic tool at all, and Lindsay (2004) raises further questions about the comprehensiveness, comparability, and specificity of these assessments.

The concept of 'hidden disabilities' encompasses both the reluctance to disclose disabilities due to fear of stigma, and the inherent invisibility of certain conditions, such as dyslexia, ADHD, and ASD. The struggle with disclosure is influenced by various factors, including societal perceptions, workplace environments, and individual coping strategies, and the decision to disclose a hidden disability is heavily shaped by potential social and professional consequences, with many choosing non-disclosure to avoid negative outcomes. Addressing these issues requires a shift from viewing disabilities purely through a biomedical lens to understanding them within a broader social context, recognizing the significant impact of societal and environmental factors on the experiences of individuals with hidden disabilities.

3.7. Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship

While this review focuses on dyslexia, it is useful to consider other neurodivergent conditions such as ADHD and ASD, particularly because they exhibit patterns of symptoms rather than being entirely distinct or independent conditions (Brown & Fisher, 2023). The inclusion of some brief discussion about ADHD and ASD alongside dyslexia within the context of entrepreneurship provides a fuller understanding of neurodiversity. While each condition presents unique challenges and strengths, there are commonalities that help inform supportive practices and inclusive environments. Neurodivergent individuals often share cognitive traits (Iversen *et al.*, 2005; Haslum & Miles, 2007) such as innovative thinking (de Beer *et al.*, 2022), which is highly valuable in entrepreneurship. By recognising other conditions alongside dyslexia, one can draw broader conclusions about how neurodiversity as a whole can contribute to entrepreneurial success. Additionally, many

neurodivergent individuals exhibit co-occurring conditions (Brown & Fisher, 2023), making it important to understand how different neurodivergent traits interact and influence entrepreneurial endeavours.

The neurodiversity movement is a strength-based approach that considers the strengths of people with mental disorders and makes adjustments to the workplace in order to harness those strengths (Wiklund *et al.*, 2018). Amidst recent discussion on workforce diversity (Moran, 2019; Orpwood-Russell, 2019), global management consultancy McKinsey & Company stress the connection between financial performance and a diverse composition of ethnicity, gender, and cultural background among company leaders (Hunt *et al.*, 2018). Innovation is the key to competitiveness in business, and innovation is enhanced by a varied workforce that includes people who see things differently (Austin & Pisano, 2017). This has led to an increasing number of companies developing new HR practices in order to recruit neurodiverse talent.

3.7.1. ADHD and Entrepreneurship

Compelling links have been established between entrepreneurship and ADHD because of the unique work context offered by entrepreneurship, one which is characterized by uncertainty and autonomy (Yu *et al.*, 2021). Verheul *et al.* (2015) hypothesize that the preference for entrepreneurship stems from a tendency among people with ADHD to seek and engage in stimulating activities to counter their experience of 'under-arousal'. Research points clearly to strengths associated with ADHD symptoms. Wiklund *et al.* (2016) found that many of the symptoms of ADHD are attuned to entrepreneurial action. People with certain learning differences may perform better in entrepreneurship than people without those specific mental disorders, and the traits associated with some mental disorders may indeed be advantageous (Wiklund *et al.*, 2016).

Wiklund *et al.* (*ibid*) further acknowledge that there is a heterogeneity between a large number of mental disorders and, according to the Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics (PSED) research program, there is a heterogeneity in the tasks of an entrepreneur (Curtin & Reynolds, 2018). For people with ADHD, it is appropriate to act and seek out novelty rather than to stop and consider one's actions. While such disinhibited action might seem irrational, for people with ADHD this behaviour is intuitive. They discuss the reports of one of their respondents (George) who states that 'normal' people would be jealous of his work capacity and wish they too had ADHD.

The symptoms of ADHD have been linked with the perception and taking of risks, to include the making of decisions in uncertain conditions (Verheul *et al.*, 2013). People with ADHD have been described as impulsive, prone to engaging in risky situations, and likely to prefer immediate rather than delayed rewards (Toplak *et al.*, 2005). Bechara *et al.* (1997) found people with ADHD lacked the unconscious biases deemed necessary in their experiments to ensure advantageous behaviour, while Mäntylä *et al.* (2012) found people with ADHD demonstrated impaired decision making in tasks involving a significant degree of cognitive control. Ascherman and Shaftel (2017) found that adolescents with learning disabilities engaged in risk-taking behaviours more frequently than those without disabilities.

The connection between ADHD and entrepreneurship is not without its dissenters, with Wisemans *et al.* (2020) finding links between ADHD and entrepreneurship – specifically hyperactivity, proactiveness, and risk-taking – but not concluding a firm relationship between them. On the matter of causality, they suggest the possibility of other factors linked to both ADHD and entrepreneurship. What these studies do demonstrate is that perceived weaknesses can in fact become strengths if they are leveraged the right way (Archer, 2014).

3.7.2. ASD, Asperger's, and Entrepreneurship

Lorenz and Heinitz (2014) found that while occupational self-efficacy and general self-efficacy were statistically relevant to employment status for neurotypical individuals, only occupational self-efficacy bore a statistically significant correlation with current employment status among individuals with Asperger's. Respondents with Asperger's were required to indicate their personal strengths, and Lorenz notes that the strengths which were least often cited directly correlated to the then DSM-IV (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) diagnostic criteria for Asperger's syndrome: weak empathy and social or emotional reciprocity, and inadequate teamwork and social skills. Lorenz and Heinitz (2014) also noted that there emerged a battery of frequently indicated strengths which were statistically significant when compared to those cited by a neurotypical control group, such as attention to detail, logical reasoning, focus, visual skills, and creativity.

Some research relating to self-efficacy and neurodiversity is sufficiently flawed as to make drawing conclusions challenging. Indeed, there was always a lack of clarity and consistency with regards to diagnosis and treatment of Asperger's and other pervasive developmental disorders (PDDs). Since the Lorenz and Heinitz study, Asperger's has been removed from the DSM-V, replaced by broader criteria for a diagnosis of ASD such as deficits in social communication and interactions, and restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour (Achkova & Manolova, 2014).

Lorenz *et al.* (2016) studied the different experiences of individuals with autism in regular competitive employment and in supported employment (what the authors term 'autism-specific employment' because of the support provided to autistic staff). They found a small incidence of self-efficacy among those people in autism-specific employment, and reason that this is likely to be because of the supportive environment of these workplaces. It is difficult to draw conclusions from these findings

because the sample in autism-specific employment was exclusively male, raising questions about the types of employment and the nature of the support offered to employees.

In a later study, Lorenz *et al.* (2017) found that while autistic individuals express lower self-efficacy than neurotypical peers, autistic individuals only demonstrate an increase in occupational self-efficacy when successfully employed. Far from being a surprising finding, this would seem to be precisely what one should expect: the experience of going to work affords autistic individuals with greater self-efficacy. This finding ties into what Bandura (1997) says about mastery experiences, where our self-belief increases when we repeatedly practice or experience a given skill.

Research by Griffith *et al.* (2011) highlights that weak social interaction skills make it difficult for people with Asperger's syndrome to find and obtain work. Workplace struggles may also be attributed to a lack of knowledge about Asperger's syndrome among employers and co-workers, and interventions by support agencies were found to be ineffective – again due to a lack of understanding of Asperger's syndrome. Such communication and social difficulties are a comparable barrier to employment for individuals with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (Hendricks, 2010), sometimes leading to termination (Bolman, 2008).

3.8. Dyslexia and Entrepreneurship

It is usual to pursue a job that engages our strengths and eschews our weaknesses. Some research supports the idea that adults with dyslexia pursue professions linked to visual skills such as art, architecture, and engineering (Eide & Eide, 2011), but other studies refute this connection on the grounds that most of the attributed findings are anecdotal and unsubstantiated (Gilger, 2017). Grant (2010) notes the much higher proportion of students with dyslexia studying art or design than subjects

such as business studies or the sciences. He reasons that students with dyslexia may be pushed towards subjects that are perceived to present fewer barriers to success.

People with dyslexia can struggle in the conventional workplace, with their inherent difficulties with literacy impacting their ability to read emails, process written information, or communicate effectively in writing (Wiklund *et al.*, 2024). Indeed, people with dyslexia may require support with their written communication, which can make it difficult to find sustainable employment (Kirby & Gibbon, 2018). However, as we have seen, the strengths typically associated with dyslexia – creativity (Cancer, 2016), problem-solving, and interpersonal communication skills (Ofiesh & Reiff, 2021) – are not linked to the characteristic challenges with reading and spelling associated with dyslexia (Fung, 2024).

Bogan *et al.* (2021) describes push and pull effects of people's decision to enter paid employment or to start their own businesses. Just as people with particular mental illnesses (Bogan *et al.*'s terminology) may be pulled towards entrepreneurship because they possess valuable traits which offer a competitive advantage, others may be pushed towards it because their illness renders conventional employment untenable. Yet, they acknowledge that, in reality, the constraints and personal preferences people experience may be much more complicated than their model proposes, and people may prefer entrepreneurship even if income opportunities are low or risky.

The current study adopts Mille and Le Breton-Miller's (2016) definition of entrepreneurship as being determined as someone starting and running their own business. In a field of research awash with definitions, adopting a social marginality perspective offers us a view of entrepreneurship that aligns with what we have come to understand about the lived experience of dyslexia. While Shane and Venkatraman (2000) describe entrepreneurs as people who discover, evaluate, and exploit opportunities to introduce new goods and services, they are often seen as marginal people, displaced in their particular environment, and using 'innovative rebelliousness' to adapt to the hostile world around them (Kets de Vries, 2009).

Research has suggested that entrepreneurial pursuits satiate the three basic human needs set out in self-determination theory (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2017; Shir & Nikolaev, 2018) – those of autonomy, competence, and respect from others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Shepherd and Patzelt (2017) note that while entrepreneurial career paths offer greater amounts and types of flexibility compared to traditional employment, there will be activities, processes, and other mechanisms which entrepreneurs exploit in order to gain the types of flexibility they need. They argue that the fact people with disabilities are more likely than people without disabilities to become self-employed is not in itself an explanation of how entrepreneurship accommodates their needs.

Research shows that people with dyslexia develop coping strategies from a young age, which help them survive their school years (Everatt *et al.*, 1999; McNulty, 2003; Logan, 2009; Kapoula & Vernet *et al.*, 2016). Studies suggest that dyslexia may actually equip people with a litany of skills and attributes that predisposes them to entrepreneurship: skills which include delegation, risk-taking, and communication (Logan, 2009); and traits which include resilience, vision, empathy, and proactivity (Sepulveda, 2013; Sepulveda & Nicolson, 2021). This focus on the strengths associated with dyslexia has been met with criticism for placing pressure on individuals and communicating the wrong message to wider society (Held, 2004). But Wiklund *et al.* (2024) argue that the reality is that the challenges faced by neurodivergent people – specifically people with dyslexia in the case of the present study – must be confronted within a framework of their strengths and aptitudes if we are to understand the relationship between dyslexia and entrepreneurship. It is only from an understanding of that relationship that targeted support systems and interventions can be established for the entrepreneur with dyslexia (Wiklund *et al.*, 2024).

Autonomy has been cited as a key motivator for people starting their own business (Alstete, 2008; Dawson *et al.*, 2009) and is considered a key skill by business owners (Benz & Frey 2008a, 2008b). The literature proposes several barriers to entrepreneurship: start-up finance (Van Praag *et al.*, 2005); concerns about fluctuations in income and work-life balance; and red tape (Klapper *et al.*, 2006), with

many entrepreneurs reluctant to put their ideas on paper and produce a written business plan (Eide & Eide, 2011). Another consideration is an absence of the requisite creativity to think of a business concept, or the intuition to spot an opportunity. A seemingly obvious reason for people not to start their own business is the lack of an idea for one. While there is a question mark over how much of this is creativity and how much is opportunism (Chell, 2000), some authors argue that intuition plays a large part in entrepreneurial thinking (Baldacchino, 2019).

People pursue entrepreneurship because of perceived or real obstacles to other paths (push motivation) or because doing so satisfies psychological needs rooted in transition or trauma (pull motivation) (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011). The desire for flexibility and control as a push motivator towards entrepreneurship may explain why people with disabilities are over-represented in the self-employed population despite improvements in accessibility and accommodations in more traditional employment routes. Haynie and Shepherd (2011) explain how their respondents offered personal reasons for pursuing entrepreneurship, including a need to feel competent, the desire to demonstrate they had the capability to succeed, and the need to secure the future for their families. Other respondents were keen to leverage not only the knowledge, skills, and experience gained in other careers, but also as the result of dealing with trauma.

In a study of 400,000 people across 13 European countries (including the UK), Pagán (2009) found the percentage of people reporting as self-employed was almost always higher for disabled people than with non-disabled people. Job satisfaction was variable between countries, which Pagán explains as being partly attributable to self-efficacy, which can be used to predict career choice, and which positively correlates with job satisfaction (p. 225).

Comparing the incidence of dyslexia in UK-based entrepreneurs and corporate managers, Logan (2001) found that one in five of the entrepreneurs she interviewed was dyslexic. Repeating the study for the US population, Logan (2009) went on to discover a higher incidence of dyslexia among entrepreneurs in the US than would be considered average for the general population: 35% of the

entrepreneurs in her sample were dyslexic, whereas the same figure for the general population was only 15%. In a follow up study, Logan and Martin (2012) found that the equivalent statistics for the UK were 19% and 10% respectively. Furthermore, entrepreneurs with dyslexia were more likely to own several businesses, and to grow them more quickly than entrepreneurs without dyslexia. She reasoned that the corporate management environment may not be conducive for people with dyslexia, or that barriers exist in that environment which make it difficult for people with dyslexia to secure management roles.

Not all academics agree. Hessels *et al.* (2014) used two large datasets – the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) panel for left-handedness, and the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) dataset for dyslexia. They examined the premise that certain cognitive and personality traits associated with left-handedness and dyslexia such as creativity and problem-solving might lead to a higher propensity for entrepreneurship. They found no significant association between people with dyslexia and the likelihood of them pursuing entrepreneurship. However, their definition of dyslexia is narrow, limited to asking respondents if their reading achievement is substantially below what would be expected given their age, intelligence, and education. A diagnosis of dyslexia typically involves multiple criteria, including assessments of phonological processing and working memory, which are not captured in this approach. The study also engages a limited exploration of the qualitative aspects and personal experiences of dyslexic entrepreneurship, thereby offering little in the way of a dissuasive dispute of the studies I have explored in this subchapter.

The exploration of entrepreneurship among neurodivergent individuals reveals a complex interplay of strengths, challenges, and adaptive strategies. Research consistently highlights the unique fit between the entrepreneurial environment and certain characteristics associated with ADHD (Verheul *et al.*, 2015; Yu *et al.*, 2021) and dyslexia (Logan, 2001; Logan and Martin, 2012). However, academics remain divided on the precise relationship between neurodiversity and entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, entrepreneurship offers a compelling pathway for individuals with neurodivergent conditions to

leverage their unique strengths and preferences. The autonomy, flexibility, and opportunity for creativity inherent in entrepreneurial endeavours (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2017; Shir & Nikolaev, 2018) provide a conducive environment for neurodivergent individuals to thrive.

3.8.1. Barriers to Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is widely regarded as a pathway to economic opportunity and self-determination, fostering innovation and enabling individuals to overcome barriers to traditional employment (Maalaoui, 2021). However, many individuals face significant challenges that hinder their ability to start and sustain a business. General barriers, such as limited financial literacy and access to resources, are well-documented. For instance, Muñoz-Céspedes *et al.* (2024) highlight financial literacy as a foundational skill for entrepreneurial success, noting that gaps in knowledge can impede effective financial planning and risk management. These challenges are further compounded for disadvantaged groups, who often face systemic and social barriers. Halfpenny and Halfpenny (2012) observe that many aspects of business operations are not conducive to individuals with dyslexia, particularly tasks involving writing and administration. Nevertheless, Logan (2012) emphasizes that individuals with dyslexia can leverage strengths such as creativity and problem-solving while delegating more challenging administrative tasks to others.

Maalaoui (2021) distinguishes between necessity entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship driven by opportunity, framing necessity entrepreneurship as more prevalent among disadvantaged groups due to systemic inequities. Disadvantaged entrepreneurs, including disabled individuals, often require support in critical business skills such as business model building, business plan drafting, marketing, and accounting. These skills are foundational for successful entrepreneurship but are often areas where disadvantaged groups lack experience or access to formal training. Similarly, Logan *et al.* (2009)

found that entrepreneurs with dyslexia face numerous challenges requiring tailored coaching, mentoring, and training. Moreover, Logan *et al.* (2009) argue that entrepreneurs with dyslexia face additional difficulties in influencing key stakeholders such as investors, distributors, and customers, further emphasizing the need for specialized support.

Dyslexia should not be an impediment to entrepreneurship where support systems are made accessible and effective (Monaheng Sefotho, 2020). Halfpenny and Halfpenny (2012) advocate for creating a robust support framework for entrepreneurs with dyslexia, enabling them to innovate while adapting the organization of their business to suit their unique needs. However, many existing support systems are poorly aligned with these needs, limiting their effectiveness. Logan *et al.* (2009) highlight a mismatch between the delivery of conventional business training programs and the requirements of trainees with dyslexia. Advisors at small business agencies and sector advisory bodies often lack the training to understand or accommodate the challenges faced by individuals with dyslexia, mirroring the gaps in teacher training identified by Gross (2006) for supporting children with disabilities. This disconnect underscores the necessity for advisors and mentors to receive specialized training to adequately support entrepreneurs with dyslexia.

The educational experiences of individuals with dyslexia also reveal systemic issues that influence their entrepreneurial journeys. Many neurodivergent individuals, including those with dyslexia, disengage from traditional education systems, which are often ill-suited to their needs, and instead find empowerment through entrepreneurship (Wiklund *et al.*, 2024). Pavey *et al.* (2021) observe that those people with dyslexia who navigate school successfully and who achieve qualifications represent a small, specific subsection of the wider dyslexic community. This reality highlights the need for tailored support programs that address not only the barriers faced by entrepreneurs with dyslexia but also the gaps left by inadequate educational systems. Such programs must consider the unique cognitive and practical needs of neurodivergent individuals and offer support that aligns with their strengths.

Mentorship emerges as a critical component in addressing these challenges. Logan *et al.* (2009) emphasize that mentorship and networking opportunities are significant hurdles for entrepreneurs with dyslexia, who often lack access to relatable role models. They recommend connecting entrepreneurs with dyslexia with mentors who have similar experiences, fostering understanding and confidence. Wiklund *et al.* (2024) echo this perspective, underscoring the value of mentorship provided by successful neurodivergent entrepreneurs who can act as both guides and inspirations. This tailored mentorship can help entrepreneurs with dyslexia overcome structural and psychological barriers, providing long-term support for business development.

In addition to mentorship, systemic changes in entrepreneurial ecosystems are crucial for supporting entrepreneurs with dyslexia. Logan *et al.* (2009) propose that governments should train mentors to guide entrepreneurs through the start-up and growth phases, ensuring sustained and tailored support. Similarly, Wiklund *et al.* (2024) argue for the development of inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems, comprising entrepreneurs, support organizations, investors, and policymakers. These ecosystems could simplify funding processes, offer tailored financial coaching, and mitigate the administrative hurdles that entrepreneurs with dyslexia often face. By fostering collaboration and inclusivity, such ecosystems could empower entrepreneurs with dyslexia to leverage their strengths and achieve greater success.

Another solution might be business simulation games, which Zulfiqar *et al.* (2018) found positively affect students' entrepreneurial intentions by offering a risk-free, interactive environment to practice decision-making, develop critical thinking, and simulate real-world business scenarios. Their findings reveal that business simulation games significantly enhance entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions through their perceived usefulness, pleasure, and value. Somewhat contradictory results were found by Meehan *et al.* (2021), in whose study of students with dyslexia only a quarter found business simulation games useful. One of the key drawbacks reported by their participants was the absence from the simulations of key business skills, such as paperwork and form-filling. One respondent stated,

‘as a dyslexic that would be my biggest worry’ (Respondent 16, Meehan *et al.*, 2021), with others noting that simulations do not offer a real sense of loss when things go wrong. Data in both studies relate only to university students, and it is not clear how simulation-based studies could be made accessible to prospective entrepreneurs who are outside the education system.

3.9. Entrepreneurial Attributes

3.9.1. Self-efficacy and risk-taking

Belief in one’s own abilities is just one of the characteristics commonly attributed to entrepreneurs. Kerr *et al.* (2016) describe the entrepreneur as aspirational, innovative, risk tolerant, and motivated by achievement. None of these traits appear on their own to be a predictor of entrepreneurial spirit. But entrepreneurship studies continue to seek to quantify distinctive personality traits which might help to identify or to indicate potential for entrepreneurship (Zhao & Seibert, 2006; Rauch & Frese, 2007; Caliendo, Fossen & Kritikos, 2011).

When we consider the link between risk taking and entrepreneurship, we turn inevitably to Logan (2009), whose work was instrumental in marrying a well-established entrepreneurial skillset with attributes possessed by adults with dyslexia. Her 2009 study identified more entrepreneurs with dyslexia reporting high levels of risk-taking than her non-dyslexic participants, which alongside the ability to delegate may link with the tendency of entrepreneurs with dyslexia to entrust to other people some aspects of running their business. Risk-taking is defined as a willingness to commit resources into an activity from which the outcomes are uncertain (Lumpkin & Dess, 2001), and it has

been proven to have a statistically significant positive impact on company performance (Boabeng & Li, 2018).

Self-efficacy is tied to risk-taking. Unless people believe they are capable of achieving their desired outcomes, they have little or no incentive to act or to persevere in the face of adversity (Bandura, Pastorelli, *et al.*, 1999). Attitudes to risk are weighted by each person's self-belief: people with low self-efficacy are more likely to give up when faced with business challenges, whereas those with high self-efficacy are more likely to try and find ways to deal with those challenges (Bandura, 2012). Hsu (2015) argues that self-efficacy is ideal for explaining performance persistence in entrepreneurship for successful entrepreneurs, but is insufficient in explaining why failed entrepreneurs return to entrepreneurship. Yet, success in business surely breeds success, and an individual with a proven record and industry and market experience is more likely to secure investment and resources (Gompers, *et al.*, 2010). Returning to entrepreneurship after a business failure requires self-belief and a readiness to take risks, and failure of a business does not necessarily imply failure of the individual (Jenkins *et al.*, 2014).

Research is mixed on the issue of risk taking and entrepreneurship. Some researchers suggest entrepreneurs are less risk-averse than employees (Ahn, 2010), while others report little difference between the two (Parker, 2009). Some argue that entrepreneurs have greater resilience to cope with unpredictability and uncertainty (Ayala & Manzano, 2014), others that entrepreneurs are risk managers, not risk takers (Iaquinto & Spinelli, Jr, 2006). There is even a suggestion that no linear relationship between risk tolerance and entrepreneurial success exists, and that people who lean towards low risk or high risk survive less often as entrepreneurs than those with a medium level attitude to risk (Caliendo *et al.*, 2010). The implication is that taking no risks at all is as fatal as taking large risks. Willebrands (2011) surmises that a successful entrepreneur is not afraid of taking risks when necessary, but that he is not a gambler.

Risk-taking may also be closely aligned with overconfidence and inflated self-belief. In their cognitive approach to opportunity recognition among entrepreneurs, Keh *et al.* (2002) observe three variables: overconfidence, where people fail to heed the limitations of their own knowledge; the illusion of control, where people believe it is skill rather than blind luck which affects events, and so they overestimate their own ability to foresee events; and over-reliance on small amounts of data when making disproportionately large decisions. These variables centre on mistaken self-belief: misconceived trust in the illusion of greater knowledge, of control, and of the ability to use one event to assume the outcome of another.

Overconfidence carries risks, but it also brings greater innovation (Hirshleifer *et al.*, 2011), and it is worth noting that overconfidence and optimism have motivational value. For many businesspeople, success can hinge on the projection of confidence even when it cannot be justified (Russo & Schoemaker, 1992). Without the variables Keh *et al.* (2002) critique, more time would be spent gathering information and discussing decisions, opportunities would pass by, and many entrepreneurial decisions would never be made (Busenitz & Barney, 1997).

It may be useful to consider whether the personality traits being tested existed before an entrepreneurial career began, or whether they are the result of those entrepreneurial endeavours. Fritsch and Rusakova (2010) dismiss the link between personality and entrepreneurship because an individual's time spent in self-employment will cause a significant enough shift in their personality that the presumed direction of causality is incorrect. Traits commonly linked to entrepreneurship such as a need for autonomy or a high level of assertiveness (Caliendo & Kritikos, 2008) may not be root causes of entrepreneurship but actually drivers that stem from the process of entrepreneurship itself. Someone in charge of their own business will necessarily become more assertive in their business activities, or they may develop a taste for control and seek more autonomy. However, research differs around whether adult personalities are affected by their environment (Costa *et al.*, 1999; Dweck, 2008), and the wide variations among entrepreneurs make it difficult to develop a profile of

personality attributes, since any such list would inevitably describe someone who is so full of traits that they become some sort of generic 'Everyman' (Gartner, 1988).

Entrepreneurship remains a complex interplay of diverse personality traits and cognitive biases, and the entrepreneurial spirit, characterized by aspiration, innovation, and risk tolerance (Kerr *et al.*, 2016), defies reduction to a singular predictor of entrepreneurial success. Studies on risk-taking and self-efficacy underscore their pivotal role in entrepreneurial decision-making (Bandura, Pastorelli, *et al.*, 1999; Lumpkin & Dess, 2001; Logan, 2009). While some researchers argue for entrepreneurs' inherent risk management skills (Iaquinto & Spinelli, Jr, 2006), others highlight the relationship between risk tolerance and entrepreneurial outcomes (Caliendo *et al.*, 2010). Overconfidence, despite its risks, fosters innovation and motivational drive among entrepreneurs (Keh *et al.*, 2002; Hirshleifer *et al.*, 2011), influencing their ability to seize opportunities and navigate uncertainties effectively. Traits like assertiveness and autonomy, often associated with entrepreneurship, may evolve as individuals engage in entrepreneurial activities (Caliendo & Kritikos, 2008). This evolution shows the adaptability and resilience required for entrepreneurial success, and it reflects the diverse pathways individuals take in response to their entrepreneurial journeys (Gartner, 1988).

3.9.2. Delegation

Logan (2012) identified additional skills such good oral communication and people skills, an ability to network with others and to explain their business vision and generate enthusiasm, good sales skills, and an ability to delegate. The importance of networking is also explored in the narrative accounts collated by Miller and Kass (2023). They cite R., a successful entrepreneur with dyslexia who describes the support he received as an adult from a small group of significant individuals. He reports that the social network he has created in adulthood is what helps him to succeed in the business world, with

the division of labour meaning other people can handle contracts etc. freeing him to focus on making decisions. He describes his identity growing up as 'a survivor...'. The compensatory skills he has mastered since 'surviving' school – focusing on technology and using it to 'bypass' his difficulties – have led to him gaining a bachelor's degree and a master's degree, and he is now considering getting a PhD.

The role played by delegation in their success in business was cited by eight of the ten respondents in Logan's 2012 study. One respondent (DR) said that in order to expand and grow organizations, people have to be able to delegate. They talk about delegation as one might expect from any businessperson, from the perspective of needing to allocate work to other people in order to maximize human capital. However, that same respondent also refers to using delegation beyond simply easing their own workload, arguing that people need to focus on using their skills and strengths while surrounding themselves with others who can help compensate for their weaknesses. Another respondent (MB) states that they have to delegate because there is no other way for them to get through the working day.

It appears that delegation was a skill that was being employed even in childhood, with one of Logan's (2012) respondents (MA) stating that even in the early days at school, they were always trying to find ways to get someone else to do the writing so they could focus on something else they were better at. Although Logan does not specify the frequency, she presents direct quotes from eight of her respondents, of whom four speak explicitly about using delegation to counteract difficulties resulting from their dyslexia.

Mazzarol (2003) identified that entrepreneurs find it difficult to make the leap from control to delegation, and that skills in leadership, coaching, and management can be lacking because of their strong direct personal involvement in the business. This might help account for the high percentage of entrepreneurs with dyslexia. Common traits among entrepreneurs are a need for achievement (Frese, 2009; Khan, *et al*, 2015; Tapp, *et al.*, 2015), a propensity for taking risks (Iversen, *et al*, 2008;

Hayward, *et al.*, 2010; Hamböck, *et al.*, 2017), drive and self-efficacy (Rauch & Frese, 2007), and a propensity to delegate (Foss *et al.*, 2007). Entrepreneurship requires drive and aggressiveness in the face of adversity (Miller, 2014). People with dyslexia commonly possess a number of broadly recognized strengths: they can generate innovative ideas (Gerber *et al.*, 2004); they have creative approaches to problem solving (Denhart, 2007); and they are resilient (Denhart, 2008). Smith (2008) draws parallels between the educational and familial backgrounds of people with dyslexia and entrepreneurs in an attempt to draw a connection between the two. He extrapolates that people with dyslexia require a strong degree of resilience during their school years, and that this seems to dovetail with the robustness associated with successful entrepreneurs. Smith further concludes that the talents of people with dyslexia link with the framework for successful entrepreneurial activities. This would suggest a disposition towards entrepreneurship, supported by Logan's (2012, *ibid*) findings.

The journey of entrepreneurs with dyslexia reveals the dynamic interplay between personal traits, adaptive skills, and supportive networks. Logan's (2012) research highlights the pivotal role of skills such as effective communication, networking, and delegation in the entrepreneurial success of individuals with dyslexia. These findings are echoed in Miller and Kass's (2023) narrative accounts, where successful entrepreneurs with dyslexia illustrate the significance of social networks and the ability to leverage delegation as a strategic tool. Indeed, the ability to delegate effectively not only alleviates workload but also strategically compensates for individual weaknesses, enhancing overall business performance (Mazzarol, 2003). The entrepreneurial landscape for individuals with dyslexia is therefore characterized not only by overcoming challenges but also by leveraging unique strengths and adaptive strategies.

3.10. The Appeal of Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurs have been found to be sometimes excessively confident, highly risk-tolerant, prepared to delegate, and able to create and maintain social networks to get ahead (Welter *et al.*, 2016). Elsewhere, the entrepreneur has been described as a woeful figure who struggles to overcome his communication difficulties (Smith, 2008), a marginal person who is displaced in their environment and uses 'innovative rebelliousness' to adapt to the hostile world around them (Kets de Vries, 2009), using entrepreneurship as a means to escape constraints (Rindova *et al.*, 2009). Both accounts link to social marginality theory, where the disparity between an individual's extraordinary strengths and the actual position they hold in society might propel them to pursue entrepreneurial pursuits (Stanworth & Curran, 1976).

One inroad into this subject is the theory put forward by Hagen (1962). His 'rage hypothesis' suggests that entrepreneurs feel rage towards mainstream society because of negative self-perception following contact with individuals who are regarded by society as being socially or economically their superior. This rage is thought to manifest itself in the pursuit of self-employment, to seize control of one's own life. Kets de Vries (2009) posits that most entrepreneurs come from an unhappy family background, feel displaced during their formative years, and seem to be misfits in their particular environments. Rindova *et al.* (2009, *ibid*) use the term 'entrepreneurship as emancipation' to describe the pursuit of entrepreneurship as a means to escape constraints.

In keeping with this, Miller and Breton-Miller (2016) describe how people who have faced significant life challenges build resilience and are to some extent 'inoculated against failures'. Those challenges help develop risk tolerance and persistence in the face of adversity. Struggling can feel like a normal part of everyday life, and those who have grown up facing such uncertainty may be unusually well equipped to face challenges others would find daunting. Struggling breeds confidence in one's own abilities, particularly when skills such as reading, writing, and focusing on a particular task are more difficult and make the conventional workplace less appealing and potentially even inaccessible.

Creative approaches and the development of unique skills in order to solve one's problems are the inevitable result of failure to reach success through conventional means.

In Logan's (2012) study, she notes that most of her respondents had held practical or vocational jobs, or had been employed by large firms, before leaving to pursue entrepreneurship. The implication is that they experienced struggles in the workplace directly related to their dyslexia and sought to pursue entrepreneurship in order to be better placed to mitigate those difficulties. One respondent (WE) stated, 'I suddenly realised that I wasn't going to go up the ladder ... [i]t reminded me that the inability to read and write was going to limit me in that sort of organization. I'm driven to succeed so I decided to leave.' Another (AC) said, '... when I got into the work environment, I discovered my dyslexia became a problem again because the job I got involved me writing reports. So unfortunately, my different way of working ... again came back to haunt me.' Eight of Logan's respondents express a preference for verbal over written communication.

Block *et al.* (2010) note the distinction between opportunity entrepreneurs and necessity entrepreneurs: the former starting their own venture to pursue an opportunity, and the latter doing so for needs-based reasons. Interestingly, they include in their classification of opportunity entrepreneurs anyone who voluntarily leaves a paid job to set up a business, without consideration of the reasons why. In their view, people are considered necessity entrepreneurs only if they leave a previous job involuntarily, whereupon they are viewed as being forced into entrepreneurship. Logan's research shows that people leave paid employment as a result of need, of struggling to cope. Self-employment is seen as a safety valve for the unemployed and discriminated to find work (Blanchflower, 2000). For Block *et al.* (2010), the success and higher earnings of opportunity entrepreneurs is attributed to the presupposition that they had the foresight to accrue capital to cover opportunity costs and to build a social network of financiers and potential customers prior to pursuing their own business.

Throsby (1999) distinguishes between four forms of capital: physical capital, such as buildings and machines; human capital, such as the skills and experience possessed by people; natural capital, referring to the resources provided by nature; and cultural capital, to mean the social status a person may possess. Block *et al.* (2010) draws a further distinction between general human capital – the skills possessed by the labour force which can be regarded as an asset to society, such as a formal education – and more specific human capital such as being educated in the particular professional area later pursued entrepreneurially. Yet, they find a causal link between opportunity entrepreneurs and general human capital, and necessity entrepreneurs and specific human capital. This seems at odds with their view of why people leave employment to pursue entrepreneurship. They push for consideration of context in future discussions of the impact of human capital on entrepreneurial success, something Miller (2017) considers critical to fully appreciating the key influences behind starting an entrepreneurial endeavour. Yet Block *et al.* (2010) pay less attention to the individual contexts in which people might leave paid employment to work for themselves.

In discussion of her findings, Logan (2012) hypothesizes that some people with dyslexia do indeed realise that starting their own venture is preferable to the struggles faced working for someone else. She notes that four of her respondents had done just that. It was common for her respondents to have someone working in their business who took on much of the written and administrative work for them, and these included spouses, friends, and non-dyslexic business associates. She discusses the coping strategies her respondents have developed in order to manage their dyslexia. She suggests four key strategies: oral communication skills; interpersonal skills; the ability to delegate; and the ability to think differently. Powers *et al.* (2020) find that entrepreneurial self-efficacy mediates the relationship between dyslexia and entrepreneurial intentions. The study emphasizes the importance of early entrepreneurial training to boost self-efficacy and confidence among adolescents with dyslexia, proposing that such interventions could help overcome the barriers posed by dyslexia and enhance entrepreneurial intentions.

Both Powers *et al.* (2020) and Logan (2012) acknowledge the significant barriers that individuals with dyslexia face in traditional employment. These barriers often lead them to consider entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship provides an appealing alternative due to its flexibility, control, and alignment with individual strengths. However, Powers *et al.* (2020) place a stronger emphasis on the role of self-efficacy in shaping entrepreneurial intentions. Their study posits that low self-efficacy is a critical barrier and that targeted interventions to boost self-efficacy could enhance entrepreneurial aspirations. This approach aligns with theories of self-efficacy that stress the importance of belief in one's abilities for successful goal attainment (Bandura, 1989). Logan (2012), on the other hand, emphasizes the unique strengths and adaptive strategies that entrepreneurs with dyslexia bring to the table. Her findings celebrate the creative and resilient approaches that individuals with dyslexia use to overcome challenges and succeed in entrepreneurship. Logan's work suggests that the intrinsic motivation and personal drive of entrepreneurs with dyslexia are crucial factors in their decision to pursue self-employment.

By integrating these perspectives, we can see that self-efficacy is not just an inherent trait but a dynamic construct that evolves through experiences, support, and the development of adaptive strategies. It is therefore important to foster environments that enhance self-efficacy, especially for individuals with disabilities. Miller and Kass (2023) discuss self-efficacy as a final product, the result of struggles and adaptations and different ways of thinking. A better way of thinking about it would be to consider confidence in business and the drive to succeed as the final product, with self-efficacy as the conduit that makes it possible.

Entrepreneurship requires a complex interplay of personal traits and adaptive strategies, and entrepreneurs with dyslexia are characterized by resilience, creativity, and a distinctive approach to overcoming challenges (Miller & Breton-Miller, 2016). Their journey shows the transformative impact of adversity in fostering risk tolerance and persistence (Miller & Kass, 2023). Logan's (2012) research shows how individuals with dyslexia, often marginalized in conventional workplaces due to literacy

challenges, harness entrepreneurship as a means of autonomy and as a strategic response to employment limitations (Block *et al.*, 2010). These findings resonate with theories of entrepreneurial behaviour rooted in social marginality (Kets de Vries, 2009; Rindova *et al.*, 2009), where the pursuit of self-employment emerges as a pathway to assert control over one's destiny and to escape societal constraints.

3.11. Dyslexia and Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is predicated on past success and will impact on how long a person is prepared to persist with an endeavour in the face of setbacks and obstacles. The notion that people have an efficacious desire to achieve is not new. Rogers (1959) proposed that we have an inherent tendency to develop our capacities for success, arguing that we are exquisitely rational and that we act with subtle and ordered complexity. Rogers was one of the founders of humanistic psychology, a branch which takes a holistic view of people as a whole and focuses on human potential and wellbeing (Waterman, 2013). Both Rogers (1959) and Maslow (1954) regarded self-esteem as a basic human need, and one which is essential to achieving self-actualization – the full realization of one's potential.

The theory of self-efficacy has roots in positive psychology, a movement in a field of science which has hitherto largely ignored the fulfilled and the thriving in favour of focusing on the nature of healing and damage repair (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A key tenet of positive psychology is enhancing strengths rather than lessening weaknesses (Lopez *et al.*, 2019). One such notion to arise from positive psychology is hope theory, itself borne not out of research into how people reach positive goals, but rather how people excuse their mistakes and poor performance (Snyder, 2002). The basic tenet of hope theory is that people are goal-directed, can perceive routes to achieve those goals, and can marshal the motivation to try (Lopez *et al.*, 2003). People who set themselves difficult goals are as

likely to achieve them as people who set less ambitious goals. Goal achievement is commensurate with hope, and people who set high goals are invigorated by them, open-minded to different routes to success, and persistence under stress (Snyder, 2002).

Vancouver and Kendall (2006) found a positive relationship between past performance and self-efficacy, and between higher self-efficacy and ambitious goal setting. Similarly, studies show that people who believe themselves to be inefficacious tend to avoid situations and activities which they believe are beyond their means to cope (Bandura, 1989), and that anxiety and avoidant behaviour are coeffects of low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1988). Bandura, whose theory of self-efficacy was first expounded in 1977, was one of the first exponents of a strengths-based approach where the manner in which adolescents develop and exercise their self-efficacy impacts directly on the course their lives take (Bandura, 1997).

Studying both university students and business executives, Chenn *et al.* (1998) assessed belief in their respondents' ability to perform a list of typical entrepreneurial tasks and claim a consistent positive effect of entrepreneurial self-efficacy on entrepreneurial intent. The students who participated were enrolled on MBA courses in either entrepreneurship, organizational behaviour, or organizational psychology. Those students studying entrepreneurship understandably scored more highly for entrepreneurial self-efficacy. Similarly, the executives who had already started their own business demonstrated stronger entrepreneurial self-efficacy than a sample of company managers. It appears that by the time people leave school, the effects of self-efficacy are already being felt, and Marcionetti and Rossier (2019) found that self-efficacy had a particularly strong influence on career adaptability at the end of the students' final school year.

Children with dyslexia are likely to form negative views of their abilities (Arslan, 2013). While entrepreneurship may be the only viable route for marginalized people who face barriers to other paths (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011), context is paramount when exploring the motivation for entrepreneurial action. Chenn *et al.* (1998) surmise that many people eschew the pursuit of

entrepreneurship because they believe they lack the requisite skills. People will tend to avoid careers they believe are beyond their reach, but they are more likely to pursue challenges if their self-efficacy is higher (Markman *et al.*, 2002). These findings would suggest that children with dyslexia will leave school with low self-efficacy. However, this is not necessarily the case.

Powers *et al.* (2020) investigated the relationship between entrepreneurial self-efficacy perceptions and intentions among adolescents with dyslexia. They found that adolescents with dyslexia often exhibit lower entrepreneurial self-efficacy compared to their non-dyslexic peers, and that this deficit in self-efficacy perceptions significantly impacts their intentions to pursue entrepreneurship. This suggests that enhancing self-efficacy through targeted educational interventions could be crucial for fostering entrepreneurial aspirations in this population. They emphasize the importance of early entrepreneurial training to boost self-efficacy and confidence among adolescents with dyslexia, proposing that such interventions could help overcome the barriers posed by dyslexia and help enhance entrepreneurial intentions.

More recently, Radoń *et al.* (2022) found that children with dyslexia showed similar levels of self-efficacy as did a neurotypical control group. This initially seems at odds with the testimonies of people with dyslexia in Miller and Kass's (2023) study, many of whom describe negative experiences during their formative years. Mu, for example, states: 'God knows how I made it to ninth grade, I really don't know ... I don't remember anything from school except that it felt bad'. Yet, the in-depth nature of the interviews conducted by Miller and Kass (2023) and Logan (2012) produced rich personal biographical accounts which confirm seemingly incongruent incidences of self-efficacy. Mu (in Miller & Kass, 2023) talks about how much his father (himself dyslexic) believed in his ability to overcome his difficulties and how impactful that was on his success in business.

While some studies suggest adolescents with dyslexia have low self-esteem, low self-worth, poor self-image and a negative self-concept (Alexander-Passe, 2006; Singer, 2008; Dåderman *et al.*, 2014), this may be because researchers habitually use the words interchangeably, blending 'self-concept' and

‘self-esteem’ (Tam & Hawkins, 2012). This is principally because researchers cannot agree on a definition of the terminology and so use any number of different terms to mean the same thing (Butler & Gasson, 2005). The result of this blending of terms is that this body of literature, though it nevertheless reaches the same general conclusion, presents very varied results.

A person’s self-efficacy will rise in the light of success and decline in the aftermath of failure, it is a fluid concept. In school, it is our past achievements that bear the most influence on our development of academic self-efficacy (Britner & Pajares, 2006). We are also likely to be influenced by evaluative feedback from others, whether it is classmates, teachers, or parents. Whether positive or negative, that feedback plays a significant role in the development of self-efficacy (Usher, 2009; Nalavany & Caraway, 2012). In a meta-analysis investigating school-based trauma, Alexander-Passe (2016a) noted a number of factors which impact on the development of self-efficacy in adulthood for children with dyslexia, which include parental support during childhood, the prevalence of childhood experiences of success, the avoidance of reading and writing as a coping strategy, the use of assistive technology to help work around dyslexic deficits, the motivation to achieve a sense of self-worth, and the ability to cast failure as an opportunity for improvement and later success.

Miller and Kass (2023) note the significance of parental support in the lives of their respondents, but this seems not to have been the driving force behind their respondents developing self-efficacy. In a study primarily concerned with the role of educational placement in the development of self-concept and self-esteem, Humphrey (2002) found that children benefited most from being in ‘dyslexia-friendly’ specialist units. He suggests that part of this stems from having other neurodivergent children in their comparison group, quoting one child as saying, ‘I don’t feel different in the unit’. However, he also observes that children with dyslexia experience issues with self-esteem and self-concept regardless of the setting.

However, the impact on self-efficacy of being in a specialized setting may not be as significant as one would expect. Power *et al.* (2021) found that dyslexia had a negative impact on the entrepreneurial

self-efficacy perceptions of their respondents, and their dyslexic sample was drawn predominantly from independent schools with targeted missions to serve students with dyslexia. As Power *et al.* state, proposing a list of careers and measuring interest on a Likert scale is considered a valid means of measuring entrepreneurial intention. In the Miller and Kass (2023) study, the respondent referred to as Mu states:

[t]he environment was not inclusive, not at all ... I remember especially everyone laughing and joking at my expense ... it wasn't pleasant to be around.

Another respondent, R, describes trying to hide in lessons to avoid being caught for not having done his homework, stating:

[f]rom the first day, my identity was of a survivor.

It is clear, therefore, that self-efficacy plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' aspirations and achievements, particularly among those facing challenges such as dyslexia. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy emphasizes the dynamic interplay between past successes and present capabilities, influencing individuals' perseverance in the face of setbacks (Bandura, 1989). This notion aligns with the perspectives of Rogers (1959) and Maslow (1954) on the inherent drive for self-actualization and the importance of self-esteem as fundamental human needs. People with high self-efficacy set and pursue ambitious goals, navigating obstacles with persistence (Snyder, 2002). The experiences of individuals with dyslexia highlight diverse pathways to developing self-efficacy (Logan, 2012; Miller &

Kass, 2023). Despite facing initial challenges and negative school experiences (Alexander-Passe, 2006; Power *et al.*, 2021), these individuals often draw strength from supportive environments and personal resilience (Miller & Kass, 2023). Individual narratives, such as Mu in Miller and Kass's study, reveal the lasting impact of early struggles on identity and self-perception (Miller & Kass, 2023).

3.12. Conclusion

In this section, I have highlighted links between characteristics of dyslexia and common personality traits and drivers among entrepreneurs. There is a theoretical basis behind the idea that identities are constructed and can accordingly be altered (Caldas-Coulthard & Fernandes-Alves, 2008; Evans, 2013, *ibid*). The notion of counterfactual thinking involves comparing real events with imagined alternatives, and regretful thinking has been linked to low levels self-efficacy (Arora, 2011). As a proposed extension of this theory, it might be the case that if people with disabilities dwell on their shortcomings and focus on what might have been, this will negatively impact on their self-efficacy. After all, people will tend to avoid careers they believe are beyond their reach. But they are more likely to pursue challenges if their self-efficacy is higher (Markman *et al.*, 2002).

This review has explored the link between self-efficacy and neurodiversity, placing both fields of study in the context of entrepreneurship. I have explored how self-efficacy makes the difference between success or failure in business. Self-efficacy is about our belief in our abilities, and this contributes to our motivation and determination to succeed. The underlying concern of this theory is with people's potential to succeed either through their own individual agency, through others, or as part of a like-minded group.

Research into self-efficacy among neurodivergent groups has yielded mixed results. Some studies suggest only a small impact of self-efficacy on employment among neurodivergent people (Lorenz *et al.*, 2016), while others suggest the impact is actually more significant (Lorenz *et al.*, 2017). There is also evidence that while learning difficulties can hinder the development of self-efficacy (Singer, 2008) and limit one's occupational choices (Snell, 2011), the barriers raised by academic difficulties can be knocked down in certain circumstances (Hall, Spruill & Webster, 2002; Taylor & Walter, 2003; West, 2005).

Dyslexia impacts on more and more aspects of people's lives as they grow older (de Beer *et al.*, 2014), but self-efficacy can begin to have a marked effect on life chances even during adolescence (Burden & Burdett, 2007; Lam, 2016; Stagg, 2018). While low self-esteem and problems with literacy continue into adulthood, self-efficacy can mean greater aspirations and better work prospects (Lee & Mortimer, 2009; Mortimer *et al.*, 2014; Vuolo *et al.*, 2012). The impact of self-efficacy on entrepreneurial intent is therefore of great interest to the current study. While the results of studies in this field are varied and sometimes conflicting (Vancouver & Kendall, 2006; Seo & Ilies, 2009), the overarching conclusion drawn in this literature review is that self-efficacy is directly and positively linked to entrepreneurial intent (Liñán *et al.*, 2010). There is a correlation between self-efficacy and high personal aspiration in both children and adults (Bandura, 1997; Locke & Latham, 2002; Bandura, *et al.*, 2001). The stronger someone's belief in their ability to run a business, the more likely they are to pursue this endeavour.

Entrepreneurship can therefore be a means for the disenfranchised to use their marginality as a resource (Frenkel, 2008). Research points to a new era of entrepreneurship, one characterized by collaboration and the sharing of knowledge, skills, and resources (Pret *et al.*, 2015). Dodd *et al.* (2016) suggest that the old model of pursuit of competitive individual capital accumulation may now be giving rise to community co-creation and ownership. In a marketplace where competitors help one another with or without the prospect of a return, lack of capital may no longer be grounds to delay starting a venture (Pret *et al.*, *ibid*).

There are undeniable links between characteristics of dyslexia and common personality traits and drivers among entrepreneurs. The current study is centred on the coping strategies employed by entrepreneurs with dyslexia: those mechanisms they have developed over time to deal with and work around the things they struggle with in life. In my data, I expect to see common trends among my respondents which demonstrate negative formative experiences at school and at home, and I expect to reach a conclusion about the importance of self-efficacy as a key driver towards success in business.

4. Methods

4.1. Introduction

In my Literature Reviews, I explored prevailing research into the theoretical link between dyslexia and the propensity for entrepreneurship, and I reasoned that there may be a connection between the characteristics of dyslexia and the personality traits commonly associated with entrepreneurs. This chapter begins with a discussion of ontology. I explore critical realism before explaining why I chose to use this for the ontological basis of my study. After a brief exploration of different philosophies of knowledge, I move to a more detailed discussion of constructionism, positivism, then back to critical realism. The next section is devoted to my methods. It begins by exploring the practicalities of semi-structured interviews. I explain my sampling method and provide a chart showing the demographics of my interviewees. Moving to data analysis, I explain my process for coding my interview data, and evaluate my use of an inductive thematic analysis. In the final section, I explain my study limitations and ethical considerations, before closing with an evaluation of my methods and a conclusion.

4.2. Researcher Positionality

I approach this study as a dyslexic researcher and a dyslexic entrepreneur. Growing up, reading and writing were sites of struggle and, too often, shame. Those early experiences forced me to develop coping strategies: speaking things through, mind-mapping, delegating fine-grained paperwork, and leaning on technology. In business, the same strategies became strengths. That lived arc, from difficulty to resourcefulness, shapes how I 'see' dyslexia and entrepreneurship, what puzzles interest me, and how I listen to participants who have walked similar paths. My standpoint is therefore not neutral; it is situated and reflexive. I am both insider and analyst.

4.2.1.The theoretical lens I bring

Two linked ideas guide my view of knowledge here. First is the social-relational model of disability, which asks us to look beyond bodies to the social, institutional, and psycho-emotional forces that disable people (while still acknowledging impairment effects). This model helps me make sense of school systems that label, exclude, or ignore, and the knock-on effects that echo into adult work lives. It steers me to examine barriers (forms, deadlines, text-heavy processes) and the everyday slights that corrode self-belief, as well as the practical ways people adapt and resist.

Second is critical realism. It fits my goal of asking not just whether dyslexic people often become entrepreneurs, but through what mechanisms early experiences, contexts, and choices lead to that outcome. Critical realism encourages me to look for layered causes, biological, social, and psychological, and to treat participants' accounts as windows onto real tendencies and structures (for example, how delegating administrative tasks functions as a mechanism for success). This orientation legitimises a search for 'what works' without pretending I am a detached observer.

4.2.2.How my lived experience shapes the questions I ask

Because I know the sting of red pen and the relief of finding workarounds, I am drawn to a strengths-based, practical line of enquiry. That means asking how dyslexic entrepreneurs mobilise creativity, big-picture thinking, risk tolerance, and verbal problem-solving while compensating for literacy-intensive tasks. It also means looking closely at everyday coping strategies, delegation, assistive tech, help-seeking, and creative reframing, rather than treating 'resilience' as a vague trait. This emphasis mirrors emerging scholarship reframing dyslexia through neurodiversity and strengths, not deficits.

Self-efficacy is central in my conceptual map. Early schooling can depress self-belief; entrepreneurship often demands the opposite. I therefore ask how dyslexic adults rebuild self-efficacy across time, through mastery experiences, social persuasion, and successful coping, and how that belief translates into action (e.g., starting a firm, pitching, hiring). Bandura's work positions self-efficacy as a key driver of action; studies in the entrepreneurship literature connect it to entrepreneurial intent. These ideas underpin both my interview prompts and my analytic codes.

4.2.3. Insider/outsider dynamics and power

Being dyslexic gave me quicker rapport with participants. People often relaxed once they realised I understood why 'just send me a quick email' can be a stressor, or why reading legalese is exhausting. That insider status helped me ask better follow-ups (e.g., 'When you say you talk it out, what does that look like in practice?'). But it also risks over-identification and projection, hearing my story in theirs. To manage that, I kept a reflexive journal after each interview, noting where I felt strongly pulled in, and flagged those moments during analysis. I also checked emergent themes with peers not working on dyslexia and invited a small group of participants to review summaries for resonance ('member reflections'), to ensure interpretations were not just mine. These practices echo the view, consistent with critical realism, that researchers never start from ignorance and must make their influence visible and accountable.

4.2.4. Method choices that follow from my stance

Because I am looking for mechanisms, how certain strategies help people cross the bridge from constraint to action, I use semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to surface patterns across diverse stories while keeping narrative richness. I attend to both the social level (what institutions demand) and the personal level (what strategies people deploy and how those feel). This sits comfortably with a critical-realist, mechanism-seeking approach and a social-relational sensitivity to disabling contexts.

In coding, I explicitly track coping families (e.g., problem-solving, support-seeking, delegation) alongside disabling contexts (e.g., text-heavy compliance tasks). That dual attention lets me link a given outcome (say, on-time tax filings) to both a barrier (dense forms) and a mechanism (delegating bookkeeping + custom templates + voice notes), avoiding reductive grit narratives.

4.2.5. Language and framing

I deliberately use strengths-based language without romanticising difficulty. Participants describe real fatigue, anxiety, and opportunity costs when compensating for literacy-heavy work by simply working more. My write-up therefore carries two commitments: to name disabling structures (gatekeeping, paperwork bottlenecks) and to show the concrete, teachable strategies dyslexic entrepreneurs use to navigate them (assistive tech, workflow redesign, hiring/outsourcing). This balance reflects the social-relational emphasis on impairment effects and social barriers, as well as critical realism's insistence on layered causation.

4.2.6. Ethics and care

Talking about school can reopen old traumas. I therefore built pacing and control into interviews: participants could skip questions, pause, or move to where they felt strongest first (e.g., Tell me about a time your way of thinking helped your business). I used accessible materials (clear fonts, bullet-pointed information sheets) and offered optional voice notes for follow-up clarifications. These choices are practical expressions of my stance that the research relationship should not replicate disabling dynamics. They also align with the study's aim: to surface usable strategies without imposing additional cognitive load.

4.2.7. What my position makes visible, and what it might obscure

My standpoint helps me notice certain things quickly: the moment a participant subtly shifts from coping to optimising, or how I hate forms often conceals a cluster of barriers (dense text, time

pressure, fear of error). It primes me to ask about delegation, mentoring, and assistive tools, and to see these as mechanisms, not afterthoughts. The literature I draw on, likewise, keeps me attuned to self-efficacy as a moving target that grows with mastery and social support, and to the way disabling structures can shrink perceived opportunity sets.

At the same time, my entrepreneurial lens could over-privilege commercially oriented success and under-attend to people who choose stability over growth, or who reject entrepreneurship entirely. To mitigate this, I avoid sampling only high flyers, probe for trade-offs and costs, and code for psycho-emotional strain as carefully as for achievement. I also resist treating every adaptation as universally replicable; mechanisms are context-bound.

4.2.8. Closing Statement

In short, I research from dyslexia rather than merely about it. A critical-realist, social-relational stance lets me look for real mechanisms that sit behind lived experiences, while staying alive to the social arrangements that disable. My entrepreneurial practice makes me curious about how questions and biases toward practicality; my dyslexic history makes me sensitive to shame, and stigma. By identifying these influences and embedding checks and balances into the design and analysis, I produced findings that are both transparent about my positionality and useful to other neurodivergent entrepreneurs.

4.3. Research Paradigm

4.3.1. Ontology

Decisions concerning how to study the social world are shaped by the question of what there is to know. Any research therefore needs an ontological basis. There are three broad positions concerning how social reality should be constructed: that there exists an external reality independent of people's beliefs of understanding of it (realism); that the world is real but that reality only exists in material features such as economic relations (materialism); and that the world is only real and knowable through people's minds and the manner in which they socially construct meaning (idealism) (Snape & Spencer, 2003). The notion of realism was modified into critical realism by Bhaskar (1978) to bridge the intransitive objects of science – those things which exist and act independently of our knowledge of them – with the transitive dimension of science (Westra, 2018). In that sense, critical realism bridges ontology (intransitive) with epistemology (transitive).

In critical realism, the nature of reality cannot simply be reduced to what we know of it. The critical realist conception of ontology (the study of being) holds that reality is comprised of three structures – the *real*, the *actual*, and the *empirical* – and is concerned primarily with the causes of events rather than the study of events themselves. The domain of the *real* generates actual events in the world, and thus the domain of the *actual* is everything that happens, regardless of whether or not it is known or empirically observable. Our *empirical* experience of reality is just one level of reality. There are also events that occur whether we experience them or not, and these may differ from what we observe, because *actual* reality exists outside the lens of human perception. Finally, events – whether experienced or otherwise – are generated by causal mechanisms at the *real* level of reality.

My research is concerned with the potential for change. I believe if I can reach an understanding of the extent to which my participants have come to take ownership of their dyslexia and the means by which they have done so, I may be able to extrapolate useful strategies for others. Critical realism holds that there are structures, powers and tendencies behind events, experiences, and discourses, and that these exist regardless of whether they are detected or known through experience and discourse (Patomaki, 2000). Critical realism is therefore about a search for causation and causal

analysis, and in both its epistemology and ontology it seeks to find the 'causal efficacy of properties which do not depend upon consciousness of them' (Archer, 1998).

Bhaskar and Danermark (2006) criticise what they term reductionist models of disability, which evolved from the biological/neurological level, to the socio-economic level, to the cultural level, and which failed successively to fully account for the multiplicity of mechanisms which create disabilities. While each mechanism plays a part, the parts they play and the ways in which they interrelate are unique to the particular individual. Critical realism has been described as the process of studying the patterns formed in a weave, rather than an attempt to untangle it (Goerner, 1999): it is a form of integrative pluralism (Bhaskar, 1986), recognising the distinctions and the connections between the objects of enquiry.

It is my expectation that conducting this research will lead to the discovery of common mechanisms which, across my participants, led to the successful pursuit of entrepreneurship. In their discussion of laminated systems, Bhaskar and Danermark (2006) argue that disability research must consider multiple mechanisms including physical, biological, psychological, psychosocial, socio-economic, cultural, and normative. A laminated system is one in which it is necessary to refer to *all* of these mechanisms if one is to claim a full understanding of the causation of an event (Scott with Bhaskar, 2015).

Dyslexia exists in the domain of the *real*. Dyslexia is a learning difficulty which leads to challenges in acquiring and processing language (Nalavany *et al.*, 2015), and its causal mechanisms are considered to be neurobiological, such as visual perceptual distortions (Chivers, 2006). The domain of the *actual* refers to the events that are caused by these causal mechanisms, which manifest as difficulty with spelling words, reading proficiently, and sounding out words in one's head. Observable experiences are in the domain of the *empirical*, where an adult with dyslexia may struggle with paperwork but excel at more creative tasks. Adequate causal explanation requires 'the discovery both of regular relations between phenomena, and of some kind of mechanism that links them' (Keat & Urry, 2010).

Critical realism 'can generate provisional explanation of how events follow from previous events, what drives processes, and the mechanisms by which human behaviour transpires' (Gerrits & Verweij, 2013). Critical realism allows the researcher to develop an explanation for reality, which can inform further research, marrying the positivist search for a reality external to human consciousness with the notion that the meaning of such a reality is a social construct (Oliver, 2012). For the reasons outlined above, I have therefore chosen critical realism as the underlying ontological position for this study.

4.3.2. Epistemology

Epistemology is an exploration of the philosophical ground on which any piece of research is built. There are several philosophies of knowledge: in *empiricism*, knowledge is produced by use of our senses and it comes from observing the world around us, but this knowledge can only be empirically true if it can be tested by experience (Blaikie, 2007); *falsificationism* (Popper, 1961) seeks to counter the deficiencies of empiricism with a focus not on proving theories to be true, but on eliminating theories which can be proven false; in *rationalism*, the human mind holds the key to understanding the structure of reality itself, and the burden of proof is on reason not experience (Huenemann, 2006); in *neo-realism*, knowledge comes not when an empiricist explanation of patterns is found, but when the underlying structures and mechanisms are found, aligning it closely with critical realism (Scott, 2010).

This study is aligned with the social relational model of disability and is not concerned with biological causes of dyslexia, nor specifically with the impact of the associated impairments. In this sense it aligns with Rorty's (in Danforth, 2006) notion of pragmatism, which argues that the creation of knowledge should not be entangled with concerns of epistemological justification but rather concern itself with promoting social equality and individual freedom. This study is also an exploration of causation: an

investigation into the mechanisms which trigger some adults with dyslexia to pursue entrepreneurship while others do not. It is concerned with how the reality of a dyslexic propensity for entrepreneurship is constructed. In this section, I will argue that critical realism is an appropriate epistemological foundation for this study, first by discussing and eliminating those epistemological stances closest to it, and then by exploring how critical realism is concerned with the investigation and identification of the relationships between events, human experiences, and underpinning mechanisms (Danermark *et al.*, 2002).

4.3.3. Realism and Causal Mechanisms

In the constructionist view, people construct meanings individually in order to make sense of events, while in *social constructionism*, those meanings are constructed and transmitted collectively (Blaikie, 2007), subverting the positivist-empiricist philosophy of science (Hibberd, 2005). Evidence suggests that reading impairment is a result of mechanisms at the biological level (Frith, 1999; McCandliss & Noble, 2003; Siok *et al.*, 2004; Quinn & Wagner, 2013) and some constructionists take the stance that disability in the broader sense is a social construction. The language processing difficulties associated with dyslexia are likely to be less disabling in a society which, to adapt the example of hereditary deafness on Martha's Vineyard Island (Groce, 1985), has no written language. However, it might be more accurate to argue that the meaning and consequences of disability are strongly determined by context (Danermark *et al.*, 2002).

The starting point for this study is the context and mechanisms that led entrepreneurs with dyslexia to their entrepreneurship. This study is concerned as much with agency (the capacity of individuals to act) as with structure (rules, resources, and organizational structures that enable or constrain such action). Knowledge about dyslexia is rooted in cultural narratives of learning disabilities (namely low

intelligence and worthlessness) and personal narratives of learning disabilities (typically anger, shame, and embarrassment) (Macdonald *et al.*, 2009). As such, dyslexia itself is regarded as a discursive structure (Cameron & Billington, 2015). In a thematically unconnected but epistemologically relevant study, Bonnington and Rose (2014) conducted a thematic analysis of interview data and found that the occurrence of structures across their data set led to a better understanding of the extent to which these structures impacted on the study's participants.

The broad context in this study is the pursuit of entrepreneurship, although each participant will have their own individual context, such as their financial situation, the kind of support they receive, the type of business they run, and the personal struggles they have faced. Evidence suggests that reading impairment is a result of biological mechanisms (Frith, 1999; McCandliss & Noble, 2003; Siok *et al.*, 2004; Quinn & Wagner, 2013). The bedrock of realist evaluation is the formula *context + mechanism = outcome* (Pawson & Tilley, 1997), and given the importance of context and mechanisms to my research, realism is a more suitable foundation than constructionism.

4.3.4. Critical Realism

Critical realism places a divide between the theory of knowledge (epistemology) and the theory of being (ontology). It assumes that there is a real world beyond our knowledge. Critical realists must take care to state the specific circumstances in which a given methodology is expected to yield evidence of causal mechanisms, or to elicit an understanding of generative processes (Fleetwood & Ackroyd, 2005). The worth of any realist-orientated theory is in the identification of causal configurations, but such theories are not made or broken by their ability to predict patterns of events (Fleetwood & Ackroyd, 2005).

As noted above, critical realism is concerned not only with investigating events, but also with uncovering and accounting for the mechanisms that produce events. Merely considering the causes of complex events or behaviours in terms of their correlation is not sufficient. At the level of the real, structures exist that command causal powers which can change actual events or situations. At the level of the actual, events occur which may or may not be experienced, and these occurrences are often different from that which is observed. At the level of the empirical, events occur which are 'mediated through the filter of human experience and interpretation' (Fletcher, 2016). Hence, the causal relationship between dyslexia and practising entrepreneurship – the multi-factorial aspects of what determines a particular event (or events) – occurs when specific generative mechanisms are in place. The desire to work autonomously or a failure to obtain qualifications might be two such generative mechanisms, and these could be affected by myriad factors at the level of the individual, the family, the community, etc. (Oladele *et al.*, 2013).

The nature of the reality being studied – the close interplay of mechanisms which lead some (but, importantly, not all) people with dyslexia into entrepreneurship – is likely to be complex and difficult to unravel. The goal of this study is to establish the causal relationships between mechanisms and outcomes, and this cannot be achieved through observational evidence alone (Dalkin *et al.*, 2015). The task with any research steered by critical realism is to find the mechanisms that produce a particular phenomenon and to try to explain how they shape the outcome (Danermark, 2002).

4.4. Methods

This section details the methods used in this study. It provides the sample and instrumentation, the data collection and analysis processes, and provides details regarding coding and thematic analysis. My study began with semi-structured interviews, in which a sample of entrepreneurs with dyslexia

were asked to reflect on the extent to which their dyslexia has affected their position in the business world. Follow-up questions took account of their formative years and any support they may or may not have received in the intervening time. This produced data that were rich in quotes. Coding these data highlighted experiences and triggers that are common for multiple respondents, and these were sorted into classes.

In deciding to use interviews, I first considered the advantages and disadvantages of other social survey instruments such as questionnaires and ethnographical studies. Questionnaires carry a certain appeal because of the capacity to administer them in large numbers, and the facility to use closed-ended, forced-choice questions lends itself to coding. Yet forced-choice answers are rarely exhaustive and can frustrate respondents who cannot find a category they feel applies to them (Bryman, 2016). Questionnaires are broadly unsuitable for respondents with poor literacy and are inflexible when it comes to respondents presenting their own perspective on issues (Marshall, 2005). Furthermore, I was seeking to explore the experiences of a comparatively small population, so both large-scale and quantitative methods were of no benefit.

I chose to use semi-structured interviews because this research links empiric events – that is, the words spoken by the interviewees – with their generative causes. While these accounts are the interviewee's interpretation of reality, such interpretations causally affect one's actions and should therefore be considered empirically real (Gerrits & Verweij, 2013). Interviews conducted with entrepreneurs with dyslexia bridge a theoretically informed understanding of their lived experience with causal mechanisms that lie behind them (Downward & Mearman, 2007).

4.5. Semi-structured Interviews

My study made use of semi-structured interviews conducted over the telephone and online via Skype instant messenger, with questions prepared in advance, but with freedom for respondents to take the interview in different directions if they chose to. An outline of the structure of these interviews is available in Appendix 1. In line with guidance by King and Horrocks (2010), interviewees were given adequate say in the time and location of their interview in order for them to take precautions to protect their own privacy and minimize the risk of being interrupted and disturbing the flow of the conversation. Interviewees were given the choice of venue at the first stage of the process, and I endeavoured to meet those requests.

The purpose of the interviews was therefore to 'generate credible descriptions and sense-making of peoples' actions and words' (Kempster & Parry, 2011). My intention was to move from data to codes and themes, and a reasonable degree of abstraction, capturing stories about life experience through narrative interviewing: stories in which the researcher plays a part in the conversations needed to produce the narrative data (Eide, 2012). I designed semi-structured interviews that allowed me to ask key pertinent questions relating to life experience, including school, starting one's own business, and any support received along the way. Downward and Mearman (2007) warn against contrasting two or more interviews with different individuals in order to explain difference in outcomes, because such comparison ignores the broader context of those differences, but I argue that such comparisons are necessary to be able to draw meaning from the data. It is in the differences and similarities of accounts that meaning is surely drawn. Realists build the '*critical other*' (Lipscomb, 2006, italics in original) into the analysis to develop their understanding of that context.

Interviews were semi-structured in the sense that respondents had freedom to elaborate on their answers. Although there is an argument that information gleaned from interviews provides 'little sense of the prevalence of whatever such items of evidence are supposed to indicate' (Bryman, 2016), this study is guided by critical realist thinking where each piece of evidence is representative of an individual's reality (Bryman, 2016). The aim is to understand life in terms of each interviewee's own

motives and understandings, and to re-describe them with the aid of existing theory, leading to a new interpretation of reality (Danermark *et al.*, 2002).

Bryman (2012) further argues that putting interview soundbites at the core of a study carries the risk that statements which are especially striking or pertinent may be construed as more prevalent or more significant than they really are. He suggests that the presentation of qualitative data can be too anecdotal, and that researchers risk discussing specific phenomena for which there is little or no indication of the extent or frequency. Bryman (2016) argues that quantification can make inroads to solving this issue, for example stating how many respondents spoke about a particular theme, or how many were coded against a specific phenomenon. Where it is felt that even limited quantification could change the emphasis of a study, the salience or significance of certain themes should be expressed (Bryman & Burgess, 1994).

Pickard *et al.* (2015) raise salient points about the benefits of using interviews for research of this nature. They argue that the likelihood of someone being willing to discuss parental relationships will be impacted by the nature of those relationships. To frame this in the context of the present study, it is reasonable to hypothesize that my respondents were more likely to feel fearful or anxious about discussing relevant school or work experiences if those experiences were unhappy or troubled. However, respondents were told at the outset that participation was voluntary and that they could, at any moment, bring the interview to a close. Further explanation of the issue of consent can be found in the section on Ethics.

4.6. Sampling

All of the participants in this study are dyslexic and are running their own business/es. They are better situated to provide key insights relevant to my research questions than a random sample (Abrams, 2010). As such, I used a purposive sampling strategy where my criteria for selecting participants was established at the outset (Hood, 2007). My criteria were:

1. respondents had to have a formal diagnosis of dyslexia
2. respondents had to be running their own business

Purposive sampling ensured the suitability of my sample to address my research questions (Bryman, 2016), more so than sending invitations through dyslexia network groups (Leather *et al.*, 2011). Random sampling was ruled out because my sample was small, I am not concerned with the broad generalizability of my findings, nor was selection bias deemed to be problematic (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). My sample was purposefully drawn from business-owning communities where business owners have dyslexia. The selection process was subjective because I was reliant on my own experience and judgement (Guarte & Barrios, 2006), but this was necessary because hidden populations such as the learning disabled are 'often out of scope or hard to reach' (Barratt *et al.*, 2015) and cannot meaningfully be studied in generalized population-based surveys.

Some of my respondents were recruited through business contacts made through my association with Access to Work, a government funded employment support programme the goal of which is to help disabled people to start or to remain in work. Some have applied for an assistance grant through Access to Work as a result of their status as entrepreneurs with dyslexia. Other respondents were sourced through the charity Social Inclusion & Dyslexia (SID), who work with individuals who are dyslexic and who run their own businesses.

I interviewed 16 entrepreneurs with dyslexia who were working at different stages of business. These interviews were mostly conducted over the telephone, with some conducted in person at mutually convenient meeting places. The sample included 9 males and 7 females. The mean age across the entire sample was 40 years old. All respondents reported an ethnicity of white British. The majority of the interviewees were in the service sector, with a broad range of business enterprises from restaurant to dress making, IT tutoring to acting. Some respondents were sole traders, and across the board no business turned over more than £1m per year. *Table 1* shows a breakdown of interviewees and their age, gender, and type and size of business.

Table 1 – Demographics of Interviewees

Interviewee	Pseudonym	Age range	Gender	Type of business	Size of business (employees)			Diagnosis
					1- 10	11- 20	21- 30	
1	Brian	40s	Male	Restaurant		Y		Diagnosed at School
2	Dave	30s	Male	Double Glazing			Y	Diagnosed at School
3	Evie	40s	Female	Dressmaker	Y			Diagnosed at School

4	Phoebe	40s	Female	Used Car Retailer		Y		Diagnosed at School
5	Dale	30s	Male	Used Car Retailer		Y		Diagnosed at School
6	Erin	40s	Female	IT Training and Assistive Technology for Dyslexics		Y		Diagnosed at School
7	Sandra	30s	Female	Maths and English Tutoring	Y			Diagnosed at School
8	Pete	30s	Male	Photography	Y			Diagnosed at School
9	Clara	30s	Female	Actress	Y			Diagnosed at School
10	Bernard	40s	Male	IT Systems	Y			Diagnosed at School
11	Mark	30s	Male	Builders		Y		Diagnosed at School
12	Isabelle	50s	Female	Dyslexia Tutoring	Y			Diagnosed at School

13	Scarlett	30s	Female	Risk Management	Y			Diagnosed at School
14	Ben	50s	Male	Industrial Salvage		Y		Diagnosed at School
15	Ryan	20s	Male	Car Sales		Y		Diagnosed at School
16	Michael	50s	Male	Marketing		Y		Diagnosed at School

4.7. Coding and Thematic Analysis

The sample comprised 16 entrepreneurs with dyslexia. The coding process took considerable time due to the amount of recorded material that came from the interviews, the average duration of which was between 23 minutes to one hour per respondent. The sound for all audio interviews was recorded, and these recordings were transcribed in full by an independent third party. This is a vital process because it facilitates the organization of 'copious notes, narratives or documents that have been collected and it also represents the first step in the conceptualization of the data' (Bryman & Burgess, 1994). For the interviews conducted over Skype, the complete chat narrative was retained. After collating the participant narratives, I entered these into *NVivo*.

In order to perform thematic analysis on the data, I first devised low-level descriptive codes, what Braun and Clarke (2006) term 'initial codes'. Due to the volume and richness of the data, this process was intended to break down the data ready for deeper analysis. By coding and categorising the data,

looking for patterns, these initial codes came to serve as shorthand definitions and labels in my attempt to begin to understand my participants' views and actions (Charmaz, 2014).

Data analysis is a vital stage because each person goes through and attributes meaning to events in their lives based on their own individual experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It was important to consider each person's account and to extrapolate meaning without being guided too much by the respondent's own attribution of meaning. Even my own constructs of meaning will inevitably be influenced by my perspectives, interactions, and experiences (Charmaz, 2016). The intention was therefore to develop a theory that could bring together all the phenomena arising from the data (McLeod, 2001). I have chosen thematic analysis as my method because, in line with critical realism, it 'works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of 'reality'' (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This preserves complexity whilst condensing qualitative data in order to facilitate a systematic comparison of individual cases, thereby highlighting patterns of causality and illuminating hidden causal paths (Rihoux & Lobe, 2009). There is no need to choose between 'understanding of complexity and knowledge of generality' (Ragin *et al.*, 2003).

In a theoretical or deductive approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Hayes, 1997), analysis offers 'less a rich description of the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, in an inductive stance, themes emerge from the data and may in fact have little relation to the questions asked of participants (Braun & Clarke, *ibid*). I am interested in the ways in which people with dyslexia are suited to entrepreneurship, how their past experiences impact their approach to business, and how they manage difficulties in the context of their work. I therefore employed an inductive research strategy in which I sought to generate a new theory around the connection between dyslexia and entrepreneurship by identifying patterns in the life experiences of a number of entrepreneurs with dyslexia. This involved the derivation of descriptive generalizations of the characteristics of people and social situations in order to determine patterns of relationships between these characteristics (Blaikie, 2010).

I used QSR International's *NVivo* software to access and cross-reference the participant narratives, and I then interrogated the data to highlight recurring patterns in experiences and behaviours. The process involved sharing examples of my data and my coding with my supervisors in order to guide the process, and data were coded and re-coded several times in order to ensure richness of themes and depth of analysis. Coding prior to analysis is a process by which we 'break open the data to consider all possible meanings' (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). If a respondent in this research spoke about difficulties during their schooling, I coded this under a specific heading, and then compared these references across all relevant respondents to gain a broader view of how dyslexia can impact on someone at school. I also considered these individual accounts in relation to everything else each respondent said about their life experience, and how their education impacted on them as they grew up.

4.8. Presenting Findings as a Narrative

During the process of data analysis outlined in *Section 4.6 – Coding and Thematic Analysis*, I will engage in a degree of interpretation in order to establish patterns and present these in a coherent structure. The purpose of this is to offer assurance that the claims being made are grounded in the data (Thorne, 2016). We give expression to our individual histories through the self-narratives we construct, and the expression of these narratives provides us with a sense of agency, coherence, and a sense of control (Palombo, 2017). Verbatim quotations from the interview transcripts will therefore be used to illustrate the data and serve as examples of how conclusions were reached.

The imperative is for the reader to 'hear' the intended message of what my respondents say. Therefore, I will omit the stops and starts, partial words, hesitation markers, and repetitions which naturally occupy speech when respondents are gathering their thoughts and working out how best to

express themselves (Thorne, 2020). This will be indicated with the use of ellipses to show where parts of a sentence have been cut out, and the use of a full stop preceding ellipses where whole sentences have been omitted. The intention of this is not to cut and paste material in order to create a bricolage whereby participants say what is desirable to the researcher (Lingard, 2019). Rather, it is in the interests of abridging longer portions of conversational discourse where some sections are superfluous to the meaning of the overall quotation, but executed in a way that remains faithful to the participants' intended meaning.

Quotations will otherwise be presented in the manner in which they were spoken at the time of interview. To avoid distorting or misrepresenting what respondents said, words and sentences which were not necessarily spoken together or in the same sequence by my participants will not be rearranged unless strictly necessary. Where extracting conversational discourse from different points in an interview is judged to be in the best interests of clarity and succinctness (Sandelowski, 1994), this will be indicated parenthetically after the quotation. Context for quotations will be presented in the analysis itself, and where necessary the interview's questions may also be included as part of the analysis in order to best serve the participant's answer. Links to the literature and to the emerging themes of this study will be integrated into the write up of those findings in *Chapters 5, 6, and 7*. In *Chapter 8*, these themes will then be discussed more fully in light of the evidence presented in the preceding three chapters.

4.9. Ethics

Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Cross-School Research Ethics Committee at Durham University. This section details the specific ethical considerations relating to this study. In line with Article 7(1)(2) of the *General Data Protection Regulation* (hereafter GDPR), prior to their participation

in this study, all prospective participants were asked to read a disclaimer detailing the nature of the research. They were required to click a button confirming they had read and accepted the disclaimer and to register their consent to involvement via electronic signature. Those people who were selected to participate in interviews were not asked to reveal personally identifiable information about themselves or about their businesses. In situations where participants did volunteer such information during their answers at the interview stage, these details were omitted during the transcription stage and do not appear anywhere in the write-up.

Although dyslexia is commonly subsumed into the category of learning difficulty (Wiig, 2011, p. 90), it was not my belief that this implied a risk of my prospective participants consenting to taking part without being in full possession of the facts. Dyslexia is a language disability which is typified by a person's difficulty with literacy development without a general underlying cognitive deficit (Lachmann, 2018). As a concession to this, I ensured my disclaimer and research intention were adapted (Cameron & Murphy, 2007) and expressed in clear, simple language, and consequently made a presumption of capacity to consent (Inglis & Cook, 2011). I therefore reason that people with dyslexia have sufficient understanding and intelligence to make an informed judgement about their participation, providing information pertaining to their involvement is presented in a manner to which their reading difficulties are not a barrier. Assistive technology in the form of screen readers and dictation software was available if needed.

Participants were made aware that they could refrain from answering any questions with which they were particularly uncomfortable. In addition, in line with Article 7(3) of the GDPR, they were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time and any data relating to them would be destroyed. This would also apply for a limited period following completion of the study if participants later felt they wanted to withdraw after the interview.

Recordings of interviews and their subsequent narratives are stored electronically in a secure folder on a password-protected user area on the Durham University server. This data will be kept for no

longer than is necessary for the completion of this PhD, in line with Article 5(1)(e) of the GDPR. Any transmission of this data has been encrypted prior to despatch and has only ever been accessible by me and my supervisors. Recordings of interviews with respondents were referenced numerically – Respondent 1, Respondent 2, etc. – and all personally identifiable information was purged entirely during the transcription process.

The names of all participants have been left out of the study, and pseudonyms have been assigned wherever there are references to their participant narratives in *Chapters 5–7*. In the one instance where an interviewee referred to themselves by name in one of their interview answers, this has been changed to their designated pseudonym.

The nature of this research is such that participants face no risk of harm beyond their everyday experience. However, some questions during the interview may have negative connotations for some participants, particularly questions drawing on their childhood school experiences and those focusing on any difficulties they face in the workplace because of their learning difficulty. Again, participants were warned at all stages that their involvement was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time. Support information was also made available, including contact details for the British Dyslexia Association.

Of the screening questions answered prior to obtaining ethics approval, the following are considered particularly pertinent to this statement of ethics. As such, this research did not:

- Require participants to take part in the study without their knowledge or consent
- Involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent
- Induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life

However, the research did involve discussion and potential disclosure of information about sensitive topics, not least of which being potentially upsetting childhood memories which could have far-reaching effects into adulthood. While some researchers claim that interviews are the most amenable way to ask sensitive questions because of the scope they offer to build rapport and establish trust (Aaker *et al.*, 2012), others assert that employing the 'facelessness' of the Internet can elicit more accurate sensitive information (Kreuter *et al.*, 2008). Pickard *et al.* (2015) found that respondents generally prefer to disclose sensitive information to human interviewers because of a personal preference for live interaction, the ability of the interviewer to empathize, and the facility of the respondent to be able to explain and clarify their answers.

Although it is based on interviews concerning personal history of being victims of violence, Black *et al.* (2006) found very few participants in their study reported significant or even unexpected distress related to their participation in their telephone interviews. Carlson *et al.* (2003) found that 'the most prominent reason given for why the interview was upsetting (remembering the past) was also the means of achieving the most prominently reported benefit (led to new insights)' (Carlson *et al.*, 2003, p. 139). It seems that the factors which are upsetting in interview participation are inextricably linked to those aspects that presents the most significant emotional gain to the participant. The kinds of questions respondents were asked in my study did not include questions about sensitive issues. However, I acknowledge that a researcher should not assume what is and is not 'sensitive', and that 'such dichotomous distinctions may mask wide variations depending on individuals' personal experiences and emotions' (Pickard *et al.*, 2015).

The sheer act of coding and theorising on the narratives of interviews is considered a potential risk of harm because, as Collier (1994) notes, one of the inherent risks with such research is that the participants are being required to 'claim objective truth for one's statements'. They thereby expose themselves to the possibility of refutation and of making it possible for others to notice and single out specifics that are perhaps not as first claimed, thereby disproving their opinion. Trigg (1980)

considered the notion of objectivity as being a conceptual dependence on 'things being the case whether people recognise them or not'.

For Hammersley (1992), realism can be considered as the idea that there is a reality which is independent of the researcher, the nature of which can be known, and thus it is the aim of the researcher to produce accounts that relate to that reality. Essentially the issue from an ethical point of view is that through the interviews the respondents may talk about events in their lives and the impact these have had, but my interpretation as a researcher might be entirely at odds with their understanding of those phenomena. There is little that can be done to avoid this possible ethical issue, save to demonstrate awareness of the need for appropriate due diligence to be taken to avoid causing upset to those who participated.

4.10. Limitations

The issue of generalizability considers whether the results of this study can be applied to wider or different populations. On the surface, my sample was selected randomly from a wider population of entrepreneurs with dyslexia, and my findings can therefore reasonably be representationally generalized to the population from which it was drawn (Lodico *et al.*, 2006). However, my study is concerned more with contributing to the theoretical explanation for the phenomena on which it focuses, than with estimating its prevalence (Piatt, 1988, cited in Lewis & Ritchie, 2013). Lewis and Ritchie (2013) use the term 'theoretical generalization' to refer to the ability of research to 'explore issues in depth and from the perspectives of different participants, with concepts, meanings and explanations developed inductively from the data'.

Previous studies relating to dyslexia and entrepreneurship (Leather, 2011; Logan, 2009; Logan, 2012; Smith, 2008) eschew any mention of the generalizability of the findings, perhaps because studies of entrepreneurs with a formal diagnosis of dyslexia have samples with such narrow parameters that their findings could only be applicable to others with the same characteristics. To the extent that the findings of this study can therefore be generalized, key considerations include the clarity with which the sample was selected, the particular conceptualization of dyslexia used in the study, and the avoidance of the IQ-discrepancy model of sample selection (Lopes *et al.*, 2016). I believe I have addressed all three of these conditions.

4.11. Conclusion

This study is aligned with the social-relational model of disability. It is a pragmatic search for the means to promote social equality and personal freedoms. I am interested in the lived experiences of entrepreneurs with dyslexia, and I settled on a critical realist ontology because I am looking for discernible strategies used by my participants which could be identified and adopted by others. Critical realism is characterized by a quest for causation, the discovery of relations between phenomena (people with dyslexia successfully running their own businesses), and the mechanisms that link them (how those entrepreneurs survive in the world of business), which cannot be observed but the causal efficacy of which can be extrapolated (Archer, 1998; Keat & Urry, 2010). Critical realism is an appropriate choice of ontology for research rooted in the human ability to reflect on and evaluate one's motives and actions (Fleetwood & Ackroyd, 2005), both of which are crucial to my methods.

The use of thematic analysis is appropriate because I want to compare data systematically across a small number of respondents whilst preserving the complexity of the data. Gerrits and Verweij (2013) draw attention to the fact that no analysis is entirely reliable: they argue that social reality is too complex to be fully understood, and that the absence of influence does not correlate to an absence of the *mechanisms* of that influence. There is no such thing as a neutral observer, and researchers never truly start from a position of complete ignorance (Elder-Vass, 2015). Coding data from interviews will always present a concern of imbuing meaning on interview data that was not necessarily present. A key factor influencing how ideas or issues emerge from data into the finished written product is the frequency with which something is observed or said in interviews.

During the course of this research, there was a risk of inconsistencies in the data: for example, if one respondent reported negative school experiences related to reading and difficulty managing paperwork in their business, while another respondent cited the same problems with paperwork but said nothing of difficulties at school. Such inconsistencies could point to a gap in the data where, due to the informal open nature of the semi-structured interviews, the second respondent may not have been asked directly about their school experience. However, I was sufficiently aware of the bigger picture but appreciative of the need to glean meaningful information from my interviewees that I was able to steer the interviews without losing focus of the research aims. Similarly, I state with confidence that the interview data were meticulously scrutinized and coded, and that I have not missed coding opportunities in said data. I will present my findings in the next chapter.

5. Data Analysis: Education and Educational Experiences

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I analyze the educational experiences and subsequent workplace outcomes of individuals with dyslexia, framed within the lens of the social-relational model. The social-relational model was selected as the theoretical basis of this study because it offers an approach to disability research that views disablement through the effects of impairment, socially constructed and imposed barriers, and the impact of the words and actions of others (Cologon & Thomas, 2014). Typically, individuals with disabilities have been defined by their limitations, yet in the workplace, they are expected to contribute value (Jammaers *et al.*, 2016). The social relational model examines disability through the dimensions of personal experiences of impairments, social barriers (Cologon & Thomas, 2014), and demeaning social interactions with external agents (Thomas, 2007).

By exploring the personal narratives of my respondents, I aim to show how the education system can disable individuals through its failures in recognizing and supporting dyslexia. The challenges faced by children with dyslexia frequently produce a negative self-image which continues to impact on them when they enter employment (Deacon *et al.*, 2020). Findings will be set out in *Chapters 5, 6, and 7*. When talking about how experiences in their formative years impacted on their adult lives, many of my respondents drew on their education. I have explored a range of literature detailing the typical struggles faced by children with dyslexia during their school years. Numerous studies found self-esteem among school children with dyslexia to be overwhelmingly low (Ingesson, 2007; Zeleke, 2007; Logan, 2012; Novita, 2016), and a poor conception of self-worth continues into adulthood (Stagg *et al.*, 2018).

The literature referenced in this chapter provides a comprehensive backdrop for understanding these experiences. Deacon *et al.* (2020) highlight the long-lasting impacts of negative labelling and stigma on individuals with dyslexia, showing how derogatory labels can shape self-perception and lead to chronic low self-esteem. Glazzard (2010) emphasizes the transformative power of early diagnosis in providing relief and understanding for students with dyslexia, showing the critical need for early intervention. Wissell *et al.* (2022) discuss the systemic barriers and lack of understanding from educators and employers, which lead to marginalization and hinder educational progress. Reiser (2018b) provides insights into the slow progress in implementing truly inclusive educational practices, despite legislative efforts. Pino and Mortari (2014) and MacCullagh *et al.* (2017) highlight the importance of compensatory strategies and tailored support for students with dyslexia, advocating for inclusive practices that cater to diverse learning needs.

This chapter is structured around key themes that emerged from the data analysis. In the first section, I explore how negative labels from teachers and peers during a person's school years shape self-perception and lead to long-term emotional and psychological challenges. This theme draws on the works of Deacon *et al.* (2020), Glazzard (2010), and Wissell *et al.* (2022) to illustrate the pervasive impact of stigmatization on individuals with dyslexia. In the next section, I examine how inadequate educational practices, lack of awareness, and support systems in schools create disabling environments for children with dyslexia. The analysis references Reiser (2018b) and Pino and Mortari (2014) to highlight the systemic barriers and the need for inclusive practices. In the final section, I discuss the broader impact of educational failure on future prospects and career trajectories, showing how the lack of support and understanding in schools can lead to limited opportunities in the workplace. This section draws on Gerber and Price (2012), who discuss the impact of rigid entry requirements and systemic barriers on career choices.

5.2. Educational Labelling and Stigmatization

It cannot be overstated how the academic difficulties associated with dyslexia continue to manifest in adult life. Jacobson (1999), Shaywitz *et al.* (1999), and Novita (2016) all highlight how the link between literacy difficulties and low self-esteem permeates from childhood into adulthood. This was borne out in several of the accounts given by my participants. Evie (40s, dressmaker) talked about losing a customer due to her own difficulty with spelling:

One customer one day stormed out because I couldn't spell her name, and while I was saying to her can you spell it please and I was trying to spell it but she was spelling really fast, so obviously when somebody's spelling really fast it just seems to go like and you can't even make the letters out. So I lost a customer because I couldn't spell her name and I thought that was absolutely ridiculous, I'm making you a blouse, I'm not writing an essay for you.

Evie's account of losing a customer due to difficulties with spelling reflects the experiences of stigma and misunderstanding I discussed earlier. This incident echoes the ongoing challenges faced by individuals with dyslexia, especially in professional environments where communication and literacy are highly valued. For example, Deacon *et al.* (2020) found that negative labels and experiences during childhood can persist into adulthood, affecting self-esteem and professional interactions. Evie's frustration and sense of injustice at losing a customer over something unrelated to her core competency aligns with findings by Wissell *et al.* (2022), who noted that workplace difficulties often stem from a lack of understanding and accommodations for individuals with dyslexia. The experience also ties into the theme of self-advocacy and the challenges of disclosure mentioned more broadly by

Gerber and Price (2012). Evie's encounter highlights the dilemma faced by many individuals with dyslexia: whether to disclose their difficulties and risk stigma, or whether to remain silent and struggle with tasks that others might find less problematic.

Circling back to their time at school, Evie discussed feeling like she was dismissed as a 'dunce' in school due to her struggles with reading and writing, evoking the assertion of Burden (2005), Ingesson (2007) and Pollack (2005) that such labels – when they are applied to children – will profoundly impact the rest of their lives:

Basically, I always got at school, treat as a dunce because I couldn't read the simplest, I couldn't even get a grasp of the letters. It was just, I'd start sweating, perspiring, getting myself in a state as my Uncle Alan used to call it.

Evie's experiences highlight the impact of educational labelling and how it can affect self-perception and behaviour, potentially perpetuating stigmatization. From a social-relational perspective, causing someone to feel the way that Evie described is a form of disablement (Thomas, 2007), directly impacting an individual's perception of self. That sense of powerlessness and ineffectiveness leading to increased anxiety and stress is consistent with the findings of Willcutt and Pennington (2000) and Maugham *et al.* (2003), who discussed the significant emotional challenges, such as heightened symptoms of anxiety and depression, faced by individuals with dyslexia. The physical symptoms, like sweating, align with the findings of Mammarella *et al.* (2014), who identified the stress of performing academic tasks as a major source of anxiety for students with dyslexia.

Furthermore, Evie's account evokes the observations of Deacon *et al.* (2020), who found that being labelled negatively by teachers – with terms like 'dunce' or 'stupid' – can impact a child's self-

perception and continue to influence them into adulthood. Derogatory labelling and a lack of understanding from educators can exacerbate the psycho-emotional impact of dyslexia, aligning with the broader discourse on stigma and negative self-concept discussed by Gibby-Leversuch *et al.* (2019). Evie goes on to explain the direct physiological impact her struggles had on her and, in line with the social relational model, we see the impact of those perceptions of failure persisting into adulthood:

I only found out about ... acetate when I decided to go and do HND in photography at college and when I mentioned I was dyslexic I was took to one side and the guy give us some acetate and it was just like a breath of fresh air. Putting that over a piece of white paper and I could actually start reading.

Evie reflects on how the discovery of tools like coloured acetate later in life made a significant difference in her ability to read. Acetate overlays – where perceptual distortions symptomatic of dyslexia are reduced using opaque coloured sheets – have been in use since the work of Meares (1980) and are now commonplace, although research into their efficacy offers mixed results: Evie asserts that they were not made available to her when she was at school, but that they had a marked impact on her when she was in further education; the fact that Evie found coloured acetate to be effective flies against the prevailing view in literature that they have a deleterious impact on reading fluency in adults (Denton, 2015). However, research suggests that coloured overlays have a more positive impact on children with dyslexia (Singleton & Henderson, 2007). This highlights the lack of support for some individuals with dyslexia in earlier educational settings and the impact it had on their learning experience.

It is important to note that Evie – like several of my other respondents – reported that she went to school in the late 1970s. Although it was a time when dyslexia was coming to be better understood

academically, with a distinction being drawn between specific issues with reading and more general levels of intelligence, this was still before the introduction of the *Education Reform Act 1988*, before the *Education Act 1996*, and before the 2001 *Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice* and the 2015 *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 Years* which superseded it. It was a time where academic papers on the subject of reading disabilities still routinely used terms like ‘general reading backwardness’ and ‘specific reading retardation’ (Rutter & Yule, 1975), and there remained an underlying attitude that if a child did not succeed in school, they would just have to pursue a less intellectually challenging job (Staley, 1974).

This is important to highlight because many of my respondents discussed negative school experiences, and these ought to be put into historical context. For example, there are situations where my participants referenced direct stigmatism, such as Dale (used car retailer, 30s), who stated:

I left school, no qualifications ... my school report read, Dale's ambition has been to leave school.

While Dale does not directly discuss educational labelling, his description of leaving school without qualifications and the school report he described both suggest a potential experience of being labelled or judged based on his academic performance. This experience echoes the account given by Phoebe (used car retailer, 40s), who highlights her struggle with academic writing due to dyslexia. Phoebe has an intersecting disability of deafness, but I have included her as her struggles are pertinent to this study.

So I'd panic naturally and then ask a tutor to help and they'd be kind of like, well if you can't do it, you can't do, you shouldn't be on the course. I was like I can do it, I know what I want to say, but I can't physically write that down, I just didn't know how to get it across on paper to make sense.

Despite understanding the concepts, Phoebe faced challenges in articulating her thoughts coherently on paper, and she experienced a lack of support from her tutor. As discussed, there is evidence to support the argument that an early diagnosis of dyslexia helps people to account for their academic struggles (Gibson & Kendall, 2010; Glazzard 2010). The dismissive attitude of Phoebe's tutor echoes the sentiments of exclusion and misunderstanding described by Reiser (2018b). Despite legislative efforts, the practical implementation of inclusive practices often falls short, leaving students feeling unsupported and misunderstood.

The account given by Erin (IT trainer, 40s) recalls struggles with schoolwork without understanding the underlying reasons, but with an assumption that it was likely due to undiagnosed dyslexia. They describe how they 'struggled at school', and they remember 'finding the work difficult but not knowing why it was difficult'. This lack of understanding can lead to feelings of frustration and inadequacy, contributing to the stigma associated with learning disabilities. Their experience speaks to the importance of early diagnosis and the detrimental impact of struggling without understanding why. The experience of difficulties without understanding the cause is a common theme among individuals with dyslexia. This sense of confusion is echoed in Leitão *et al.* (2017), who found that children often view themselves as lazy or dumb before receiving a dyslexia diagnosis, simply because they can't understand why they struggle where others don't.

This account also aligns with findings by Novita (2016), who pointed out that the lack of understanding about why certain tasks are challenging can lead to significant emotional distress and anxiety. This

further exacerbates the sense of powerlessness and frustration that many individuals with dyslexia face. Indeed, the contrast between pre-diagnosis confusion and post-diagnosis clarity was a turning point for many children in Glazzard's (2010) study, underscoring the transformative power of a proper diagnosis. When asked how that experience made her feel, Erin demonstrated a somewhat pragmatic but nevertheless fatalistic outlook:

Disappointed but there is nothing I can do about it. I can sit and say the education system let me down but you know what? It has been and done, I can't change that fact.

Pragmatic or not, it underlines the impact of a child with dyslexia going through school without a diagnosis, and without the adjustments and potential access to assistive technologies that Elliott (2005) described. Yet, while Elliott (2005) argued against diagnoses and instead advocated for every child with literacy difficulties to have access to individual intervention programmes, what such an argument misses is the personal impact of the diagnosis itself upon the individual child. When asked about her childhood difficulties, the experiences Erin reached for were primarily related to her education, during which time she describes being ostracized and unsupported to the point of playing truant.

Sandra (Maths and English tutor, 30s) shared a similar experience, and talked about having gone through school struggling with literacy but not having any understanding of why that was:

Maybe when I was younger, when I was at school, if I had understood why I was the way I am it might have helped.

Here, Sandra touches on a broader barrier to personal development, the lack of early support for and understanding of dyslexia. I have discussed the impact of a diagnosis of dyslexia, and the evidence I presented suggests that a diagnosis would have given Erin (IT trainer, 40s) and Sandra a reason for their academic struggles. As these participants make clear in their accounts, without a diagnosis, children often feel like failures due to not understanding why they struggle (Madriaga, 2007; Gibson & Kendall, 2010; Glazzard, 2010). Many children feel relieved and more confident after being diagnosed because it explains their difficulties and helps them rationalize their experiences (Doikou-Avlidou, 2015; Lithari, 2018), and several studies (Glazzard, 2010; Leitão *et al.*, 2017) show that a diagnosis can shift children's attitudes positively, boosting self-awareness and self-esteem.

Early intervention and support could have potentially mitigated some of the self-esteem and confidence issues that impacted on their later professional journeys, a fact borne out in research conducted by McNulty (2003) and Carawan *et al.* (2015). The theme of dyslexia going undiagnosed was a thread which ran through several of my interviews, with Pete (photographer, 30s) stating:

I was educated in an era when dyslexia wasn't prevalent, it wasn't, I knew I had something wrong. I was shoved off to another school for reading and writing which had a huge effect on my confidence because I shoved off to another school and children in those days, I am sure they are still do, pick up on it and start to make fun of it and things like that, if you can't spell a certain word, they will pick up on that even through senior school.

When Pete reflects on his experience, he harkens back to a time when dyslexia was not widely recognized or understood. The *Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act* (DfES, 1970) was the first UK

legislation to mention dyslexia, but it was not until more robust legislation in the 1990s and 2000s that we saw a gradual increase in recognition and understanding of dyslexia and the need for inclusive practices. Pete's description of being picked on for his spelling difficulties supports the findings of Deacon *et al.* (2020), who documented how negative labels from peers and teachers can persist into adulthood, affecting self-perception and confidence. This stigmatization is a recurring theme and shows the damaging impact of bullying and ridicule, especially when combined with a lack of understanding and support.

The move to another school, intended to provide targeted support, ended up isolating Pete and exacerbating his challenges. Through a social-relational lens, one can acknowledge the interplay between individual impairments and the social structures that create barriers for individuals with disabilities (Thomas, 1999). Here, we see Pete's disablement not only through the effect of impairment as experienced by the individual, but also his disablement through the words and actions of others. The social-relational model emphasizes that difficulties arise not solely from the impairment itself, but also from societal attitudes, a lack of understanding, and inadequate support systems.

The account given by Pete suggests that his learning difficulties were not discussed with him, and that measures put in place to support him were instituted without warning or consultation. Such measures fall under the banner of reasonable accommodations, the kind Liasidou (2014) argues are more to do with stigmatization and segregation from the wider school community than they are about support for an individual child. There is no suggestion, either in the literature or in the accounts given by my respondents, that such measures were put in place with the intention of causing emotional harm. However, the real impact of such endeavours cannot be mistaken. The accounts of Pete and Mark (builder, 30s) echo those of participants in the Deacon *et al.* (2020) study. While Pete was moved to a different setting, Mark describes the trauma of being removed from class and taught in a special room away from his peers:

... there was a room called support where it was between two corridors and it was like a big glass box and the main corridors run past it and they explained that this was where children with difficulties go. So anyway, I went to this comprehensive school and then one day I was in a class and suddenly someone came and took me out of the class and took me to this support class which was a glass box where everyone could see you, two corridors passing by and stuff and everyone knew that the children in that, weren't good at what they were, so they needed help and stuff like that.

Mark's description of the 'glass box' classroom highlights a physical manifestation of the isolation and stigma faced by many students with dyslexia. It is consistent with Mammarella *et al.*'s (2014) findings on the anxiety-inducing effects of being singled-out in the classroom, and Gibby-Leversuch *et al.*'s (2019) documentation of negative self-perceptions among children with dyslexia. The narratives of both Pete (photographer, 30s) and Mark resonate with the findings of Giangreco *et al.* (2001), who noted that the presence of additional support often led to embarrassment, and Deacon *et al.* (2020), who documented the lasting impact of derogatory labels from teachers and peers. The idea of being visibly separated from one's peers aligns with the broader concept of segregation, as discussed by Marks *et al.* (1999) and Wissell *et al.* (2022), emphasizing how such practices can lead to long-term emotional and psychological harm.

Mark explains that when he experienced this during his schooling, it was in fact traumatic, humiliating, and dehumanizing:

I felt quite sick. One minute I am with the rest of my group but, I did need support because I was finding it difficult, they identified it but not by telling me, but then they came and took me so one minute I was, like out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Mark describes how being segregated into a different classroom for additional support was a deeply traumatic experience, likening it to moving 'out of the frying pan and into the fire', and mentioning the humiliation and dehumanization he felt. This echoes findings by Giangreco *et al.* (2001), who noted that the presence of an extra adult in the classroom often embarrassed children. The assertion that a child's academic self-concept can be improved by their removal from their mainstream classroom in order to be taught separately by a different member of staff (Bear, 2002) is not evidenced in the accounts given by my respondents. While some studies show classroom support staff can be crucial for the successful inclusion of children with disabilities (Marks *et al.*, 1999; Webster *et al.*, 2010), Giangreco *et al.* (2001) found that the presence of an extra adult in close proximity in the classroom can cause embarrassment for the child, and there was a pervading sense in the literature that inclusion can have a detrimental impact, with children making less academic progress the more support they receive (Howes, 2003), and concerns being raised about whether support staff are adequately trained to deliver the required support effectively (Martin and Alborz, 2014). Similarly, Marks *et al.* (1999) pointed out that the role of support staff often ends up being more about managing burdensome students than genuinely aiding their academic progress. The stigmatization and separation Mark felt was not an isolated incident:

... it was full of children who had difficulties like me and some of them were like disruptive behaviour problems and stuff like that so instead of having a classroom for behaviour issues and also learning issues, they just had a class for everyone who fitted underneath that. I know from working in schools nowadays is that they tend to ... send children who are being disruptive and violent and stuff, so they are out of the school building but in this classroom, it was, everyone was in the same classroom.

As Mark notes, the segregated room was filled with children who had diverse difficulties, including disruptive behaviour. This type of separation, although likely unintentional, aligns with observations by Gibby-Leversuch *et al.* (2019), who documented negative self-perceptions in children with dyslexia, despite adjustments intended to help them. There is no mistaking the stigmatization inherent in the 'glass box' classroom, a place which Mark was told was for 'children with difficulties', although one can argue that its negative impact was unlikely to have been intentional.

While Mark was stigmatized by being separated from his peers, Erin (IT trainer, 40s) received disparaging remarks from her teacher about her academic abilities, ones it is difficult to argue could have been unintentional. Such comments doubtless had an impact on Erin's self-esteem and perception of her capabilities, evidenced by how vividly she is able to recall so many years later what was said to her:

I picked history as a subject and my history teacher sat me down at the back of the class and very quietly while he stood over me said, 'I don't know why you have picked this subject, you are terrible at remember information, you can't remember facts and figures, you are never going to pass this subject. Sit there, as long as you do not disrupt my class I don't care what you do, just do not disrupt my lesson'.

Erin's account of receiving disparaging remarks from her teacher further illustrates the damaging impact of stigmatization. This is consistent with findings by Deacon *et al.* (2020), where participants with dyslexia reported being labelled 'stupid' or 'thick' by their teachers, shaping their self-perception long into adulthood. While Bear (2002) asserted that a child's academic self-concept could be

improved by teaching them separately, my data suggest the opposite may be true. Indeed, Mark's (builder, 30s) earlier experience of feeling stigmatized and demoralized by being separated from his peers directly contradicts this claim, indicating instead the complex and often detrimental impact of segregation on a child's self-esteem and academic self-concept. Feelings of being misunderstood or unfairly treated, as shared by my interviewees, resonate with the findings of Deacon *et al.* (2020) and Gibby-Leversuch *et al.* (2019), suggesting that the approach to supporting children with dyslexia needs careful re-evaluation to prevent further psychological harm and stigma.

Mammarella *et al.* (2014) identified reading aloud in class as a significant source of anxiety for students with dyslexia. The pressure to perform in front of peers can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and lead to heightened stress levels. Ben (industrial salvage manager, 50s) discussed his experience of being forced to read aloud in lessons, something he found profoundly difficult and humiliating:

At school I used to hate class reading, I used to hate it, you had to stand up and do class reading and there you are with 20 other kids in the class, and you know you try and guess where you are going to be in the book, which part you are going to read and you try and read ahead and ask the kid next to you or whatever else, and it never worked out, and you would always read another bloody page!

Ben's experience of being forced to read aloud in class echoes the findings of Novita (2016), who discussed how anxiety and low self-esteem often accompany dyslexia, particularly in school settings where students are required to perform tasks that serve to highlight their difficulties. Moreover, Maughan *et al.* (2020) found that children with reading difficulties often experience persistent challenges and do not keep pace with their peers, which is evident in Ben's struggle to predict which part of the book they would have to read. These public reading sessions only exacerbate feelings of

inadequacy and self-consciousness, as noted in McArthur *et al.* (2020), who linked poor reading skills to poor self-concept. Ben's account also ties into the broader discussion by Boyes *et al.* (2020) and Arnold *et al.* (2005) regarding the emotional and psychological challenges faced by children with dyslexia. Internalized problems of low self-esteem can leave lasting impressions and affect a person's confidence well into adulthood. Indeed, Ben's experience seemed to have a direct impact on his experience in the world of work. He added:

what it ... taught me to do is to look for alternatives, if I am going to write something or I want to say something, I actually have to write as opposed to having loads and loads of words, I would look at the shortest, quickest way to write something.

Ben's ability to memorize information is a learned response to the formative difficulties he experienced in school, something I will explore more fully later.

Discussing his perspective on dyslexia and its potential impact on entrepreneurship, Dave (double glazing manager, 30s) suggests that dyslexia may enhance certain qualities that are beneficial for entrepreneurship, such as being more in touch with oneself and relying on intuition rather than conventional academic methods:

... in my opinion, it's probably more the opposite, because from my understanding of dyslexia, you're really more in touch with yourself rather than an academic person telling you what to do.

This is a characteristic highlighted in research by Baldacchino (2019). There is a correlation among these experiences which underscores the pervasive impact of dyslexia on an individual's educational experiences and adult life. The lack of support and understanding during school can contribute to feelings of stigmatization, low self-esteem, and academic challenges that persist into adulthood. However, some of my participants demonstrate resilience and adaptability, finding ways to navigate their dyslexia and even leverage it as a strength. Seven of my participants recount instances where they felt labelled or stigmatized due to their struggles with dyslexia in school. These experiences include feeling like a 'dunce', leaving school without qualifications, being separated into special classes, receiving disparaging remarks from teachers, and struggling with class reading. The common theme across these experiences is the detrimental impact of labelling and stigmatization on self-esteem, confidence, and academic performance.

5.3. An Education System which is Disabling

In this section, I am drawing a distinction between interviewees describing experiences of having been overtly labelled and stigmatized at school, with accounts of how school in the broader context was disabling. The preponderance of written work would serve as a typical example. I judged examples of disablement to be those where an interviewee was failed by their school through a lack of appropriate academic adjustment. As I described earlier, such adjustments might include help with scribing written work, additional time to complete assessments, or the allocation of a separate room away from the rest of the class.

In some cases, the absence of adjustments was due to a fundamental lack of understanding of dyslexia, as highlighted by Evie (dressmaker, 40s):

I know the schools are changing now and you can't change the past, but I just wish dyslexia was known about years ago, in the 80's, late 70's. Because I feel as though I would have got on much better, even if I just had a piece of yellow acetate back then, I think that would have made my life so much different.

This reflection captures the frustration and regret about the historic lack of awareness and support for children with dyslexia. This regret highlights the slow pace of change in educational policy and practice, as discussed by Reiser (2018b). Despite the introduction of various legislative frameworks aimed at promoting inclusion, the practical implementation of effective support systems for students with dyslexia has often lagged behind, leading to continued struggles and missed opportunities. Evie suggests that their school was disabling because it lacked awareness and support for learning differences like dyslexia. Evie expresses a wish that dyslexia had been recognized and understood earlier, implying that their educational experience could have been more positive if appropriate accommodations and interventions had been provided.

The consequence of this lack of understanding at school is that Evie later turned to crime:

... being treat like a dunce, treat like you'd never amount to anything ... that spiralled into me being a bit of a tearaway and basically that's why the Prince's Trust helped us to start my own business because I probably wouldn't have got jobs in a normal job because of my criminal record and things like that ... when you're younger and you want money and you can't get a job, I ended up resorting to shoplifting, resorting to doing lots of other things which I know now is absolutely really bad, but I felt as though I never had any other which way to go. Because ... I was always treat like a dunce, I thought I'll be treat the same way in a normal working place.

Evie's account of being treated like a 'dunce' and her resulting spiral into criminal behaviour highlights the impact that negative educational experiences and stigma can have on an individual's life trajectory. Her school failed to acknowledge and support her learning differences, leading Evie to believe the people around her regarded her as a 'dunce'. Consequently, she struggled to enter the world of work because she felt that same misunderstanding of her intellect would follow her. Deacon *et al.* (2020) highlighted how negative labels from teachers and peers can shape an individual's self-perception and lead to long-lasting emotional and psychological challenges. Evie's experience of feeling that she would be treated the same way in the workplace shows the pervasive impact of such labels.

In exploration of the potentially disabling nature of schools, in particular their attitude to learners with dyslexia, Bernard (IT systems manager, 40s) describes the longer-term effects of teachers not adequately meeting their needs:

I suppose just like with dyslexic people ... if you had like an idiot or someone who is just abusive or 'do you not understand boy?', that sort of attitude, you are going to get a lot of people with problems, it's like if you have a load of plants and a load of seedlings, some seedlings get the best soil, so they get a bad start, so not everyone can get good training from teachers, so I am saying there are a lot of bad teachers out there and that is creating a lot of people with bad training abilities.

Bernard's analogy of seedlings and the quality of soil directly reflects the impact of teachers' attitudes and support on students with dyslexia. Just as seedlings need good soil to grow and thrive, students

need a supportive and understanding educational environment to succeed. When teachers provide poor *soil* – through lack of empathy, support, or effective teaching methods – it hampers the growth and potential of these *seedlings*. Gerber and Price (2012) emphasized the systemic issues within education, including inadequate teacher training and support, which contribute to the difficulties faced by students with dyslexia. This dovetails with Bernard’s assertion that ‘bad teachers’ are a significant part of the problem. Bernard further explains that what was missing most from his time at school was teachers who were able or willing to devote the time he needed to learn:

... with dyslexia, I couldn’t read or write properly, I don’t know whether it was just bad teachers, not giving me the time, so at school I didn’t get many qualifications, only like a CSE and then I sort of taught myself ... with me it was down to confidence and when I went back to education, I noticed when I went back into it, I was with a lot of good tutors which had the time, the sense not to damage my confidence or my ego and gave a good teaching approach.

This comparison between the negative impact of ‘bad teachers’ and the positive influence of ‘good tutors’ reinforces the themes discussed earlier. The reference to confidence ties into Boyes *et al.* (2020) and McNulty (2003), who emphasized the psychological and emotional challenges faced by individuals with dyslexia. Supportive educators who foster confidence and provide a nurturing environment can significantly enhance the self-esteem and academic performance of a student with dyslexia. The far-reaching effects of the school experience seem to extend to a person’s ability to undertake training in the workplace. Yet, in many cases among my sample, it becomes clear that quite simple provisions would have been impactful.

Phoebe (used car retailer, 40s) highlights several aspects of how the education system can be disabling for students with dyslexia. The struggle to follow verbal instructions without written support, the

difficulty in structuring essays, and the reliance on visual aids all illustrate the need for tailored teaching methods and understanding from educators. For Phoebe, the availability of a written record of the teacher's instructions would have been transformative during her schooling:

... if a teacher stood in front of me explaining something and talking it through, I used to have to ask them to write it down for me or write it on the board because I used to really struggle to do a task without seeing it physically there on paper and knowing what I needed to do and how to do it.

Phoebe's need to ask teachers to provide these written instructions implies a need for accommodations that appear not to have been made readily available, signalling a gap in the support within the school for children with dyslexia. Pino and Mortari (2014) and MacCullagh *et al.* (2017) discussed the importance of compensatory strategies and tailored approaches for students with dyslexia. Phoebe's need for teachers to write instructions down or use the board is a practical example of how such strategies can significantly aid understanding. A comparable lack of adaptations in higher education also caused Phoebe some avoidable difficulties. Phoebe describes her experience seeking help from tutors when struggling with academic writing due to dyslexia. She expresses frustration with the lack of understanding and support from tutors, highlighting a desire to convey her thoughts effectively despite her difficulties:

... I really struggled with my essay writing, just because I couldn't structure anything and I didn't know where to start. So I'd do bullet points, but then I didn't know how to get them bullet points then into a more structured sentence, so I'd panic naturally and then ask a tutor

to help and they'd be kind of like, well if you can't do it, you can't do, you shouldn't be on the course. I was like I can do it, I know what I want to say, but I can't physically write that down, I just didn't know how to get it across on paper to make sense. If I could have handed an essay of bullet points in, I'd have been fine.

This frustration with essay writing and the lack of support from tutors reflect the systemic issues noted by Gerber and Price (2012), who highlight how inadequate teacher training and support for students with dyslexia can lead to feelings of frustration and helplessness. Phoebe's experience of being told, 'if you can't do it ... you shouldn't be on the course' highlights the lack of empathy and understanding that can exacerbate the already considerable challenges faced by students with dyslexia. Her statement about preferring to submit an essay in bullet points shows she had an awareness of her preferred learning and communication style, which indicates a need for alternative approaches to accommodate dyslexia in academic settings. Pino and Mortari (2014) and MacCullagh *et al.* (2017) discuss the importance of compensatory strategies and tailored approaches for students with dyslexia. Phoebe's need for teachers to write instructions down or use the board is a practical example of how such strategies can help with understanding a task.

Offering a counterpoint to these accounts, Phoebe struggled at school because of hearing difficulties, and her reliance on written instructions was actually conversely beneficial for her:

I always had be sat in the front of the class, if I couldn't see the teacher I couldn't understand what was going on ... if a teacher stood in front of me explaining something and talking it through, I used to have to ask them to write it down for me or write it on the board because I used to really struggle to do a task without seeing it physically there on paper and knowing what I needed to do and how to do it.

The need to sit at the front of the class and have visual aids ties into the findings of Chivers (2006) and Dore (2008), who documented how visual aids and appropriate seating arrangements can significantly enhance learning for students with dyslexia. Phoebe's reliance on these aids shows the importance of creating an inclusive classroom environment that accommodates diverse learning needs. Phoebe also explained how her long-term difficulties with the rigors of academic writing impacted on her life choices, leading her to drop out of university because the thought of having to write a final dissertation was too daunting:

I only did two years at university, I didn't do my third year because as soon as they said you have to do a twelve-thousand-word essay, I thought I ain't doing that. There's no way I could do it, I couldn't even do a four-thousand-word essay.

Phoebe's decision to leave university due to the prospect of writing a twelve-thousand-word essay illustrates the disabling impact of academic expectations on students with dyslexia. This experience is a stark reflection of systemic barriers, and the emotional toll that such academic pressures can have on individuals with dyslexia (Boyes *et al.*, 2020). Sandra (Maths and English tutor, 30s) discusses a similar experience of not being understood. She acknowledges feeling less intelligent compared to her peers, indicating the impact on her self-esteem and confidence:

I have a very high IQ but I never – there were some things I couldn't do but now I know I can learn how to do it and there were – I went to grammar school – there were 78 of us in my year

and I was by a long way the slowest reader and worse speller. We didn't know about dyslexia in those days, so I just thought I wasn't very clever.

This account from Sandra mirrors the 'paradox of dyslexia' discussed by Shaywitz (2008), where bright individuals experience significant reading difficulties. This often leads to a mismatch between their actual capabilities and their self-perception, as they misinterpret their academic struggles as a lack of intelligence. In line with research by Liasidou (2014), being surrounded by academically successful peers may have reinforced Sandra's feelings of inadequacy or being 'different', contributing to a sense of stigma associated with their learning differences.

Dyslexia going unrecognized and unaddressed was a recurring theme in my data. Isabelle (dyslexia tutor, 50s) talked candidly about how that made her feel:

I stuttered a lot when I was young, the system knew that I had, they recognised that I had a problem but they never helped me one bit, so all I did was sit at the back of the class, kept quiet and anything and that is where I stayed for the five years in secondary school.

Isabelle's experience of stuttering and being relegated to the back of the class without any support shows the impact of systemic neglect. Her narrative aligns closely with the theme of failure of the education system to provide adequate support for students with dyslexia. Her words reflect the lack of support and understanding they received, resulting in feelings of isolation. When asked how this experience made her feel, she surmised: 'worthless, I didn't have no value ... I still have that fear on a daily basis.' They are powerful words, and the far-reaching effect is that Isabelle continues to struggle with fear and self-doubt stemming from her dyslexia.

Isabelle indicates that this continued to impact her working life in the years after she left school, prior to starting her own business:

I knew I could do better but I just didn't have the people outside of my family to support me in the right direction, so I did jobs where I didn't have to challenge myself or if I did have to challenge myself, I kept on a low key.

Isabelle's reflection on lacking external support and consequently avoiding challenging jobs highlights the disabling impact of an unsupportive education system and broader societal structures. Wissell *et al.* (2022) noted that systemic barriers and a lack of understanding from educators and employers often leave individuals with dyslexia feeling marginalized and unsupported. Isabelle's reliance on family support and the absence of guidance from other sources reflect the broader issue of inadequate external support, which can significantly hinder personal and professional growth. This sentiment also aligns with Gerber and Price (2012), who discussed how systemic issues in education and employment create significant challenges for individuals with dyslexia. Without adequate support and understanding, many find it difficult to navigate academic and professional environments, leading to decisions to avoid challenging situations or to keep their struggles hidden.

When asked about the qualities she considers important for success in business, Isabelle cited a willingness to take on things that she has not taken on before, which seems at odds with her own personal life experience. Isabelle is a dyslexia tutor by profession. She stated that her biggest strength is an ability to empathize with her clients because they have gone through many of the same difficulties. She noted:

I have got an understanding to help them, how to address certain things in a better manner, seek help and give them better advice to help with the day to day in the workplace.

Isabelle's ability to support others is shaped by her own experiences of suffering at school due to dyslexia. Her insights and empathy as a tutor highlight the crucial role of lived experience in fostering effective support systems for students with similar challenges. Her journey from struggling in school to becoming a supportive tutor also resonates with McNulty (2003) and Boyes *et al.* (2020), who emphasized the role of self-awareness and resilience in managing dyslexia. Isabelle's efforts to help her students reflect an understanding of their struggles and a commitment to ensuring they receive the support she herself lacked.

Clara (actress, 30s) reflects on the positive impact of having had their dyslexia diagnosed at a young age, in time for the provision of additional support to make a difference to their educational prospects:

I kind of struggled at school ... and I wouldn't kind of make a fuss about it at school, I'd probably get my mum to help me with it ... I was always quite hard-working, so that's how I coped with it. But I think it kind of, I struggled in English, and languages quite a lot, and I was lucky that my mum had me assessed when I was 14 with an educational psychologist. And because of that, I was given kind of extra time in exams, and a reader to help with certain exams, and that helped tremendously.

The positive difference made by receiving a diagnosis at the age of 14 and the subsequent accommodations in exams align closely with Glazzard (2010), who emphasized that obtaining a dyslexia diagnosis can serve as a turning point for many students. Knowing the root cause of their

struggles often brings relief and understanding, which in turn helps in managing academic challenges more effectively. The provision of extra time and a reader helped Clara cope with exam pressures, illustrating how such accommodations can significantly enhance academic performance and reduce stress (Pino & Mortari, 2014; MacCullagh *et al.*, 2017).

According to the experience of Mark (builder, 30s), the negative effects of dyslexia being misunderstood or handled without sensitivity are rivalled only by a disbelief in its existence at all:

In my early years I was at a primary school and the headmaster didn't believe that dyslexic was a condition, my mum realised that there was something wrong and this would have been in the seventies and she, there was no internet or anything like that, she did it off her own back and she found that there was a place in Birmingham where you could go and get assessed and this wasn't with the help of the school, this was my mum, just doing what she felt that needed to be done.

Clara's (actress, 30s) experience of being at a primary school where the headmaster didn't believe dyslexia was a condition shows the challenges of dealing with systemic ignorance and lack of support. This links to the disabling impact of an education system that fails to recognize and support individuals with dyslexia. When asked about the challenges he has faced relating to his dyslexia, Mark cited spelling as the biggest issue. For him, difficulty spelling equates to difficulty communicating, and he feels that if he cannot spell correctly, people will not want to let him do work for them:

It is communicating, I can't communicate. I want to because, to spell a word wrong, people are going to see that and then they are going to judge me in such a way that they will think I

am not capable of, if I can't read and write then are they going to let me do any work for them and stuff like that ... I feel frustrated but I want to change that and I know that technology has come on quite a bit, regarding voice recognition and spell check and stuff like this, so hopefully I will be able to sort out my IT skills so that then it is a lot easier for me then to be able to do my normal business work.

These interviews paint a vivid picture of how dyslexia intersects with systemic barriers to create a disabling environment. Several interviewees highlighted the absence of early diagnosis and support, which exacerbated their difficulties and negatively impacted their self-esteem and academic performance. Glazzard (2010) emphasized that early diagnosis and understanding can be transformative, relieving students and helping them manage their challenges more effectively. Without early intervention, the education system failed these individuals, setting a trajectory of struggle and underachievement. Furthermore, the pervasive negative labelling and stigmatization from teachers and peers emerged as a recurring theme. Interviewees described being called 'dunce', being treated as less capable, or were subjected to public humiliation during class reading. Deacon *et al.* (2020) found that such derogatory labels can have long-lasting impacts, shaping self-perception and leading to chronic low self-esteem. This aligns with the broader issue of systemic failure to create supportive and understanding environments.

The experiences of my interviewees illustrate the disabling impact of inadequate educational practices. Whether through a lack of visual aids, unsupportive tutors, or an over-reliance on traditional assessment methods, these practices hindered their academic success. Reiser (2018b) and Wissell *et al.* (2022) emphasized the need for inclusive practices and systemic changes to support diverse learning needs. My participants variously experienced a lack of awareness and support for dyslexia at school, resulting in feelings of marginalization and hindered educational progress. Indeed, Isabelle (dyslexia tutor, 50s) endured long-lasting effects of being unsupported and misunderstood in school,

resulting in ongoing feelings of fear and self-doubt. Inadequate support for dyslexia negatively affected the academic performance and confidence of Phoebe (used car retailer) and Bernard (IT systems manager), leading to challenges in further education and training. These accounts highlight the need for greater awareness, understanding, and support for people with dyslexia during their school years.

5.4. Educational Failure

In the final section of this chapter, I am going to discuss the theme of educational failure. It is something discussed directly by only a few of my interviewees, with Dale (used car retailer, 30s) being the one who draws the most direct link between his failure at school and the ensuing barriers to his desired line of work:

Did apprentice electricianing which I really enjoyed, that's the only job I did actually, that is actually the only job I actually enjoyed doing. I wanted to become an electrician, I genuinely wanted to do it, but then, the problem was then, I went to college and I couldn't do the course because I didn't have the qualifications.

Dale's account of his experience at school and his career trajectory since leaving school makes clear the generative mechanisms (Oladele *et al.*, 2013) that led to him starting his own business. He expresses a desire to work autonomously, something which is explicitly linked to his failure to obtain qualifications. That academic failure appears to have its roots in the lack of support and understanding

he received at school. He explains the enduring challenges presented by his educational experiences, not confined only to a lack of formal qualifications but more broadly to a sense of having been given up on:

I've done all sorts of jobs, I've tried everything. I've tried absolutely everything since I left school. I left school with no qualifications. In fact the school report read, it's a bit of a joke now actually, but my school report read, Dale's [name changed to protect anonymity] ambition has been to leave school.

His words suggest that his struggles at school were acknowledged by his teachers but, rather than being tackled, were allowed to become routine. Indeed, for a teacher to write 'Dales's ambition has been to leave school' really only serves to trivialize his struggles. The use of the adverbial 'now' in his remark that his report card is 'a bit of a joke now' suggests that, in fact, his struggles were far from being a joke to him at the time. He left school with no qualifications and passed from one job to the next without direction or purpose, spending just a few months at each, striving 'to find some identity'. He served as an apprentice electrician, a job he said he liked, but for which he failed the entry exam due to the reading and writing components:

I actually talked my way into the entry exam, even though I didn't have the qualifications but me spelling and reading and writing were that poor that I wasn't offered a place so obviously I was devastated and moved onto the next job.

Dale makes it apparent that his learning difficulties became institutionalized, and he himself became inexorably linked with them. Dale's experiences are not unique among my sample. The account given by Erin (IT training manager, 40s) reflects an education system that let her down. She struggled with coursework and examinations, experienced setbacks such as failing exams multiple times, and she discussed the frustration and sense of failure that individuals with dyslexia may encounter within the educational system:

I struggled at school, I distinctly remember finding the work difficult but not knowing why it was difficult. I actually failed my English O level twice. I gave up trying to retake it because obviously my poor spelling ability wasn't great and I spent probably a quarter of my last two years at high school playing truant and funnily enough nobody seemed to be bothered. The fact that I wasn't there, people didn't care.

Her short time in tertiary education was demonstrably impacted by her formative school experiences, leading to Erin attending 6th Form college to re-take her examinations but only enrolling for 2 months before dropping out. Elsewhere in her interview she attributes her childhood struggles with dyslexia to being the direct cause of her needing to spend a short period of time in a psychiatric rehabilitation centre during her adolescence:

I struggled at school, the fact that I had a poor home/family life – I think lots of things kind of trigger. It is not one thing. When you start to spiral, everything builds up and you find yourself spiralling faster.

Bernard (IT systems manager, 40s) left school with one qualification, something which he believes was because his teachers didn't make the time to try and support him. He attributes this outcome to his unsupported struggles with dyslexia:

... with dyslexia, I couldn't read or write properly, I don't know whether it was just bad teachers, not giving me the time, so at school I didn't get many qualifications, only like a CSE and then I sort of taught myself, so when I left school I went down to London and I did security and I noticed all IT people were as clever as me, because I used to beat them at chess, so that got us back into education, so it is a way, it is all down to us, with me it was down to confidence and when I went back to education, I noticed when I went back into it, I was with a lot of good tutors which had the time, the sense not to damage my confidence or my ego and gave a good teaching approach.

Bernard had the fortitude to appreciate his own intelligence, and to recognize that his struggles at school were exacerbated by the lack of support he received when he was there. He was able to recognize the shortcomings of educators who did not nurture the confidence of neurodivergent learners such as him.

Dave's (double glazing manager, 30s) experience suggests a disconnect between his perceived identity and societal expectations, which could relate to his educational experiences:

I've always felt like I'm very much a fake or an imposter really ... when I go to business meetings, I always feel like the odd one out because I'm not a businessman, I'm just [real name]

redacted] who runs the glass company, who works at the glass company, I haven't felt like a businessperson. ... I've always felt like I'm very much a fake or an imposter really.

While there is no explicit mention of educational failure in his interview, there are indications of Dave's unconventional path, and a sense of dissatisfaction or scepticism about the effectiveness of traditional academic education in preparing individuals for entrepreneurship. He discusses his belief that as a nation we 'teach people academically and we teach them how to add up ... but we don't actually teach them how to operate a business', which implies a belief that formal education should not be one-size-fits-all and more should be done to support the less academically motivated to pursue more vocational paths.

These narratives highlight the impact of educational failure on a person's career prospects, self-esteem, and sense of identity. Dale (used car retailer, 30s) directly correlates his failure at school with subsequent barriers to pursuing his desired career path as an electrician. Despite enjoying the work, he was unable to complete the necessary qualifications due to his struggles with reading and writing. His struggles at school were acknowledged by teachers but were not adequately addressed, leading to routine failures and a sense of being given up on. Erin (IT training manager, 40s) recounts a similar narrative of struggling at school, failing exams, and experiencing frustration and a sense of failure within school. She failed her English O-level twice due to her difficulties with spelling, and eventually gave up trying to retake it, feeling unsupported and disengaged from the education system. Collectively, they reveal the importance of addressing the diverse learning needs of students and providing adequate support to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities.

The negative school experiences of my respondents had effects that lasted into adulthood. Indeed, Isabelle (dyslexia tutor, 50s) even used her own negative experiences to inform her present work as a tutor for students with dyslexia. These individuals survived school by developing coping strategies,

and these strategies were necessary because schools failed to embed necessary support. Moving beyond education, in the next chapter I will explore how employment experiences are linked to the pursuit of entrepreneurship.

5.5. Conclusion

The narratives of my participants illustrate the disabling impact of an education system that failed to recognize and support their dyslexia, and which in turn significantly shaped their future prospects and experiences in the workplace. The social relational model highlights how systemic barriers and negative social interactions can disable individuals. Glazzard (2010) noted the transformational power of early diagnosis, which could have provided these individuals with much-needed relief and understanding, mitigating the disabling impact of their impairments. Indeed, Leitão *et al.* (2017) found that children often view themselves as lazy or dumb before receiving a dyslexia diagnosis, highlighting the confusion and frustration they experience. The lack of early diagnosis and support, as emphasized by Clara (actress, 30s) and Erin (IT trainer, 40s), shows the detrimental effects of not understanding their struggles.

Negative labelling and stigmatization by teachers affected the self-perception of Evie (dressmaker, 40s) and Erin. Deacon *et al.* (2020) found that such labels shape self-perception, leading to chronic low self-esteem and reinforcing the disabling impact of socially constructed barriers. This influenced my interviewee's decisions to avoid challenging jobs or to disengage from educational opportunities, aligning with the findings of Wissell *et al.* (2022). While Bear (2002) asserted that a child's academic self-concept could be improved by their removal from mainstream classrooms in order to be taught separately by a different member of staff, Mark's (builder, 30s) experience directly contradicts this assertion. Mark describes being segregated into a different classroom for additional support as a

deeply traumatic experience. Bear's suggestion is based on the idea that tailored and individualized attention might help improve the academic self-concept of children with dyslexia but, rather than feeling supported, Mark experienced humiliation due to this separation. This negative experience aligns with findings by Giangreco *et al.* (2001) and Marks *et al.* (1999), who noted that the presence of additional support staff can lead to embarrassment and a sense of stigma.

The experiences of Evie (dressmaker, 40s) and Mark, who faced frustration and underachievement due to the absence of tailored teaching methods and support systems, align with the findings of Reiser (2018b) and Wissell *et al.* (2022). Reiser (2018b) highlighted the slow progress in implementing inclusive educational practices and the resultant systemic barriers that hinder students with dyslexia. Similarly, Wissell *et al.* (2022) emphasized the marginalization of individuals with dyslexia due to a lack of understanding and support from educators. Both studies support the need for inclusive practices, as noted by Pino and Mortari (2014) and MacCullagh *et al.* (2017), who cite the positive impact of compensatory strategies and tailored support. My own findings highlight the real-world impact of these systemic failures, illustrating the critical need for schools to adopt more inclusive and supportive practices to ensure equitable learning environments for all students.

The experiences of Dale (used car retailer, 30s) highlight the disabling impact of educational failures, where the lack of qualifications directly hindered the pursuit of a career as an electrician. This aligns with Gerber and Price (2012), who found that systemic barriers often exclude talented individuals from fields they are passionate about. These authors emphasized that the education system and workplace environments frequently maintain high entry thresholds that do not account for the diverse capabilities of individuals with dyslexia, thereby perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and underachievement. Dale's narrative of facing barriers due to inadequate support during his education illustrates this finding, demonstrating how these systemic issues extend beyond the school years and into professional aspirations.

Bernard's (IT systems manager, 40s) account reveals the necessity for the education system to adopt more inclusive practices, as emphasized by Gerber and Price (2012). By implementing flexible teaching methods, providing adequate time for assignments, and ensuring teachers are trained to understand and support students with dyslexia, educational institutions can help mitigate these systemic barriers. The experience of Bernard highlights the long-term impact of these systemic inadequacies, reinforcing the call for more inclusive educational practices to ensure equitable opportunities for all students.

Mark's (builder, 30s) experience of struggling with communication and fearing judgment underscores the long-lasting impact of these negative self-perceptions, as discussed by Gibby-Leversuch *et al.* (2019) who discovered that negative self-perceptions related to academic abilities persist among children with dyslexia, even when adjustments are made. Their study highlighted how these negative self-perceptions can carry over into adulthood, affecting an individual's confidence and self-esteem in various contexts. Reinforcing the disabling effects described by the social-relational model, Wissell *et al.* (2022) also emphasized the pervasive stigma and misunderstanding that individuals with dyslexia encounter, particularly in professional settings. They found that negative social interactions and judgments from peers and colleagues can lead to a feeling of inadequacy and self-doubt. This aligns with Mark's fear of being judged for spelling errors, which impacts his ability to communicate effectively and feel confident in his professional capabilities.

However, the narratives in my data also reveal resilience and adaptability. Isabelle's (dyslexia tutor, 50s) role as a tutor, shaped by her own struggles, illustrates the transformative potential of lived experience in fostering resilience and effective coping strategies. This supports the findings of McNulty (2003), who emphasized the importance of self-awareness and resilience in managing dyslexia. Their research found that individuals who develop a strong sense of self-awareness and understanding of their own learning processes are better equipped to navigate challenges and leverage their strengths. Boyes *et al.* (2020) also emphasized self-awareness and resilience, showing how personal experiences can lead to positive social interactions that mitigate the disabling effects of systemic barriers.

Mark's (builder, 30s) optimism about the advancements in technology aligns with these findings of Chivers (2006) and Dore (2008), who emphasized the significant improvements that assistive technologies can bring to individuals with dyslexia. Their research highlighted how tools can mitigate the challenges associated with reading and writing difficulties. These technologies empower individuals with dyslexia to communicate more effectively and manage their work with greater ease, reducing the reliance on traditional literacy skills that often pose barriers. The hope expressed by Mark reflects a positive outlook on the role of technology in mitigating the disabling effects of dyslexia, paving the way for more inclusive and supportive work environments.

Disabling educational experiences set a trajectory of self-doubt and limited opportunities in the workplace. Dale's (used car retailer, 30s) inability to pursue a career as an electrician due to the lack of qualifications exemplifies this. Gerber and Price (2012) found that systemic barriers exclude talented individuals from some fields, illustrating how socially constructed barriers continue to disable individuals beyond their school years. Similarly, Bernard (IT systems manager, 40s) attributed his lack of qualifications to inadequate support. The lack of tailored support and flexible teaching methods meant that Bernard was unable to achieve the qualifications necessary for his desired career.

The limitations and challenges faced in traditional educational and professional environments often pushes individuals with dyslexia towards alternative paths, such as entrepreneurship. The need to adapt and create compensatory strategies during their school years equips people with dyslexia with unique problem-solving skills and resilience, essential traits for successful entrepreneurs. Dale's (used car retailer, 30s) narrative of navigating the workplace independently despite being unable to meet traditional qualifications highlights this entrepreneurial spirit. As he shared: 'I actually talked my way into the entry exam, even though I didn't have the qualifications but me spelling and reading and writing were that poor that I wasn't offered a place so obviously I was devastated and moved onto the next job.' These experiences align with the findings of Pino and Mortari (2014) and MacCullagh *et al.*

(2017), who emphasized the importance of compensatory strategies and resilience in managing dyslexia.

The experiences of my respondents illustrate the profound impact of educational failures and socially constructed barriers on a person's future prospects. Their stories show the need for inclusive and supportive educational practices, greater awareness of dyslexia, and the transformative potential of empathy and tailored support in both educational and professional settings. This sets the stage for further exploration of how experiences in the workplace inspired adults with dyslexia to become entrepreneurs, leveraging their unique strengths and resilience to create successful ventures.

6. Data Analysis: Employment Experiences

The entrepreneurial journeys of individuals with dyslexia are marked by a unique interplay of barriers and resilience. As this chapter explores, the employment experiences of entrepreneurs with dyslexia often illuminate how systemic inequities in traditional work environments and educational frameworks shape their decisions to pursue self-employment. Theoretical perspectives such as necessity-driven entrepreneurship (Block *et al.*, 2010) and ‘entrepreneurship as emancipation’ (Rindova *et al.*, 2009) frame these decisions as responses to restrictive conditions, emphasizing the ways in which individuals with dyslexia seek autonomy and control over their careers. Dyslexia itself often introduces challenges that amplify these systemic barriers, including difficulties with bureaucratic and administrative tasks, as noted by Logan (2012), yet it also cultivates strengths such as creative problem-solving and adaptive thinking, identified by Kapoula *et al.* (2016).

The data presented in this chapter align with established findings on the role of determination (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2017) in entrepreneurial motivation. Many of my participants describe experiences of marginalization in the workplace, where nepotism, a lack of accommodations, or misaligned roles limit their opportunities for growth. These narratives support the notion of social marginality espoused by Kets de Vries’ (2009) and Rindova *et al.* (2009), which suggests that marginalized individuals often turn to entrepreneurship as a pathway to reclaim agency and assert their value in professional contexts. Similarly, these narratives reflect a recurring theme in dyslexia research, as explored by Alexander-Passe (2015), in which past failures or exclusion – particularly in education – propel individuals to seek avenues where their unique talents can flourish.

Yet, as the data will show, these paths are fraught with challenges, from financial and bureaucratic barriers to a persistent lack of tailored support. Existing systems are designed predominantly for neurotypical entrepreneurs, often leaving individuals with dyslexia to navigate these complexities

alone. This chapter draws on key works such as those by Logan *et al.* (2009), who critique the one-size-fits-all nature of business support services, and Halfpenny and Halfpenny (2012), who emphasize the need for empathetic and practical guidance tailored to entrepreneurs with dyslexia. Additionally, the strengths-based perspective (Eide & Eide, 2011) highlights the untapped potential of entrepreneurs with dyslexia to use creative and strategic approaches to overcoming obstacles.

Through the analysis of the narratives drawn from my interviews, this chapter reveals not only the systemic shortcomings in entrepreneurial support but also the resourcefulness of individuals with dyslexia in leveraging alternative networks and learning through experiential processes. These findings reveal the critical need for more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems, including mentorship programs and accessible training frameworks that align with the unique needs of entrepreneurs with dyslexia. By knocking down these barriers, as suggested by Singer (2008), systems can better enable these individuals to harness their strengths and achieve success.

6.1. Difficulty Finding/Keeping Paid Employment

Several of my respondents reported difficulties finding employment, sometimes due to the limited job opportunities in their area. The job market in the Northeast of England was partly what fuelled the entrepreneurial aspirations of Bernard (IT systems manager, 40s), who noted the lack of available employment:

A lot of businesspeople do it because you can't get a job, specifically being a location as Sunderland, so in Sunderland it is very restrictive ... I tried to get a job with the council, twice I

got in the last two but the person who got the job, for some reason was related or knew the person, so that was one of the reasons that put me off from getting full-time work.

His unsuccessful attempts to secure traditional employment due to what he perceives as nepotism or favouritism contributed to his decision to pursue entrepreneurship. Faced with barriers to traditional employment, he felt compelled to create his own opportunities. His words reflect the necessity-driven entrepreneurship discussed by Block *et al.* (2010), where individuals are compelled to start businesses due to a lack of job opportunities. This aligns with the social marginality theory proposed by Kets de Vries (2009), which suggests that entrepreneurs often come from marginalized positions and use innovative rebelliousness to adapt. Furthermore, the concept of 'entrepreneurship as emancipation' by Rindova *et al.* (2009) is evident in Bernard's pursuit of entrepreneurship as a means to escape the constraints of the restrictive job market. Logan (2012) supports this by highlighting how individuals with dyslexia often face barriers in traditional employment, pushing them towards entrepreneurship.

Some respondents described how their personal preferences and work environments influenced their move towards entrepreneurship. Ben (industrial salvage manager, 50s), who had reached a high level in a German steel company, preferred engaging with customers over managerial duties:

... I am more of an outside person, more of street warrior and I could see the line that they were going to put me down into management, which would mean that I would be managing people as opposed to dealing with people, you know customers, so I felt I would get away from the front end of the business which is why I enjoy most and what I understand a lot easier than having to check people's expenses or make corporate decisions ... I thought, I will give it a go myself and I had some money, put it down, rented an office and off I went.

This shift illustrates the 'pull' motivation described by Haynie and Shepherd (2011), where individuals pursue entrepreneurship to align their work with personal strengths and preferences. It further supports the notion of 'entrepreneurship as emancipation' by Rindova *et al.* (2009) and reflects the desire to work on one's own terms can drive entrepreneurial pursuits (Benz & Frey, 2008a). Dale (used car retailer, 30s) highlighted his initial lack of formal education and direction after leaving school, leading him to seek employment opportunities to support himself financially. He implies broader societal contexts and challenges faced by individuals who may not conform to traditional educational norms.

I left school, no qualifications, no direction from anybody, including parents etc. Obviously weren't doing no qualifications whatsoever, so I thought I had to go and do something, which I did. So I went to work for an electronics company down in Clayton le Moors, because it paid a wage and me parents were saying you had to pay board. So that's what I did. I hated it with a passion, did that for eight, nine months and then moved onto another job for another eight, nine months, twelve months.

This broadly aligns with the concept of necessity-driven entrepreneurship described by Block *et al.* (2010). However, as noted earlier, Block *et al.* consider people to be necessity entrepreneurs only if they leave a previous job involuntarily; if they are, essentially, forced into entrepreneurship due to economic pressures. This is not true of Dale, who stated:

I just thought I was on the wrong track really. I just thought this is, I've got to change this now. It's not good, not right for me. Just didn't feel right, so literally over night I handed my resignation in and yeah, set a, just went self employed literally, you know, the next week.

Dale's decisive shift from traditional employment to entrepreneurship captures both necessity *and* opportunity-driven entrepreneurship (Block *et al*, 2010). His dissatisfaction with his job acted as a push factor, while the pursuit of a more fulfilling and autonomous career was a pull factor. This further supports Rindova *et al.*'s (2009) concept of 'entrepreneurship as emancipation', highlighting the desire to escape the constraints of a misaligned work environment. Dale's lack of qualifications and direction also echoes the findings of Alexander-Passe (2015), who argues that individuals with dyslexia experience academic and career challenges that steer them towards vocational paths, and Shepherd and Patzelt (2017), who emphasize that entrepreneurship can satisfy the need for autonomy and personal fulfilment, providing an escape from unsatisfactory jobs and enabling individuals to leverage their unique strengths.

The respondents cited in this chapter all faced challenges such as limited job opportunities, dissatisfaction with available roles, and financial insecurity. Erin (IT trainer, 40s) struggled to find full-time work after her position was made redundant, moving between zero-hours contracts and unemployment while seeking funding to start her own business. She found attending the Job Centre 'frustrating and slightly degrading' and relied on a local food bank due to financial difficulties. This narrative fits the model of necessity-driven entrepreneurship described by Block *et al.* (2010) but, as Dale (used car retailer, 30s) shows, the pursuit of entrepreneurship cannot be ascribed either to economic drive or opportunistic desire.

Bernard's (IT systems manager, 40s) experience reflects the impact of nepotism and favouritism in traditional employment sectors, prompting his transition to entrepreneurship. Similarly, Ben's

(industrial salvage manager, 50s) decision to start his own business stemmed from a desire to maintain involvement in customer-facing roles and avoid administrative responsibilities. Dale and Erin had to navigate between jobs and unemployment while striving for financial stability. These narratives reflect the resilience and adaptability of these individuals in overcoming barriers to traditional employment and seeking alternative pathways.

These findings confirm those of Alexander-Passe (2006), Power *et al.* (2021) and Miller and Kass (2023), all of whom found that in spite of initial challenges and negative school experiences, people with dyslexia can demonstrate high levels of resilience. These findings also seem to support the work of Singer (2008) who suggested the preservation of self-esteem and dignity are driving forces for people with dyslexia who have faced repeated failure at school. This raises the question of how far their success is the result of resilience borne of self-efficacy, and how much of it is determination borne of a desire to avoid further humiliation in adulthood.

6.2. The Impact of Employment on Entrepreneurial Pursuit

In this section, I explore the bearing previous employment has on the pursuit of entrepreneurship, examining how individuals draw upon their knowledge, skills, and aspirations cultivated in traditional roles to establish and succeed in their own ventures. Dale (used car retailer, 30s) worked for many years in the automotive industry, and subsequently began his own business retailing cars. This experience was pivotal in him being able to get a business started:

... you need experience in the job you want to do of course. I think a lot of people feel like they can just, everybody thinks they can sell cars, well they can't. They think it's easy, but it really

isn't. So, you need good experience, which I got from Vauxhall. You know, even though I hated the work there to the end of my career, I'd gained valuable experience from that. So I'd really just transferred that over into what I did for myself. So I took all the good points, all the stuff that worked and just thought, right, if I do that ... you should effectively have the same result, which is true.

This shows Dale's recognition of the value of industry-specific knowledge and expertise gained through previous employment. This aligns with the findings of Logan (2012), who describes the necessity of leveraging prior work experience to succeed in business, and it supports the theory of human capital discussed by Block *et al.* (2010), which emphasizes the role of both general and specific human capital in entrepreneurial success. Further, the transfer of skills and knowledge from previous employment to a new business venture reflects the concept of entrepreneurial self-efficacy, as detailed by Powers *et al.* (2020), where confidence in one's abilities, gained through previous experience, drives entrepreneurial intent and success.

Dale's experience in car sales allowed him to establish a network of contacts within the automotive industry, enhancing his ability to source and sell vehicles effectively:

We work with a lot of main agents up and down the country. We buy cars directly from them, the ones that they don't want, i.e. we buy them at trade price and then we put them in our workshops and paint shop who, they're again local businesses that we work with ... now we finance the cars, so we get finance commission from any finance deal we do on the vehicles, we also deal with warranties etc. Local warranty companies, where we get a commission as well when we sell new warranties.

This highlights the importance of social capital and networking in entrepreneurial success, aligning with Pret *et al.* (2015), who emphasize the value of collaboration and the sharing of resources in modern entrepreneurship. Dale demonstrates an ability to identify opportunities for collaboration and negotiate mutually beneficial agreements with third-party companies, enhancing the overall value proposition for his customers.

Where Dale's motivation stemmed from years working in the same industry, it was Sandra's (Maths and English tutor, 30s) childhood dream to own a riding school:

I borrowed money from the bank to start a livery yard which is where you take in other people's horses and look after them and I did that while I had my full time job – that enabled me to show the bank managers that I could run a business so then I borrowed more money to leave my job and start a riding school and build it from there.

Here, Sandra highlights the importance of combining experience with strategic planning, aligning with Logan's (2012) findings on leveraging prior work experience to achieve entrepreneurial success. The ability to secure funding by demonstrating competence in running a business reflects the concept of entrepreneurial self-efficacy discussed by Powers *et al.* (2020), where confidence in one's skills and abilities is crucial for gaining financial support and pursuing entrepreneurial goals. Additionally, Shepherd and Patzelt (2017) note that entrepreneurship can fulfil the need for autonomy and personal satisfaction, which is evident in Sandra's dedication to realizing a childhood dream. This also emphasizes the role of persistence and strategic planning in overcoming financial barriers, resonating with the discussions on human capital and resource acquisition by Block *et al.* (2010).

Yet, Dale (used car retailer, 30s) explains that while he knew less about the operational side of management at the time he started his first business, in the long run this was a benefit:

... it was my first business, I didn't know many things that I know now and I probably wouldn't have been as successful if I did. I would be too cautious, whereas in this day and age you have to be a lot more on the ball, and so I suppose it is my experience now has stood me in good stead for the business I have currently.

The notion of becoming more cautious with increased knowledge resonates with the concept of overconfidence discussed by Keh *et al.* (2002), where initial naivety sometimes leads to bold decisions that then spur success. But this also highlights the importance of risk-taking and adaptability, as noted by Lumpkin and Dess (2001), where entrepreneurial success often hinges on the ability to navigate uncertainties and leverage past experiences.

After having established a horse-riding school from the ground up, Sandra (Maths and English tutor, 30s) tutored in a college for several years before deciding she needed something different. Her experience opening a livery yard seemed to kindle a desire for autonomy or creative freedom that resurfaced when she decided to leave the college and start her own tutoring business. The transitions of Dale and Sandra show how dissatisfaction with traditional employment can fuel the entrepreneurial spirit, driving individuals to seek out ventures that align more closely with their personal ambitions and values. Sandra described her journey:

... maths was my best subject at school so that is what I went into doing and I worked as a tutor at college for seven years. I became a manager there and then decided I needed something different so that is why I decided on what I am doing now.

This aligns with Shepherd and Patzelt's (2017) findings that entrepreneurship satisfies the need for autonomy, competence, and control. It also demonstrates the importance of strategic planning and the role of prior experience in fostering entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Powers *et al.*, 2020). The transitions of Dale and Sandra illustrate how personal experiences and dissatisfaction with traditional job roles can drive the entrepreneurial spirit, aligning with Logan's (2012) emphasis on leveraging previous work experience and skills to achieve success in business.

The decision for Sandra to start a tutoring business in subjects she is proficient in demonstrates how entrepreneurs often leverage their strengths and interests to build their ventures. This strategic use of personal skills and passions is a common motivator for individuals moving from employment to entrepreneurship. Indeed, when asked for her advice for other people with dyslexia thinking of starting their own business, Sandra states:

... find out about your strengths and weaknesses. Mostly your strengths, get some help when you can and make sure that you have the determination to succeed because it will be hard ... I have to be a lot more careful than most people so I don't make mistakes. Not rush important things and use the strategies that I have developed to help.

The advice offered by Sandra highlights the importance of self-awareness and strategic planning, echoing Logan's (2012) emphasis on leveraging unique strengths and adaptive strategies to overcome

challenges in entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the role of self-efficacy, as discussed by Powers *et al.* (2020), is evident in Sandra's belief in leveraging personal strengths and the importance of determination and strategy in achieving entrepreneurial success.

Pete (photographer, 30s) similarly demonstrates a desire for independence and autonomy and, although he does not directly discuss his previous employment experience, it is apparent from his words that passion for his chosen field was a significant motivator for starting his own business:

I just wanted to work for myself. I have worked in a lot of environments with other people and I know what I can achieve in the subject that I thrive from.

'Thrive' is a significant choice of word because it suggests something more than job satisfaction or the expectation of success. It evokes engagement, commitment, job satisfaction, wellbeing, and a sense of being valued. The concept of one's value is something several of my participants discussed, most often in reference to their school experiences and how their sense of worth had been negatively affected. There were two notable exceptions: Scarlett (risk manager, 30s) said she pursued entrepreneurship because she wanted 'independence and flexibility and being more in control'; meanwhile, Michael (marketing executive, 50s) recognized his own worth and was prepared to leave the security of employment in the pursuit of a position commensurate with that sense of self:

I worked for people ... I hated the fact that ... somebody else decided what I was going to be worth. And that it didn't matter if my way worked ... if it wasn't the right way, we weren't allowed to do it that way. And I thought, well, that's stupid. If there's a way that works better, let's do it. But I wasn't allowed.

This reflects the ‘pull’ motivation described by Haynie and Shepherd (2011), where the desire for independence and the ability to innovate drew Michael (marketing executive, 50s) towards entrepreneurship. Logan (2012) noted the struggle to navigate restrictive organizational environments as a theme of independence and innovation prevalent in the entrepreneurial narratives discussed by her respondents. Clara’s (actress, 30s) drive for autonomy and control over personal worth is clearly articulated in her statement:

I couldn't stand the idea of somebody else deciding how much I made. Yeah, I didn't like the fact that somebody in middle management was going to tell me what I was worth. I've always felt that a person's worth needs to be established by them. And not just on what they think of themselves, but what they can prove that they can do. And I've always been motivated by the fact that the harder I work and the smarter I work, the more I make.

This again aligns with Shepherd and Patzelt’s (2017) findings that entrepreneurship satisfies the need for autonomy, competence, and control, allowing individuals like Scarlett to determine their own value and reap the rewards of their efforts. The emphasis on self-determination and proving one’s abilities mirrors the entrepreneurial self-efficacy discussed by Powers *et al.* (2020), where belief in one’s skills and hard work drives entrepreneurial action. Additionally, this quote reflects the ‘pull’ motivation described by Haynie and Shepherd (2011). The desire to escape the limitations of middle management and establish personal worth through entrepreneurship highlights the broader themes of independence and self-reliance prevalent in the entrepreneurial narratives discussed by Logan (2012).

Dale (used car retailer, 30s) experienced dissatisfaction with traditional employment in the automotive industry, and so he drew on his background to successfully establish his own car retailing business, emphasizing the transferability of knowledge and skills acquired in previous roles. Sandra (Maths and English tutor, 30s) and Michael (marketing executive, 50s) pursued entrepreneurship to achieve personal aspirations. Sandra followed her childhood dream of owning a riding school and drew on her experience in managing a livery yard to successfully start her own tutoring business, highlighting the value of industry-specific expertise and the strategic use of personal strengths. Michael focused on personal growth and fulfilment, seeking opportunities for self-discovery and development in entrepreneurship. Pete (photographer, 30s) sought independence and autonomy, reflecting on his passion for his chosen field as a significant motivator for entrepreneurship. These accounts show how my respondents drew on industry-specific expertise, and sought autonomy and self-determination, two of the basic human needs expounded in self-determination theory (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2017; Shir & Nikolaev, 2018). They leveraged past experiences to navigate the complexities of business ownership.

6.3. Barriers to the Pursuit of Entrepreneurship

In this section, I explore the barriers encountered by individuals embarking on entrepreneurial endeavours. Financial constraints emerge as a predominant obstacle, with interviewees grappling with the challenges of launching and sustaining their businesses in the face of limited capital. The accounts of my participants reveal the complexities of securing funding, navigating bank procedures, and managing expenses, often exacerbated by a lack of financial literacy and support. In addition, the bureaucratic hurdles of business startup, including obtaining licenses and making sense of complex application processes, pose formidable challenges.

6.3.1. Financial Barriers

Having made the decision to pursue entrepreneurship, many of my respondents faced significant hurdles to their progress. In this section, I explore specific issues that my interviewees cite as having been barriers to their efforts to start and run their own businesses. One of the key barriers to business startup relates to finances. Many of my respondents started with little or no capital and ran into obstacles almost immediately. Erin's (IT trainer, 40s) account is representative of the typical predicament my participants faced:

I suppose the difficult thing that my business is facing, has faced is no finance. Trying to start a business with no finance, I have a vehicle that is desperately in need of replacing and I have no money. I know with Christmas coming up there is going to be a period where I won't be working where I won't be earning and that is a worry ... at the end of the day, no contingency, no resilience, a lot of what I do is provide a service but my parents had to buy me a laptop because I didn't have a laptop – so simple things that I require to help me run my business I couldn't even do and as I said earlier the fact that no money.

This narrative shows the financial challenges faced by many aspiring entrepreneurs, aligning with the necessity-driven entrepreneurship discussed by Block *et al.* (2010), where individuals must overcome substantial economic barriers to establish their businesses. The lack of financial resources and the reliance on family support reflect the findings of Logan (2012), who emphasizes the added pressures faced by entrepreneurs with dyslexia in securing startup capital. The absence of financial contingency highlights the precarious nature of entrepreneurship for those with limited resources, reinforcing

Shepherd and Patzelt's (2017) discussions on the critical need for financial planning and risk management in entrepreneurial ventures.

Dave (double glazing manager, 30s) similarly encountered financial barriers when attempting to start a kennel and cattery business. He was unable to secure funding from lenders and did not have the necessary financial resources to pursue his business idea:

I wanted to build a kennels and cattery, which I couldn't afford to do, nobody would lend me the money at the time to be able to do that and to be truthful I couldn't afford to pay the mortgage.

Logan (2012) and Block *et al.* (2010) highlight how the financial challenges and constraints in traditional employment settings often push individuals with dyslexia towards entrepreneurship, driven by a need for autonomy and control. This aligns with the notion that many entrepreneurs with dyslexia leave conventional employment due to struggles with literacy demands and workplace limitations, seeking instead the flexibility and adaptability offered by self-employment (Logan, 2012). Dave reflects the difficulty in securing startup capital, which is a common barrier discussed by Van Praag *et al.* (2005) and Klapper *et al.* (2006) in the context of entrepreneurial endeavours. Furthermore, Logan (2012) emphasizes that entrepreneurs with dyslexia often rely on strong oral communication skills, interpersonal networks, and delegation to navigate such financial and operational challenges. The theme of resilience and persistence in the face of financial setbacks is also supported by Miller and Kass (2023), who illustrate how overcoming initial financial difficulties and barriers can shape the entrepreneurial journey and contribute to the sense of self-efficacy and eventual success of entrepreneurs with dyslexia.

One would expect finances to be a challenge for a new business. What became clear from my data, however, was that there were deeper issues with access to sources of capital. Phoebe (used car retailer, 40s) highlights the challenges entrepreneurs may face in accessing financial resources and managing financial matters, particularly when they lack specialized knowledge or support:

... we didn't know which was the best lender to go to. We didn't know how to approach them or who to speak to to get that, we've only got that information by asking other people who are in the industry, you know, and extracting that information ... opening bank accounts wasn't straight forward, it's like you know, some of them charge extortionate amounts, but some offer free banking which we didn't know about so we used to go with the bank that charged us, then somebody said oh we can get free banking, what you doing? If we'd have known that in the first place, we probably wouldn't have wasted all that money ...

This experience resonates with the literature on the barriers faced by individuals with dyslexia in entrepreneurship. Logan's (2012) discussion of entrepreneurs with dyslexia often facing significant challenges in accessing financial information and navigating bureaucratic processes aligns with Phoebe's difficulties in identifying the best lenders and understanding banking options. Van Praag *et al.* (2005) and Klapper *et al.* (2006) further highlight the complexities involved in securing startup financing and navigating financial institutions, which can be daunting without proper guidance and networks. The need for specialized advice and the reliance on industry contacts for crucial information is a recurring theme in the narratives of entrepreneurs with dyslexia (Logan, 2012; Miller & Kass, 2023), emphasizing the importance of strong social networks and support systems. Phoebe confirms that knowledge gaps that can lead to financial inefficiencies, such as the unawareness of free banking options, reflecting broader issues of financial literacy and access to reliable information.

But issues around finance went further than merely not knowing the right processes to follow. One would expect any entrepreneur to face similar challenges, although Phoebe's phrase 'extracting that information' implies the information is not easily accessible and must be actively sought rather than being made readily available, and she states that the absence of this information had a financial cost for her to bear. The greatest difficulty for Phoebe was traversing the red tape involved in securing finance. She further explains:

... there's so many obstacles that are put in your way and so many, just for example, you know, getting a loan can be quite a difficult thing and some of, in our industry, some of the certificates you need or some of the, getting some of the tools that you require, you can't just obtain them easily and to get them, you've got to have interviews, you've got to fill out loads of forms and it can be quite complicated and challenging ...

The difficulty obtaining loans and necessary certifications that Phoebe described echoes the financial and bureaucratic barriers highlighted by Logan (2012) and Block *et al.* (2010), who discuss the obstacles that individuals with dyslexia encounter in accessing startup capital and navigating complex administrative processes. This is also supported by Van Praag *et al.* (2005) and Klapper *et al.* (2006), who note the challenges in securing financing and the extensive paperwork involved, which can be particularly daunting for individuals with dyslexia. The requirement for interviews and the completion of forms further complicates these processes, as highlighted by Logan (2012), who emphasizes the need for strong oral communication skills and robust support networks to navigate such hurdles.

Phoebe's experience also reflects Morrison's (2019) findings on the added pressure and stress of navigating bureaucratic systems, which can be exacerbated by the need to disclose hidden disabilities. The complexities and challenges faced in obtaining industry-specific tools and certifications are

consistent with the broader literature on the systemic barriers that individuals with dyslexia often face, reinforcing the need for supportive environments and adaptive strategies to facilitate their entrepreneurial success (de Beer *et al.*, 2022).

According to Phoebe, applications for funding often feature complex questions, and paperwork in some cases took her more than three hours to complete:

some of the biggest things is getting finance on board ... to get finance on board, you've got, there's so many different rules and regulations to be in place and just for example the other day we did our FCA [Financial Conduct Authority] you know, so we're allowed to be with the FCA and the forms that we had to fill out, it took me about three hours and that was with somebody, you know giving me some advice and assistance over the phone from the FCA but I think, it's just the difficulty of actually starting it.

These barriers can be daunting and time-consuming, as exemplified by the three-hour process Phoebe described, even with external assistance. Van Praag *et al.* (2005) and Klapper *et al.* (2006) also emphasize the difficulties in accessing financial resources due to stringent regulatory requirements, which can impede the entrepreneurial aspirations of individuals with dyslexia. Moreover, the need for detailed and often complex paperwork, which can be particularly challenging for those with dyslexia, is a recurring theme in the literature, showing a need for supportive measures and adaptive strategies (Morrison, 2019), which also aligns with Miller and Kass's (2023) findings on the importance of social networks and external support in overcoming such bureaucratic challenges. Furthermore, it echoes the findings of Wissell *et al.* (2022), who note that pre-interview aptitude tests or writing tasks can impede people with dyslexia even before they are able to enter the workforce.

The provision of telephone support would appear to be insufficient in terms of assisting someone with dyslexia through the completion of complex FCA authorization documentation and, while the FCA also offer video guides, neither of these mitigate for the challenge of reading and comprehending the paperwork. While there are third party companies who assist with drafting the application and with policy and procedure documentation in order to speed up the time to market, such services are chargeable at a time when a fledgling company is most cash poor. The red tape associated with business startup is demonstrably both figurative and literal, and was cited as an obstacle by several of my other respondents.

There are other unexpected challenges and hidden costs involved in running a business, which align closely with findings such as those by Logan (2012), who discusses the numerous bureaucratic and regulatory hurdles that individuals with dyslexia often encounter, which can complicate the entrepreneurial process significantly. Evie (dressmaker, 40s) states:

I remember not knowing about business rates and things like that. There's just so many things that you don't realise, that you've got to pay for like, basically you've got to pay for an entertainment license even though you're a dress maker, you can't just play music to the customers and then you've got to have another license for, back in the day it was tapes and DVDs, I suppose you've got to have a license just to play your laptop now, I dunno but there's so many hidden things in business which I feel, when you're dyslexic you can find them as pit falls.

In this example by Evie, even something as straightforward and seemingly inconsequential as having music playing in the workplace is beset with complications. In the 'patents, trademarks, copyright and designs' section aimed at businesses and the self-employed, the *Gov.uk* website states that businesses

will usually need to get a licence to play recorded music in public or at a business premises. Business owners are required to apply for a Mechanical-Copyright Protection Society and the Performing Right Society licence through PRS and a second supplementary Phonographic Performance Ltd licence through PPL. These are two separate bodies, with two distinct application processes, which Evie found to be an unnecessary encumbrance. Again, this echoes the findings of Van Praag *et al.* (2005) and Klapper *et al.* (2006), who discuss the barriers that complex regulations pose to aspiring entrepreneurs.

Dale (used car retailer, 30s) echoed similar sentiments, singling out the banks for the lack of clarity and transparency in their written materials:

The banks are not helpful. Even just getting the right bank account and just making sure you're not being ripped off with charges, etc. There's so much information to take in, you know, that massive challenges just organising the business bank accounts, etc. Any potential overdrafts you might need. Setting up streamline, card payment machines, etc. It's just, they are pretty big challenges to overcome really, just the initial set up.

Dale's account of the overwhelming amount of information and the steep learning curve in the initial setup phase reflects the broader challenges highlighted by Miller and Kass (2023), who emphasize the crucial role of support networks in navigating these complex processes.

Clara (actress, 30s) revealed that while she is confident with some aspects of bookkeeping, filling out forms poses a problem:

Tax return's always a bit of a nightmare. I mean, even though I'm dyslexic, I'm quite good in terms of the kind of spreadsheets, and marking up my income, it's just, the bit I always have a nightmare with is the actual filling in of the form.

It was surprising that none of my other participants mentioned their tax returns, other than Erin (IT trainer, 40s), who noted one of the most crucial pieces of advice she had received at the start of her business:

A gentleman I spoke to gave me one piece of advice and said if you get yourself a good accountant they take away the hassle and the aggravation when it comes to tax return, why cause yourself stress if you don't need to so one thing I did was find myself a good accountant.

Clara (actress, 30s) explained that her difficulties reach further than just the tax return, into areas of the daily running of her business:

Because I'm quite creative, I get very bogged down in being creative, and I'm not so good at the whole business money side of things, and pushing for money, and stuff, so maybe getting a bit more business-savvy, and kind of being a bit tougher when it comes to asking for money for work, and stuff like that, I'm kind of, I'm so passionate about the creative side, I kind of let the business side drop a lot of the time.

Clara's experience of letting the business side lapse due to her creative immersion aligns with what Mazzarol (2003) notes about entrepreneurs, particularly those who are highly creative, finding it difficult to delegate or focus on administrative tasks, preferring to immerse themselves in the creative or strategic elements of their ventures. This is echoed in Logan's (2012) findings, where the creative and innovative approaches of individuals with dyslexia are highlighted as strengths yet their enthusiasm for these aspects can sometimes overshadow the practical business requirements.

Erin (IT trainer, 40s) attempted to seek guidance from a small business advisor, but reported that the only help she received was the suggestion of a 'preferential rated business loan', but this was not something she knew anything about:

I am worried about tying myself into a loan that needs to be repaid when I am already struggling and if my business doesn't take off then I am going to be saddled with still having to pay a loan which when some months I can't even afford to feed myself, is going to cripple me and the last thing I need is to be forced into being homeless or basically having to give up something I love doing or be in a situation that again I don't even want to consider. It is – rock bottom is not a nice place to be and I don't want to be back there again.

Erin highlights the barrier of inadequate support in starting her business, particularly the risk of burgeoning debts that can stem from a lack of clarity concerning loans, and most especially when she is already financially vulnerable. There is no easy solution to the obstacle of financial red tape. Pete (photographer, 30s) explains his issues with progressing an application with the Arts Council, and says there would be a huge benefit to people with dyslexia if they were able to dictate the information needed:

... the Arts Council application itself, you have got a list of questions that you have got to meet and some of the questions are saying, for someone who is dyslexic, are very similar to the last question and just trying to get this criteria down in this form is just mind boggling ... I have been trying to get through this process for ten years. I have kept going I have persevered, and I am going to keep persevering. I have just had an application in, which has been knocked back after two attempts but I feel from a dyslexic point of view, if I could verbalise it rather than writing it, even with the scribe, we still haven't got through, it is a very competitive process as well but the thing is with the dyslexia it is, you feel disadvantaged compared to an artist who hasn't got dyslexia.

In this section, several themes emerge regarding the financial barriers faced by individuals with dyslexia pursuing entrepreneurship. Five of my participants grappled with limited capital, and highlighted challenges in securing funding, navigating bank procedures, and managing expenses. An additional five participants encountered difficulties with administrative aspects of business startup, including obtaining licenses and navigating convoluted application processes. My respondents describe difficulties in obtaining loans and navigating complex rules and regulations, aligning with Logan (2012) and Block *et al.* (2010), who discuss financial constraints and bureaucratic obstacles. The extensive paperwork and need for specialized knowledge, such as filling out FCA forms and managing business bank accounts, reflect the administrative hurdles outlined by Van Praag *et al.* (2005) and Klapper *et al.* (2006). Furthermore, the emotional and psychological impact of financial insecurity, including fears of incurring debt and the potential for homelessness, is a significant theme, highlighted in my interviewees' concerns about taking on loans. This supports the findings of Miller and Kass (2023), who explore the resilience and mental strain associated with financial stress.

6.3.2. Difficulties with Bookkeeping and Administration

The need in business to use, manipulate, and process words and numbers has proven problematic for my respondents. Pete (photographer, 30s) spoke candidly about the problems he has faced due to his dyslexia, citing bookkeeping as his greatest challenge. He explained that constantly seeking help, and having to pay for this help, is a drain both on company finances and his own sense of self-worth:

some people who I know have people that do that for them so they can concentrate on the business side ... the accounts side, that kind of thing ... with dyslexia, it takes so much longer because you are having to go to somebody else for them to write [documents] for you and they have got to be funded and then if it gets knocked back then you have to get them in again and they have got to be funded again ... it just becomes so frustrating because you are trying to get what's in your head on paper.

Pete's reliance on others for document preparation and the associated financial implications links with the broader discussion on adaptive strategies necessary for individuals with dyslexia (Miller & Kass, 2023). The need for support in handling bureaucratic tasks is crucial for maintaining focus on creative and client-orientated work, as highlighted by Van Praag *et al.* (2005) and Klapper *et al.* (2006). As de Beer *et al.* (2022) observe, strong social networks and supportive environments are essential for navigating these challenges. This dovetails with the sense of anxiety felt by Scarlett (risk manager, 30s), whose concerns about the severe consequences of financial mistakes, despite her efforts in managing accounts, reflect the challenges of financial management for individuals with dyslexia (Logan, 2012):

I've got to do my accounts ... I always procrastinate but once I get to it, get the hang of it, and in my zone so to speak, I am there, I manage it, I don't think I have ever messed up on anything major but because it was new to me and because it was an unknown area because the consequences of messing up are quite severe ... there was a lack of understanding and my accountant and the relationship with my accountant was slightly, I wouldn't say it was, there as friction ... I felt vulnerable because I didn't know exactly why I was doing various things ... the accountant had the role of ultimately telling me what to do but I was paying them, those dynamics were ... difficult for me to absorb or manage.

For some of my respondents, the accounting side of the business was less challenging, but being confident with numbers is only so much use when many tasks that focus on mathematics still require reading fluency. Clara (actress, 30s) explained how writing letters was difficult for her, describing the process at first as 'a kind of headache' but going on to describe it as a 'detriment' that takes extra time to complete. Reading is also a challenge for Clara, who is forthright about the difficulties she continues to face in adulthood as a result of her dyslexia:

... researching is quite heavily reading-based, that kind of stresses me out, and I think, you know, it can be quite daunting, so a lot of it for me was getting over fears, that is kind of, comes from the dyslexia, with the reading, and things. That was kind of just really, just, the beginning of things, the first steps are always the hardest for me ... being dyslexic, reading doesn't come easy, so I've had to kind of spend a lot of extra time doing sight reading, and really trying to conquer stuff, and I, with the acting, I have to obviously, know lines, and reading

them in the audition situation, so, I kind of over-compensate by learning all my lines off by heart.

Alexander-Passe (2016a) discusses how individuals with dyslexia often avoid reading as a coping mechanism, but this strategy could also lead to challenges in professional settings where reading is essential. Clara's coping mechanism is to over-compensate by memorizing lines off by heart, which resonates more with the adaptive strategies highlighted by Miller and Kass (2023) as a pathway to developing self-efficacy. Clara goes on to reveal that these difficulties are only tolerable because of her unrelenting passion for the acting profession:

... it takes over my life, because of, because I love acting, that's why I allow it to do it, but maybe someone who wasn't quite as passionate as me probably wouldn't go to the lengths I go to, but I try to overwork, to compensate for the dyslexia.

Dale (used car retailer, 30s) stated that there was a considerable amount of information to take in, and that it was a challenge just organising business bank accounts and overdraft facilities. He highlights the challenges of information overload and bureaucratic red tape that entrepreneurs must navigate, which can be time-consuming and frustrating:

Setting up ... card payment machines ... they are pretty big challenges to overcome really, just the initial set up. Not just cost, but the actual paperwork involved in that. The bureaucracy.

That's what it is, it's bureaucracy. That is the biggest problem. You can see where you need be, but actually getting there is like, literally climbing a mountain sometimes.

The amount of bureaucracy in business is necessarily high and my respondents acknowledged this. Yet, for some it was nevertheless 'literally climbing a mountain' (Dale). The resounding message was that 'being dyslexic, reading doesn't come easy' (Clara). For several respondents, specific difficulties were harder to pinpoint because they highlight a broader canvas of challenges. The minutiae of setting up a business includes a variety of processes: some legal, some simply bureaucratic. Bernard (IT systems manager, 40s) said he lacked confidence in filling out forms:

... if you are dyslexic and you have got a pile of forms there, some days you might be able to do it but if you are tired, a dyslexic person would just leave that and let it all build up, it's like a dyslexic person might forget to do all the tax returns and all that, because they are scared of doing it but if a person was there to help them, the person will like be able to like coach them into it.

Such administration was described by Pete (photographer, 30s) as a 'huge barrier' in his efforts to apply to the Arts Council, and his dyslexia presents a disadvantage due to the complexity of the administration required:

... just trying to get this criteria down in this form is just mind boggling ... I have been trying to get through this process for ten years. I have kept going, I have persevered, and I am going to

keep persevering. I have just had an Application in, which has been knocked back after two attempts ... if I could verbalise it rather than writing it, even with the scribe ... the thing is with the dyslexia it is, you feel disadvantaged compared to an artist who hasn't got dyslexia.

Here, Pete describes the sort of cognitive challenges faced by adults with dyslexia which can cause further challenge because fear of stigmatization and discrimination makes it hard to seek the necessary accommodations (Beer *et al.*, 2022; Smith-Spark *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, Ben (industrial salvage manager, 50s) stated that he finds form-filling extremely difficult, saying:

I look at a form and I don't understand it, well I say I don't understand it, I understand it but the way I answer form filling is very, very odd.

Ben offered no further elaboration on his particular method of completing such forms, but went on to explore his dislike of communicating in writing and his preference for talking to people. Bernard (IT systems manager, 40s), like the other interviewees I have discussed in this section, demonstrates that individuals with dyslexia face unique challenges due to increased cognitive load, administrative hurdles, and the emotional impact of their condition. Logan (2012) highlights the significant stress and difficulty associated with text-heavy tasks such as job applications and bureaucratic paperwork. These tasks require additional time and effort, which people without dyslexia do not need, as discussed by Miller and Kass (2023), who also emphasize the importance of adaptive strategies and support systems. Additionally, fear of stigmatization and discrimination, as noted by Alexander-Passe (2016a) and Beer *et al.* (2022), can deter individuals with dyslexia from seeking necessary accommodations, further complicating their job application and retention processes. My respondents show that

accommodations such as verbal instructions, additional time for tasks, and supportive tools could be life-changing for individuals with dyslexia. This is in support of findings by Smith-Spark *et al.* (2022), who highlight the necessity of tailored support to help these individuals manage their work responsibilities. These findings highlight the need for individualized support and accommodations for individuals with dyslexia.

The experiences shared by my respondents illustrate the significant challenges that individuals with dyslexia face in applying for and maintaining employment. Bernard 's struggle with form filling and the tendency to procrastinate on complex tasks due to fatigue and fear exemplifies the increased cognitive load and stress associated with text-heavy tasks (Logan, 2012; Van Praag *et al.*, 2005). Similarly, Pete's (photographer, 30s) decade-long perseverance through bureaucratic processes underscores the administrative hurdles discussed by Klapper *et al.* (2006) and the necessity of accommodations such as verbal communication, which are critical but not typically required by individuals without dyslexia (Miller & Kass, 2023).

Moreover, Dale's (used car retailer, 30s) frustration with the bureaucracy of setting up payment systems, and Scarlett's (risk manager, 30s) feelings of vulnerability and friction in financial management due to a lack of understanding, align with the need for adaptive strategies and support systems highlighted by Beer *et al.* (2022) and Smith-Spark *et al.* (2022). The over-compensation and extra time spent on reading and memorization by Clara further demonstrate the emotional and psychological toll of dyslexia, as described by Morrison (2019). Collectively, these accounts confirm the literature, emphasizing the distinct struggles faced by individuals with dyslexia in securing and retaining employment, and the critical need for tailored support and accommodations.

6.3.3. Time Management

The impact on time was something several of my respondents raised when talking about the problems they faced with reading and retaining information. Clara (actress, 30s) noted that one of the key difficulties she faced was researching for her roles because so much of it was based on reading. She suggested that the problem was less about the reading itself and more about the barriers she experienced. She used the word 'meltdown' to describe the tremendous pressure reading and writing put her under, saying that the extra time she had to commit in order to counter her difficulties meant that it took over her life.

A key problem is that struggling with daily administrative tasks takes entrepreneurs with dyslexia away from other matters relating to the day-to-day running of a business. These tasks are likely to be the same for all entrepreneurs, but the nature of dyslexia is that such tasks can take far longer due to slowness of reading and difficulty in comprehension. Pete (photographer, 30s) stated that the time needed to tackle accounts meant he was distracted for long periods of time from his actual work. Clara went into more detail when she talked about the difficulty of juggling so many aspects of the business:

... because you're doing it all yourself, and sometimes there just isn't enough hours in the day, to get it all done. And that's quite a big challenge, and still, just keeping on top of kind of the reading, and not kind of getting fazed by things, because of the dyslexia.

Clara's experience supports the findings of Smith-Spark *et al.* (2022), who discuss the broader impact of dyslexia on workplace cognition in relation to time constraints, emphasizing how the additional time required for reading and processing information can lead to significant challenges in managing

daily tasks and responsibilities. Phoebe (used car retailer, 40s) echoes those sentiments, revealing how time-consuming running a business can be when the completion of paperwork takes such a long time:

Work hours, unbelievable hours sometimes when, you know you maybe don't want to. And not to give up as well, coz there's so many obstacles that are put in your way and so many, just for example, you know, getting a loan can be quite a difficult thing and some of, in our industry, some of the certificates you need or ... getting some of the tools that you require, you can't just obtain them easily and to get them, you've got to have interviews, you've got to fill out loads of forms and it can be quite complicated and challenging.

Just as for Clara, time management is a problem for Phoebe, and their experiences resonate with the findings of Logan (2012) and Van Praag *et al.* (2005) who discussed the significant bureaucratic hurdles faced by individuals with dyslexia, such as filling out forms and attending loan interviews. Their experiences highlight a need for adaptive strategies (Miller & Kass, 2023), including delegation, which enables individuals with dyslexia to focus on their strengths and manage their workload more effectively. It is something touched upon by Pete (photographer, 30s), who noted that there are so many aspects to running a business, it distracts him from the things that really matter:

... some people who I know, have people that do that for them so they can concentrate on the business side, the photography, the marketing, the social media, things like that, the accounts side that kind of thing because I don't want it to take me away from making work and working on the client's needs and requests and things like that because I think when you are homing in on those type of things, it takes your eye off the ball a little bit.

Pete's experience supports the findings of Wissell *et al.* (2022), confirming the profound impact of literacy difficulties on individuals with dyslexia. Nalavany *et al.* (2011) and Wissell *et al.* (2022) all discuss the cognitive strain and emotional toll that literacy-intensive tasks can have on individuals with dyslexia. Offering further support of these findings, Erin (IT trainer, 40s) stated that writing reports and generally maintaining the necessary organizational skills proved to be particularly difficult:

I have to write reports, I have to keep information up to date so making sure I keep myself organised can be an issue. Writing reports can be an issue and if it is not something that I can't do but obviously it takes longer to do so you have additional time spent so things that can make me more productive doing what I need to do not only helps me but it helps my business which then also helps the people I am trying to help.

For Erin, the extra time taken to complete such tasks equated to time away from other more pressing areas of the business. In the same way, Isabelle (dyslexia tutor, 50s) noted that 'the biggest challenge is paperwork' and highlighted the interplay of difficulties with paperwork and time management. She also emphasized the issue of working to other people's deadlines:

I am not sure whether it is time management, it just takes me a slightly longer to get there ... I like to be left to my own devices to do something, I don't like time pressures but maybe it is time management, maybe if somebody is saying do this in half an hour, I am now assertive enough to say actually I need 45 mins or an hour, but there is a time element for me ... because things take me longer, I get more tired doing stuff ... one of the big things that you have when

you are dyslexic is that you are labelled as lazy ... it is quite hard in your life to try and manage that negative image or self-belief because yes you are taking your time, yes you are feeling tired, you know ultimately it is not because you are lazy but sometimes how things fall it stacks up against you.

Isabelle further confirms what Wissell *et al.* (2022) and Nalavany *et al.* (2011) described in terms of there being mental ‘tug-of-war’ with energy levels for adults with dyslexia trying to balance the cognitive demands they face. The need for assertiveness and effective time management reflects the importance of adaptive strategies discussed by Logan (2012), Van Praag *et al.* (2005), Smith-Spark *et al.* (2022), and Miller and Kass (2023). Sandra (Maths and English tutor, 30s) also noted that she had to be a lot more careful than most people in order not to make mistakes. The consequence, of course, was that her work took more time to complete because she naturally felt the need to check and re-check. In these excerpts, my respondents reveal the emotional and psychological toll of business tasks, with individuals needing more time and experiencing fatigue, as reflected in Logan (2012) and Van Praag *et al.* (2005). These discussions emphasize the critical need to address time management and cognitive load to support the professional success and wellbeing of individuals with dyslexia. However, such support is not always forthcoming or easily accessible.

6.3.4. Lack of Support for Entrepreneurs

Success for individuals with dyslexia is often defined by resilience, redefining failure, and leveraging support systems (Alexander-Passe, 2015; Logan, 2012). Several of my respondents highlight the critical

gaps in support and training for individuals with dyslexia pursuing entrepreneurial paths, whether it be difficult to put in place, or whether there has been an absence of availability altogether. When support is absent, difficult to find, or simply ineffectual, the impact on an entrepreneur can be stifling.

Evie (dressmaker, 40s) described the lack of support available for aspiring entrepreneurs:

I did get a little support at the beginning by Business Innovation at North Hilton, basically there wasn't much help. Yes they give us flyers, yes they give us business cards. But they never really helped us understand about your books, about basically there should be some sort of like little course, just a little course what you go on to learn all about them things, when you want to be an entrepreneur. You want to be an entrepreneur but you don't really wanna go and do a business course for like four years, especially when you're dyslexic and you just feel like you're gonna be running into barriers all the time anyway with the written side of things.

While she acknowledges receiving some assistance from an organization called Business Innovation, Evie highlights that the support provided was insufficient. She notes that there was a lack of practical guidance on essential aspects of business management, such as bookkeeping. This experience corroborates what Wissell *et al.* (2022) found in highlighting the inadequacies in current support systems, and what Logan (2012) and Smith-Spark *et al.* (2022) found about the need for practical, accessible educational resources that address the specific challenges faced by individuals with dyslexia.

Evie emphasizes the need for accessible and tailored educational resources for individuals with dyslexia who may encounter additional challenges with traditional learning methods. This aligns with Wiklund *et al.* (2024), who suggest that overly academic business courses are particularly unsuitable for people with dyslexia, who often excel in practical and experiential learning environments. Evie's

preference for shorter, targeted courses reflects the need for modular and accessible learning, which contrasts starkly with the perceived barriers of long-term academic programs. This also supports Halfpenny and Halfpenny's (2012) argument that support systems for entrepreneurs with dyslexia often fail to move beyond superficial assistance, such as providing flyers. Their work highlights the need for mentorship and training that addresses foundational entrepreneurial skills, such as managing finances and bookkeeping, as Evie mentions.

Dale (used car retailer, 30s) had a similar outlook, stating that he realized very quickly that he was on his own in starting a business, and that there is 'no one to help you'. Echoing these sentiments, Isabelle (dyslexia tutor, 50s) stated that 'there isn't much information out there, even from government websites, for people with dyslexia or disabilities', and Mark (builder, 30s) noted that 'there wasn't anything out there to help ... basically I just adapted with the stuff that I knew'. Bernard (IT systems manager, 40s) had a similar experience when he sought professional mentoring, noting the apparent lack of experience of the people offering the service:

... the people in Business Link had never ran a business, a lot of them are just there for the money like, I once had experience where I was setting up my own business computers to do websites, they were actually in competition with us, one of their own staff, set up his own business, and he was in IT doing website design, Business Link passed all their business to him.

This further supports the arguments of Halfpenny and Halfpenny (2012) and Wiklund *et al.* (2024). The issue of Business Link staff competing with those people seeking their guidance highlights a serious ethical concern, which is less explicitly addressed in the literature but aligns with Halfpenny and Halfpenny's (2012) broader critique of superficial and misaligned support systems. Bernard's experience with Business Link shows the gaps and even potential conflicts of interest in support

systems for entrepreneurs with dyslexia, revealing the potentially limited usefulness of the kind of networking discussed by Miller and Kass (2023).

Bernard was fully aware of the support he needed, and was clear about his expectations of what Business Link should be doing to support his new business:

If I was in Business Link, I would like say, here is a business package, go to see these people, they will print off your cheap leaflets, if you want invoicing, use this invoice software, how to run a business, cash flow, only time I had some good stuff from Business Link was doing my cash flow ... If I had a decent coach, a decent coach would say, the very first thing in business is get a deposit, get an agreement and a good businessperson will tell you which banks to work with.

What Bernard sought was practical, actionable support and guidance tailored to the realities of entrepreneurship, particularly in areas like cash flow management, using appropriate tools, and securing deposits. His recognition of the value of learning cash flow management dovetails with the findings of Muñoz-Céspedes *et al.* (2024), who stress the critical role of financial literacy in entrepreneurial success. Indeed, while Ben (industrial salvage manager, 50s) presented as having been confident and resolute about his entrepreneurial journey right from the beginning, he nevertheless revealed fundamental gaps in his business knowledge:

... never been on a course, never been to seminars or anything like that. Nothing to do with business at all. I still struggle to understand what is gross and what is net.

Some of my respondents took the initiative to seek out guidance from experienced people in their own industry. Dale (used car retailer, 30s) indicates that the lack of meaningful support from external entities may have hindered his entrepreneurial journey, forcing him to rely on his own resources and networks to overcome challenges:

... when I went to work for myself ... I could have just easily gone back and worked for another dealership somewhere else, a car dealership and I say that because I think a local government body, I went to three times, at the Michelin site. Seemly these people are there to, ex-businesspeople seemingly, ex-successful businesspeople. Well, they told me they were ... were there to help us and assist us and tell us our right paths forward and the right way to do things and it's possibly the biggest load of rubbish I've ever come across in my life, in fact it was an absolute waste of time. In terms of help, I'd probably say they could be bordering on minus.

The sense of disillusionment felt by Dale reflects the broader issues highlighted in the existing literature regarding inadequacies and inefficiencies in support systems for individuals with dyslexia (Wissell *et al.*, 2022), and the importance of understanding the unique challenges faced by individuals with dyslexia more broadly (Alexander-Passe, 2017). Dale's critique that the advisors at the government body were ineffective and offered little practical help echoes the findings of Logan *et al.* (2009), who highlight the gap between what entrepreneurs with dyslexia need and what traditional support services actually deliver on the ground. Logan *et al.* (2009) argue that advisors often lack a genuine understanding of the entrepreneurial challenges faced by individuals with dyslexia, particularly in areas like navigating written documents or complex administrative requirements. Dale's description of the advisors as ex-businesspeople adds weight to the claim of Logan *et al.* (2009) that

the experience of advisors does not always translate into relevant, actionable guidance for neurodivergent entrepreneurs.

Dale recognized that returning to paid employment would have been an easier path to take and reveals the difficulty he had getting support. He persisted with trying to seek professional mentoring even after having negative experiences:

In terms of help from people, the biggest help we've got that we've had, has actually been from local businesspeople and I mean successful businesspeople, coz we've quickly realised ... if you look at a sales person, what you do is you take all his good points and ignore all his bad points. You tend to find if you do that, you're actually a very good salesperson. I think it's the same in business, we've looked at similar businesses. What's working for them, taken that from these people, sometimes without them knowing. Very cleverly digging with them and ignore the bad points, so obviously that I think makes for a success and local businesses who, well, who haven't been involved with us, sorry, who are not involved in selling cars, etc. But have give us massive help, you know, just general nice people who's give us very very good support.

Dale demonstrably had a proactive approach to entrepreneurship, analysing successful businesses to identify strategies and tactics that could be applied to his own venture. The positive role of local businesspeople contrasts with the critique of institutional support provided by Halfpenny and Halfpenny (2012) and Logan *et al.* (2009). While he highlights the shortcomings of formalized support, Dale's experience with supportive local businesses suggests that community-based, informal networks may offer more relevant and empathetic guidance.

Ben (industrial salvage manager, 50s) took a similar approach, emphasizing the value of engaging with experienced businesspeople through 'relationships' rather than more formal 'networking'. This approach reflects a reliance on observational learning, conversational insight, and trust:

I spend a lot of time, hopefully speaking to people, older than me that have been in business and pick up ideas from them and ask them how they succeed, I do a lot of that, they call it networking but I don't know, I call it relationships I have with people that are successful in other businesses and in business and speak to them and listen to what they are doing, watching what they are doing, seeing how they operate in their businesses and seeing if there is anything that they do, which is successful, which I can utilise in my own business.

Here again, my data support Halfpenny and Halfpenny (2012), who argue that entrepreneurs with dyslexia benefit significantly from mentorship rooted in practical experience. Ben illustrates the critical role of relationship-based mentorship and observational learning in entrepreneurial success, particularly for individuals with dyslexia who thrive in practical and adaptive learning environments. Michael (marketing executive, 50s) had no formal training or business mentoring, but has always striven to learn from others with more expertise than himself:

I've always said I never want to be the smartest person in the room, because if I'm the smartest person in the room I won't learn anything that day ... I always wanted to be the dumbest guy in the room because then I had the most to learn. And as a result of that, starting as far back as in high school, all of my friends were 20 years older than me. And I surrounded myself with people I could learn from Unfortunately, I don't have a lot of mentors left. Most of most of

the men that shaped me, who I am today, have passed away. But I do have a couple of people that I still call and run ideas by.

Michael's intentional strategy of surrounding himself with more knowledgeable and experienced individuals reflects themes in the literature about the importance of mentorship (Wiklund *et al.*, 2024) and the challenges posed by the scarcity of sustained, long-term mentorship. Michael's enduring reliance on a 'couple of people' suggests the need for more robust, scalable mentorship networks that can adapt as entrepreneurs progress through their careers. Indeed, several of my respondents confirmed that without proper support and guidance, entrepreneurs may struggle to navigate the challenges of starting and growing a business, potentially limiting their chances of success. Dale (used car retailer, 30s) said:

No support from Business Link. I've tried to contact a few bodies. Again, they are at best, useless ... these places once you start digging, they tend to be full of people who haven't actually done very well in business and you know, I can just see them there, turns out they've had a corner shop somewhere, not done very well, shut it down and they must feel very powerful in these nice offices that the government's provided telling novices like me how great they are, when actually all we need is a proper bit of direction and actual practical help, rather than, we don't want bull, we want someone to say, go to Santander, you know there's no charges with them, they'll look after you. Streamline, yeah this machine, card machine. That's what you need, someone with absolute physical hard direction really.

Dale's criticism of Business Link and similar institutions is that they are populated by people with limited real-world entrepreneurial experience. They highlight the need for direct, straightforward advice, such as how to secure business services or navigate financial systems. This supports the argument that traditional support systems are often inadequate for entrepreneurs with dyslexia (Halfpenny & Halfpenny, 2012). Similarly, Pete (photographer, 30s) secured some business mentoring but felt the mentor did not have the requisite business acumen. He alludes to his own experience and struggles, and reasons that someone can only teach you how to run a business if they have learned those same hard lessons:

... in some respects you are being mentored by people who have never had a business, have never burnt the candle at both ends over a night trying to think how is it going to get more business, how am I going to retain these clients, why are they not coming with me and going with another practitioner, just all the questions you ask and was I too expensive, you ask yourself the questions, what could I have done differently to get that contract or that client.

Again, Pete's frustration with being mentored by individuals who have no entrepreneurial experience highlights the disconnect between theoretical knowledge and the practical, lived challenges faced by entrepreneurs. It also emphasizes the emotional and strategic challenges involved in running a business. In fact, these accounts reflect a common frustration among aspiring entrepreneurs who seek assistance but encounter barriers or receive ineffective support from the resources available to them. It highlights the need for more tailored and accessible support services for individuals starting businesses, particularly those facing additional challenges such as dyslexia.

Despite reaching out to multiple organizations and small business advisors, Erin (IT trainer, 40s) felt as though she was not receiving any guidance or resources:

I went to see a small business advisor that was recommended by my local county council as the person I needed to go and see. I booked an appointment to go and see him and the first thing he said to me was basically because I had already registered with HMRC they were only supposed to see start-ups and obviously that caused as issue. They had honoured the appointment or the county council said that they could honour the appointment because they'd already booked it. He did email me a couple of fact sheets which were a bit – they didn't really offer any advice or any guidance. He did also email me a blank business plan template excel sheet for me to fill out with no real instruction on how to fill it out either so I didn't find it very useful.

She expresses a disconnect between the expectations of support services and the practical guidance that entrepreneurs, particularly those with dyslexia, actually need. Her frustration with the lack of personalized, supportive advice mirrors critiques in the literature regarding the inadequacy of generic support systems for entrepreneurs with dyslexia and those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Halfpenny & Halfpenny, 2012). Erin goes on to convey an alarming sense of isolation when he describes feeling as though he is slipping through the cracks:

I don't think that I gained any support and ... my small business advisor ... has been completely ineffectual in giving me what appears any help or any advice. I honestly believe that I almost am falling between the cracks in the pavement and that nobody out there appears to be able to help me. I contacted a second organisation in the area I live in and they basically gave me a phone number for a business hub which I phoned and again these are people that are supposed to be able to access funding and give advice and everything else and funny enough the small

business advisor ... who I went to see ... his company are kind of overseen by this other company and I have spoken to a contact there and he almost came back saying well I need to refer you back to the company you have already seen – and it was kind of like, but I have approached you because that first company didn't help me!

Here, Erin shows the frustration and disillusionment felt by entrepreneurs navigating an ineffective and fragmented support system. She describes a cyclical pattern of referrals between organizations, with neither providing meaningful assistance, figuratively being passed from pillar to post. Scarlett (risk manager, 30s) shared similar concerns, emphasising the worries she has faced and saying of mentoring that, 'perhaps the coaching would have helped ease some of the anxieties'. Bernard (IT systems manager, 40s) mentioned the limitations of the government support and mentoring programs he encountered. He criticized the effectiveness of mentoring received from organizations like Business Link and BIC, describing it as inadequate and lacking practical guidance for running a business:

The stuff I had at BIC was amateurish and foolhardy ... they have never pointed me into any right direction which was positive

What is clear from this account and the others given by my respondents is that support for entrepreneurs – particularly financial support – is not clearly signposted. Where support is available, it is not geared towards entrepreneurs with dyslexia. Only Isabelle (dyslexia tutor, 50s) had a positive experience with formal mentoring:

They have helped me about giving me advice, taking things on board, and I am able to get information on a daily basis and call them and so far, over the last six months, things have been going good ... because then you have an idea of what you have to face, if I had all that before, it definitely would have been a great help.

In contrast, Michael (marketing executive, 50s) stated that he received no formal business training and explained how he expanded his business by responding to customers asking if he was able to add more and more facets to the services he offered. Originally, he would fly to a trade show and set up a company's stand. When stands began to arrive damaged in transit, he offered the additional service of repairing them. This evolved into designing and building stands, and later offering his own freight service.

... since I have no formal training in anything expanding the business in any direction means I have to learn something. And so it challenges me to either come up with ... a new process or ... expand the facet ... it just kept expanding more and more of what we could do for the client and you know my business today looks absolutely nothing like it did 20 years ago, but it just it changes with the times, it changes with the market, it changes with the trends in this industry.

With no formal training, he has intuitively grown his business to meet the increasing demands of his customer base. His iterative approach to building and diversifying his business suggests that his adaptive mindset and problem-solving skills were integral to his success. Research tells us that individuals with dyslexia frequently outperform their peers in problem-solving and innovation tasks (Everatt *et al.*, 1999; Kapoula *et al.*, 2016). The innovative business evolution described by Michael

aligns with a broader tendency among individuals with dyslexia to develop adaptive strategies to overcome systemic barriers, such as those rooted in rigid business models. There also appears to be a propensity for people with dyslexia to demonstrate creative thinking and intuitive strategies (Eide & Eide, 2011; Cancer, 2016), although evidence for this is not entirely conclusive (Everatt *et al.*, 1999; Erbeli *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, the innovative and hands-on solutions described by Michael are suggestive of the emergence of creative business strategies stemming from compensatory mechanisms developed to navigate challenges associated with dyslexia.

6.4. Conclusion

My data reveal a significant misalignment between the needs of entrepreneurs with dyslexia and the support provided by existing business systems. The unavailability of tailored business support is particularly detrimental to individuals with dyslexia whose unique cognitive challenges – especially with written communication – are insufficiently addressed by traditional business advisory services. This supports what Logan *et al.* (2009) found, that many business support organizations fail to meet the specific needs of entrepreneurs with dyslexia, offering generic advice and lacking practical, actionable support. The result is a feeling of exclusion, as reflected in my interview transcripts, where entrepreneurs expressed frustration with unhelpful, one-size-fits-all resources like fact sheets and business plan templates.

Even among those who have received some form of formal business support, my respondents paint a grim picture of the extent to which entrepreneurs with dyslexia are getting professional help in running their businesses. Erin (IT trainer, 40s) described his business mentor as ‘completely ineffectual’, and Bernard (IT systems manager, 40s) articulated the frustration so many of my respondents felt when it came to a lack of practical guidance from organizations meant to support entrepreneurs. Their sentiments were echoed by Dale (used car retailer, 30s), Isabelle (dyslexia tutor, 50s), and Mark (builder, 30s), all of whom expressed dissatisfaction with the support available (or with their inability to access it). Bernard (IT systems manager, 40s) went further, criticizing the inadequacy of government support programs, highlighting a systemic issue in the availability and quality of support for entrepreneurs. He emphasized the amateurish nature of the assistance received and the lack of the practical guidance he needed.

Unlike other disadvantaged groups, entrepreneurs with dyslexia face cognitive barriers that require specialized interventions. Halfpenny and Halfpenny (2012) highlight the failure of business support

systems to provide inclusive, empathetic guidance, which is exacerbated by the industry's use of staff who lack real-world entrepreneurial experience. Erin's criticism of being referred back to the same ineffective advisor suggests a broader issue of system fragmentation, where inefficiencies make it harder for entrepreneurs to access meaningful, tailored advice. Wiklund *et al.* (2024) argue that neurodivergent people thrive in environments where mentorship is rooted in practical experience and flexibility. My data show how entrepreneurs with dyslexia, despite the lack of formal training, can find innovative ways to expand their businesses and respond to customer needs. Michael's (marketing executive, 50s) story in particular illustrates how someone can intuitively expand their business by responding to market demands and learning new skills as needed. This supports Logan *et al.*'s (2009) view that entrepreneurs with dyslexia often thrive through experiential learning.

Despite encountering barriers in accessing support, some interviewees demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness in seeking guidance from alternative sources. Dale, Ben (industrial salvage manager, 50s), and Michael exemplify this by making use of their networks, seeking advice from experienced individuals, and learning from industry peers to navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship. However, the misalignment between support organizations and the needs of entrepreneurs with dyslexia remains a significant barrier. These entrepreneurs often develop adaptive strategies to survive in the business world (Palombo, 2001; Cancer *et al.*, 2016), but these strategies are largely self-taught and often result in isolating experiences where the entrepreneur must rely on their own resilience rather than external support. Many of my interviewees expressed feeling unsupported and unseen by organizations who are meant to assist them.

Much of this experience is an echo from their school days. Just as children with dyslexia face rigid, text-based curricula that fail to accommodate their learning styles (Macdonald, 2009), adults with dyslexia encounter support systems that prioritize standardization over personalization (Logan *et al.*, 2009). People with dyslexia can excel in non-verbal and experiential tasks (Tafti *et al.*, 2009), yet both educational and business systems continue to emphasize traditional literacy-based approaches. Clara

(actress, 30s) described business administration tasks as 'a nightmare', a sentiment echoed by Dale, who called them 'a massive challenge', and Pete (photographer, 30s), who called them 'a huge barrier'. The lack of tailored, accessible business support seems to perpetuate the exclusion of people with dyslexia from ever achieving their full potential.

While some of my respondents managed to find guidance through informal networks and personal initiative, most of them continued to struggle with a lack of effective assistance. The personal narratives presented here reveal the importance of tailored and accessible support services for entrepreneurs with dyslexia. There is a need for systemic improvements in the provision of support, including the development of resources specifically designed for individuals with dyslexia, and the enhancement of mentoring programs to offer practical guidance and expertise. However, something else that unites my respondents is that none of them have given up, even in the face of significant barriers. In the next chapter, I will explore how their perseverance and success in business have been shaped by their experience of dyslexia.

7. Data Analysis: Success in Business

The focus in this chapter is on the strategies and resources my respondents have used to help mitigate the difficulties experienced in their businesses. Framed in the social-relational theory of disability, this chapter explores how my respondents have navigated these barriers, emphasizing their self-efficacy, resilience, and adaptive strategies. Eight of my respondents had made use of formal business support, and this took different forms. Four respondents had what they describe as a mentor. Five of my respondents stated that they relied on the support of friends and associates to combat the stresses of starting and running their own business. Just as family support had a positive impact on my interviewees during their school lives, so too does such support continue to make a meaningful difference in their professional lives.

Building on the literature reviewed in previous chapters, this analysis reveals the duality of dyslexia as both a barrier to and a driver of innovation. Logan (2012) emphasizes the entrepreneurial propensity of individuals with dyslexia, noting their inclination toward risk-taking and their capacity to innovate in environments where traditional measures of success may not apply. This chapter also engages with the role of mentorship, assistive technology, and delegation as coping mechanisms that entrepreneurs with dyslexia may adopt to mitigate the disabling effects of systemic barriers, echoing findings by Miller and Kass (2023) and Wissell *et al.* (2022).

By examining the lived experiences of entrepreneurs with dyslexia, this chapter seeks to highlight the link between systemic barriers and individual agency. It explores how my participants, through a combination of determination and external support, have redefined traditional notions of success. Themes such as resourcefulness, self-belief, and adaptive communication strategies will be examined, emphasizing the critical role of self-efficacy in navigating entrepreneurial challenges.

7.1. Secondary Symptoms of Dyslexia in Adulthood

The impact of early struggles with dyslexia unmistakably intrudes on adult lives. In *Chapter 5*, I explored the educational experiences of my participants, and they spoke variously about difficulties with reading and writing. I begin this chapter with an account of how dyslexia continues to adversely affect those who have it and who attempt to pursue entrepreneurship in spite of it. Pete (photographer, 30s), for example, discussed having been bullied at school, and how he continues to experience similar behaviour in adulthood:

I have never been a confident person from being young up to my age now, I am lot more confident that I was when I was younger but still get frustrated because I am not as confident as I would like to be and with people skills as well, if people see that I am a soft touch and they try and manipulate that and I have vowed this year to try and change that.

Pete describes experiencing bullying in childhood and manipulation in adulthood. This aligns with research which has found depression, anxiety (Arnold *et al.*, 2005), low self-esteem, bullying victimization, and difficulties with peer relationships among children with dyslexia. Studies show that childhood poor readers tend to continue to struggle in adulthood with tasks such as writing formal letters and filling in forms (Maughan *et al.*, 2020), and Pete's account supports previous findings that problems of anxiety, stress, self-doubt, and depression as secondary symptoms of dyslexia continue into adulthood (McNulty, 2003; Nalavany *et al.*, 2011; Smith-Spark *et al.*, 2022). It is unclear whether Pete is being stigmatized by others around him or whether he is perpetuating a self-stigma in terms of how he views himself (Stoeber, 2020).

Clara (actress, 30s) talked about her self-doubt, presenting a sense of uncertainty stemming from a lifetime of struggling and being *othered* by those around her:

I think sometimes, because of the dyslexia, I've got that inner doubt in me, that you know, you know, will people think I'm not very good at this, when you read something, and I'm not acting very well, it's not a good audition because I haven't had time to learn it properly. And I think there's that inner doubt that can get in the way. I'm constantly having to overcome ... [F]or me it's panic, I panic quite easily, and I think that's related to the dyslexia.

Like Pete, Clara has inner doubt that echoes findings by Haft *et al.* (2022), who describe how individuals with dyslexia internalize societal stigma, leading to self-doubt and reduced self-efficacy. This self-stigma likely develops from lifelong exposure to negative stereotypes and perceptions about their capabilities. Her experience of panic and self-doubt during auditions highlights the connection between dyslexia and performance-related stress, as explored by Mammarella *et al.* (2014), who attribute heightened anxiety to the expectation of failure in performance-based situations requiring literacy-related preparation. From a social relational perspective, the self-doubt and anxiety experienced by Pete and Clara reflect disabling interactions rather than intrinsic flaws. Clara's struggles with audition preparation and fear of judgment highlight how societal structures reinforce the disabling effects of dyslexia. The inner doubt she describes aligns with the internalized effects of societal othering, showing how external barriers translate into internal struggles. The emotional toll of compensatory effort can exacerbate self-doubt, perpetuating a cycle of anxiety and undermining confidence (Nalavany *et al.*, 2011).

When asked whether she would do things differently if she had to start all over again, Sandra (Maths and English tutor, 30s) acknowledged the steep learning curve associated with her first business venture:

... it was my first business I didn't know many things that I know now and I probably wouldn't have been as successful if I did. I would be too cautious whereas in this day and age you have to be a lot more on the ball and so I suppose it is my experience now has stood me in good stead for the business I have currently. So I don't know if I would change anything.

Sandra's experience supports Alexander-Passe's (2016) findings that entrepreneurs with dyslexia often rely on experiential learning and adaptive strategies developed in response to early struggles. The lack of initial knowledge and experience is a common barrier for new entrepreneurs, who must learn quickly on the job. However, these early challenges often provide valuable lessons that contribute to future success. Reflecting positively on past choices reflects the concept of post-traumatic growth, where overcoming challenges fosters adaptability and confidence in managing complex scenarios (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

The idea that being 'too cautious' might have hindered their success links with Logan's (2012) findings that people with dyslexia have a propensity for calculated risk-taking in entrepreneurial contexts. Individuals with dyslexia often embrace risks due to a combination of creative problem-solving and resilience developed through navigating systemic challenges. Pete (photographer, 30s) opines the challenges of dyslexia in terms of simply needing more time to complete tasks other people seem to complete quickly:

Sometimes you get kind of depressed and a bit frustrated at things you wish you could do ... and with dyslexia, it takes so much longer because you are having to go to somebody else for them to write it for you and they have got to be funded and then if it gets knocked back then you have to get them in again and they have got to be funded again because they have got to be paid to do this but it just becomes so frustrating because you are trying to get what's in your head on paper.

The sense of frustration Pete describes resonates with findings by Nalavany *et al.* (2011), who emphasize that adults with dyslexia often experience mental fatigue and emotional distress due to the cognitive demands of managing literacy tasks. The additional effort required to complete tasks contributes to feelings of dependency and exacerbates frustration. Pete also laments the barrier to self-expression that dyslexia represents, noting the difficulty of translating thoughts into a written form, resulting in a reliance on intermediaries which adds layers of complexity and delays to achieving their objectives. A dependency on external support to write or advocate for them reflects findings by Morrison (2019), who describes the bureaucratic hurdles individuals with dyslexia face when seeking accommodations, a process made all the more difficult by systemic inefficiencies in the provision of accommodations (Madaus, 2008).

Erin (IT trainer, 40s) emphasizes themes of information overload, decision-making challenges, and the need for mentorship, revealing the additional layer of difficulty she faces and her resilience and adaptability:

I know nothing about setting up a business, running a business – being dyslexic, there is a ton of information out there on the internet but there is also too much out there on the internet and I have felt really kind of – I almost need, I use the term a mentor – somebody to help steer

me in the right direction because I just feel overwhelmed by the volume of information and not knowing what I should/shouldn't be doing, not knowing – I can't afford, to a certain degree, to make mistakes.

The experience of feeling overwhelmed by the 'ton of information' on the Internet ties into Smith-Spark *et al.*'s (2022) findings on cognitive challenges faced by adults with dyslexia. They note deficits in planning, selective thinking, and decision-making that exacerbate difficulties in environments requiring the management of large amounts of information. Wissell *et al.* (2022) similarly describe how struggles to filter and prioritize information effectively leads to mental fatigue and reduced confidence. Erin raises the issue of needing a mentor, and mentorship has been found to serve as a counterbalance to systemic barriers, offering a means to navigate complex processes and reduce the stress associated with independent decision-making (Logan *et al.*, 2009; Wiklund *et al.*, 2024).

While Erin identifies mentorship as a critical support mechanism to help filter overwhelming information and reduce decision-making uncertainty, Pete (photographer, 30s) focuses on self-discovered coping strategies, emphasizing resilience and adaptability in managing personal literacy challenges like re-reading paragraphs or postponing tasks:

... I just found natural coping strategies, unbeknown to me, it just came natural because I just soldiered on through it. I didn't have problems reading too much, it was more spelling, grammar and those kind of things, reading I am not too bad, yet I still experience things while I am reading at home and every day reading, I would say I am a slow reader but I don't like have the mish mash of words jumping around the page and all that, so I am fortunate in that way but I do, sometimes I do read a paragraph and think what have I just read and I have got

to just cope with that and just read it again and sometimes I have just got to put the book down and come back another day and sort of have another attempt..

The notion of ‘soldiering on’ is a self-deprecating veil for what is in fact a coping strategy which they have systematically put in place since they were at school. Pete’s experience of being bullied at school and still facing challenges with confidence and self-doubt in adulthood reflects the lasting emotional toll of dyslexia. Pete emphasizes the power of personal coping strategies in managing dyslexia’s everyday effects. This demonstrates the dual necessity of systemic accommodations and individual adaptability. For individuals with dyslexia, success – whether in business or daily life – relies on a balance of external scaffolding and internal resilience, both of which should be supported by inclusive practices and resources.

The narratives presented here reveal the profound impact dyslexia has had on individuals pursuing entrepreneurship. Clara (actress, 30s) expressed the doubt and panic that stems from a lifetime of struggling with dyslexia, which manifest as impostor syndrome and anxiety. Dave (double glazing manager, 30s) expressed feeling like an impostor in business settings due to a lack of confidence and a sense of not belonging. But despite these challenges, there are examples of resilience and adaptability. Sandra (Maths and English tutor, 30s) acknowledged the steep learning curve associated with their first business venture and highlighted the importance of experience in navigating the complexities of entrepreneurship. Evie (dressmaker, 40s) emphasized the significance of seeking help and support to overcome barriers associated with dyslexia. My respondents show they have used specific strategies to mitigate challenges, and Pete described natural coping strategies developed over time to manage reading difficulties.

7.2. Coping Strategies Used by Entrepreneurs with Dyslexia

7.2.1. Adaptive Use of Contextual Strengths

Michael (marketing executive, 50s) employed a coping strategy which was, in my data, unique to him. In his interview, he reflected on the value of engaging with technical manuals related to his hobbies, which allowed him to enhance his understanding of mechanics. This enabled him to overcome some of the challenges posed by dyslexia and develop a comprehension of engineering precisely because there was less reliance on accurate spelling:

... when I took all my exams and everything because spelling was awful, English was awful but fortunately a lot of it was, you had to show that you had an understanding of the mechanics of whatever it was that the question was based on, you can do that, if you're spelling and English isn't right, if you can show the examiners that you know that that wheel should be there and it is doing that and it causes this and whatever else it is, even if you don't get the actual spelling and everything right, it, you might not be able to get through that in other businesses but in engineering people want to know do you understand these principles ... because my hobby is old cars and things like that, I read manuals, so I understand them, I understand where they are going, you don't have big complicated, words which you know, you don't see every day.

Michael shows how the focus on practical understanding in engineering mitigates the need for strong literacy skills. This aligns with research by Logan (2012), who notes that entrepreneurs with dyslexia

often excel in fields emphasizing big-picture thinking and practical problem-solving rather than literacy-based tasks. They also demonstrate how many individuals with dyslexia can navigate systemic challenges by gravitating toward industries valuing applied knowledge over theoretical or written precision (Alexander-Passe, 2017). Michael, who had no engineering or mechanical background, found he was able to visualize complex systems and make sense of them without needing to write anything down:

I never took physics or any of that stuff because the books didn't make sense to me. And so I just ... I just ... when I looked at things ... mechanical things. They just made sense and when I look at a sheet of paper with instructions on something, it's a jumbled up mess, but when I can see the pieces my brain assembles them and I just ... I basically build it from the picture and my brain shows me the picture of what it's supposed to look like.

Michael's reliance on context-specific strengths, adaptive resource selection, and personal interests shows a proactive and resourceful approach to managing dyslexia. It highlights the importance of creating inclusive environments where practical knowledge and applied skills are valued equally alongside conventional literacy.

Michael demonstrates a form of coping that is not only adaptive but also creative and contextually grounded. Rather than attempting to overcome his difficulties with reading through traditional means, Michael developed a strategy that bypasses the need for written instructions altogether. This reflects a developmentally advanced form of what we might term 'representational coping', where internal visual models replace external textual cues.

In support of what Eide and Eide (2011) found about dyslexia predisposing people to three-dimensional spatial reasoning and mechanical ability, Michael described what he termed ‘three-dimensional thinking’, and presents a pertinent explanation of how he visualized solutions to problems:

I had a company called me a few years back to devise a mechanical drive system for a piece of machinery that they were ... they patented this design for this piece of machinery, and we're trying to build it and they got the machinery done, but they had no way to propel it because they couldn't ... they couldn't figure out a drive system that wouldn't get in the way of the rest of the machine and so that was about a \$20,000 contract that took me two weeks to figure out. Well, it took me about two hours to figure out and about two weeks to build it. And these guys had the brain trust working on it for six months. And couldn't come up with a solution on their computer.

Michael can visualize complex systems in his mind’s eye, work through the structural mechanics of a system, and make modifications in real-time. His ability to visualize and devise a solution to a mechanical challenge quickly also supports Kapoula *et al.* (2016), whose research highlights the enhanced non-verbal creativity and spatial reasoning often found in individuals with dyslexia. This aligns with the observation that individuals with dyslexia frequently excel in artistic and design-related fields. This insight into three-dimensional thinking reinforces the notion that dyslexia is not merely a cognitive deficit but a unique cognitive profile that includes strengths in areas like spatial reasoning, creativity, and problem-solving.

The manner of Michael coping through visual-spatial thinking resonates with the concept of contextual fit (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2015), where the effectiveness of a coping strategy

depends on how well it aligns with the demands of the situation and the individual's available resources. In Michael's case, his ability to visualize mechanical systems and intuitively understand how they function allows him to thrive in environments that value practical problem-solving over written communication. His account of the \$20,000 contract that took him 'about two hours to figure out and about two weeks to build' highlights both Michael's technical skill and his confidence in his own abilities – a key component of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006). His success in this context challenges the deficit-orientated view of dyslexia and supports the argument that coping should be understood as a dynamic, strength-based process. When talking about the founding of his business, Michael explained how he attended a trade show and found multiple company representatives complaining about having to assemble their stands but struggling with putting them together:

'We don't know how it goes. We're salespeople and they're sending us here to set these things up and we're not engineers', and ... and when I would look at them, they just made sense to me. I could ... I could see ... if I just could scatter the pieces out on the floor and look at it, I knew how it went together just by looking at it.

Michael illustrates how dyslexia fosters a different way of thinking, enabling him to visualize complex systems in three dimensions. Despite his academic struggles, Michael found success in his ability to conceptualize mechanical systems and devise innovative solutions, frequently outperforming conventional problem-solving methods. The creative adaptations described by Michael reflect compensatory strategies discussed by Eide and Eide (2011) and Everatt *et al.* (1999). These strategies reflect the innovative and adaptable thinking that entrepreneurs with dyslexia use to thrive, particularly in fields requiring spatial intelligence and creative problem-solving. My respondents confirm assertions that dyslexia is not simply a barrier to traditional literacy but can also lead to

innovative thinking and adaptive problem-solving strategies, which are critical to entrepreneurial success. These insights are consistent with Logan (2012), who highlights how entrepreneurs with dyslexia develop unique cognitive strengths that enable them to thrive in challenging business environments. Such creative capabilities are intertwined with self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to succeed, which is often cultivated through these compensatory strategies.

Michael's experience raises questions about limitations within existing theories of coping. Traditional models, such as Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model, tend to emphasize cognitive appraisal and problem-solving within a relatively narrow framework. These models often assume that coping involves either changing the stressor or adapting to it through internal regulation. Yet, Michael's strategy involves reframing the task entirely, not by altering his internal state or the external environment, but by engaging with the task through an entirely different cognitive modality. This suggests that theories of coping should include non-verbal, spatial, and intuitive forms of problem-solving as legitimate and potentially superior strategies in certain contexts. Michael's narrative also complicates the adaptive/maladaptive binary often found in coping taxonomies. His avoidance of written instructions might be deemed maladaptive in the parameters of Lazarus and Folkman's approach, but this actually proves highly effective in Michael's professional life. His coping strategy exemplifies the need for a more nuanced, inclusive understanding of coping, one that acknowledges neurodivergent cognitive profiles and the importance of aligning coping strategies with individual strengths and contextual demands.

7.2.2. Assistive Technology as Empowerment

One of the ways in which my respondents have been able to combat their difficulties has been with the use of assistive technology, which emerges as a critical coping strategy for the entrepreneurs in

my study, allowing them to manage literacy challenges, enhance efficiency, and build confidence. Mark (builder, 30s) emphasizes the importance of making technological resources widely accessible and ensuring that individuals receive adequate training to use them effectively:

... technology has come on quite a bit, regarding voice recognition and spell check and stuff like this, so hopefully I will be able to sort out my IT skills so that then it is a lot easier for me then to be able to do my normal business work.

Computers have a lot of functionality intended to help the user, and Mark hopes that assistive technology software will be something he can embrace in the future. By seeking to integrate assistive technology, he demonstrates a proactive effort to reduce dependency on external assistance for literacy-based tasks. Some of my participants flagged up assistive technologies that transcend the mere use of computers. Clara (actress, 30s) uses software called *Dragon NaturallySpeaking*, a program which allows the user to dictate what they want to write on their computer as well as controlling their computer with their voice, and *Read&Write Gold*, which supports comprehension by reading text aloud, addressing the challenges of reading fluency and understanding. Isabelle (dyslexia tutor, 50s) also uses *Read&Write Gold*, which she says helps her to focus on the most important pieces of information:

It helps me where I can look at documents and press play and it helps me to listen, focus to what the most important thing is about in the document. I use mind map as well to set out what I am trying to learn so it is more of the, helping others but also helping yourself and training yourself how that can help you in the future and keep up with those type of technology.

From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with what Rothbaum *et al.* (1982) describe as secondary control coping – a process by which individuals adapt themselves to the environment rather than attempting to change the stressor. Instead of trying to improve reading fluency through traditional means, Isabelle adapts by using technology that reads text aloud, allowing her to engage with content in a way that suits her. Clara also emphasizes the importance of assistive tools in her advice to others:

Just really get out there and work out what software is out there to help you, because that's helped me an awful lot.

This proactive stance reflects a high degree of self-efficacy, and Clara's confidence in using technology to overcome her particular barriers is not only empowering but also indicative of what Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2016) describe as 'developmentally appropriate coping', where strategies evolve in response to both internal capacities and external supports.

By using these tools, Clara and Isabelle reduce their reliance on external support for literacy-related tasks, fostering greater independence and enhancing self-efficacy. Bandura's (2006) concept of self-efficacy links such technological empowerment to increased confidence and a sense of control over one's work. These tools also alleviate emotional frustration associated with dyslexia, such as the anxiety of making errors or the mental fatigue from manually completing literacy-heavy tasks (Wissell *et al.*, 2022). Yet, out of 14 participants, only Clara and Isabelle mentioned the use of specific computer software. This raises questions about the availability of such solutions, their cost, and how suitable and adaptable they are to an individual's needs. It may be that the other respondents have tried these software titles and not found them to be of any benefit.

Evie (dressmaker, 40s) was the only other respondent who talked about assistive technologies, making specific reference to the use of acetates – coloured overlays used to help reduce the symptomatic visual stress commonly associated with dyslexia. They described these acetates as being ‘like a breath of fresh air’ and stated that once they put them over a sheet of white paper, they could simply begin reading. Here again, this respondent was the only one to reference the use of coloured overlays, and it’s worth noting that there is questionable value in using coloured overlays to remediate the reading difficulties experienced by people with dyslexia (Henderson *et al.*, 2012). The benefits Evie experienced may therefore be entirely idiosyncratic and not a reflection of the broader usefulness of overlays.

However, the broader context of my data complicates this optimistic view. Out of 14 participants, only Clara and Isabelle mentioned using specific assistive software. This limited uptake raises questions about accessibility, awareness, and suitability. Ben (industrial salvage manager, 50s) offers a more critical perspective, arguing that the helpfulness of such software is limited if it does not address someone’s underlying reading difficulties:

What people don’t understand is, when the computer came out and it had a spell check on it, and what people do not get and still do not get it to this day, they say it has got a spell checker on it, and? What does that mean to me, I see words up there and I still don’t know what it means. I have to go and look at it on a thing, so it has got it, it does help but you know it doesn’t fix the issues that you have with that understanding.

Ben highlights a misconception that the use of computers with spell checkers means that there is an expectation of the standard of everyone’s written English. While these tools can assist people with dyslexia, they do not address underlying issues like reading comprehension or semantic processing.

Their availability does not resolve the issue of workplace literacy demands like reading, writing, and editing not being adequately adjusted for their dyslexia and, as Wissell *et al.* (2022) found, while technology reduces some barriers, it often falls short in addressing the holistic needs of individuals with dyslexia.

Dyslexia is more complicated than simply the confusing of letters and subsequent misspelling of common words, and spellcheckers are unlikely to pick up every mistake. They are designed to make best guess suggestions about what Ben intended to write, but this will only be of assistance in situations where Ben's attempt was sufficiently close to the correct spelling. Spellcheckers take no account of meaning, and there are, for example, multiple ways to spell there/their/they're or your/you're/yore. In situations where the spellchecker does make suggestions for the correct spelling, choosing the correct word from the list requires semantic understanding. While assistive technologies reduce such disabling barriers (Macdonald, 2009), they cannot be relied upon to always be available, or to always be effective.

The assumption that technology is a universally accessible coping tool ignores the systemic and economic barriers that may prevent individuals from acquiring or effectively using them. The success with assistive technology described by Clara and Isabelle may reflect not only their personal initiative but also their access to resources, training, and supportive environments – factors not equally distributed among all participants. Furthermore, from a theoretical standpoint, this suggests a need to expand coping models to account for the structural and contextual constraints that shape the availability and effectiveness of coping strategies. While Skinner *et al.* (2003) emphasize the importance of functional families of coping, they do not fully address how inequities in access to tools and support can limit the coping tools available to individuals.

Clara and Isabelle's use of assistive technology exemplifies adaptive, self-directed coping that enhances autonomy and emotional wellbeing. However, my data more broadly reveal that such strategies are not universally adopted or effective, suggesting a need for more inclusive and context-

sensitive models of coping – ones that recognize both the potential and the limitations of technological solutions.

7.2.3. Help-Seeking and Informal Mentoring

During the data analysis process, the mentor role became difficult to demarcate. What was clear from my data is that most of my respondents made use of different forms of support, from fellow businesspeople to well-meaning friends and relatives. In the Literature Review, I gave an account of studies by Clutterbuck (2014) and St-Jean (2011), for whom the term ‘mentor’ confers a range of different supportive functions, including being a role model, providing feedback on the mentee’s character and business, acting as a confidante, and helping to integrate them into the business community. Whilst ascribing so many functions to the label ‘mentor’ risks the term becoming so imprecise as to be redundant, there is a clear overlap of the functions these people have played in the lives of the Interviewees.

In *Chapter 6*, I detailed how Phoebe (used car retailer, 40s) faced considerable difficulties working through the paperwork required for her to secure finance for her company. In the main, Phoebe sought guidance from other people who had started their own business, even when those businesses were in different fields:

If you've got a difficulty with something, rather than me just sitting on it and dwelling on it, discussing it with people and talking to other people who are maybe not in the same industry, but other people who know about businesses and know how to, and have their own business. That can help you coz you realise you're not on your own.

Phoebe emphasizes the importance of discussing challenges with others, which aligns with findings by Logan (2012), who highlighted the tendency of entrepreneurs with dyslexia to leverage networked learning, drawing on insights from diverse professionals to address gaps in their own knowledge and to overcome business challenges. This captures the essence of what Skinner *et al.* (2003) classify as the support-seeking family of coping – strategies that involve reaching out to others for assistance. Phoebe’s narrative also aligns with the motivational dynamics of help-seeking described by Marchand and Skinner (2007), who found that children and adolescents are more likely to seek help when they perceive themselves as competent, autonomous, and connected to others. In Phoebe’s case, her willingness to seek advice reflects a sense of agency and a belief in the value of collaborative problem-solving.

The relational nature of Phoebe’s method of coping also supports Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck’s (2007) developmental model, which emphasizes the social embeddedness of coping. According to this model, coping is not an isolated, internal process. Coping is shaped and scaffolded by relationships with caregivers, peers, and mentors. Phoebe’s reliance on a network of fellow entrepreneurs, irrespective of their industry, demonstrates how networking can be used to help navigate complex business environments.

This is in stark contrast to the words of Erin (IT trainer, 40s) who, in *Chapter 6*, stated that ‘nobody out there appears to be able to help me’. Erin’s business journey began by ‘learning the ropes’ from her father, and she sought no training or formal support from professional bodies. Indeed, both her parents have proved to be useful sources of mentorship:

Sometimes I speak to my dad because he's got his own business so he's always really helpful with it. My mum works now doing insurance so if I've ever got any problems with insurance-

ing, she's really good at helping me with that. But then other people who we know, who are in the job you know, people who've been in this job for a long time. Even speaking to a car-dealer sometimes helps, coz if you're having a really quiet month and you think right, I've not got the customers this month and you're panicking and you realise everyone else is in the same boat, you don't panic the same.

Erin had access to familial support – her father and mother both offer business-related advice. Yet, Erin expresses a sense of isolation and frustration. This suggests that perceived support may be just as important as actual support in determining the effectiveness of help-seeking as a coping strategy. It also highlights a potential limitation in the literature around coping. While help-seeking is often framed as inherently adaptive, it may not yield positive outcomes if the support is unavailable, inaccessible, or perceived as inadequate.

Erin's narrative highlights how interpersonal networks – both familial and professional – can mitigate disabling barriers by providing practical advice and emotional reassurance, the latter point supported in findings by Logan (2009; 2012). Erin's strategy of seeking support from her parents is in keeping with Maughan *et al.*'s (2020) findings that adults with poor reading skills often rely on family members and friends to manage tasks requiring literacy, such as filling out official documents. This reliance illustrates how family networks can act as a compensatory mechanism for managing systemic barriers.

Similarly, Mark (builder, 30s) describes the profound impact of his father not only as a role model but also in shaping his educational and professional path, explaining how his father gave him the business, along with premises and pre-existing clients to get going. His father's success story, despite significant challenges, served as a strong motivational factor for the interviewee. Moreover, the strategic decisions made by his father to guide him into a trade and subsequently into higher education tailored

to the building industry highlight the importance of targeted educational paths in fostering entrepreneurship.

Evie (dressmaker, 40s) had a similar reliance on her friends, and on a personal assistant, which further emphasizes the importance of social networks in navigating business challenges:

I've got a good support network and lots of good friends, I say to them what's that? What's that paperwork? What's that paperwork? And they'll read it for us and help us, where somebody who hasn't got a support network, I don't think I would like succeed in business, without a support network ... I've got a very good friend Marian who's ... my personal assistant. She doesn't get paid or anything, but every year she helps me with my accounts and anything what needs to be done like that.

As Maughan *et al.* (2020) found, individuals with dyslexia may rely on family and friends for help with tasks requiring literacy. Indeed, these participants show how support networks are not just emotional buffers but practical resources that enable entrepreneurs with dyslexia to engage with business tasks they might otherwise struggle with. Evie's account reinforces the idea that coping is relational and distributed: it often involves delegating tasks to others who can compensate for one's weaknesses. While this supports Maughan *et al.*'s (2020) findings, it also raises equity concerns such as what happens to those who lack such networks? While help-seeking and informal mentoring are effective coping strategies for many of my participants, their success is contingent on the availability, accessibility, and quality of that support. Theoretical models that treat support-seeking as universally adaptive should account for these contextual variables. My data suggest that coping is not just about individual agency but also about the social infrastructure that enables or constrains that agency.

There comes from Dale (used car retailer, 30s) a suggestion that, to some degree, success is an inevitable consequence of perseverance, which would only have been accelerated by mentorship.

We're going to get to where we want to be anyway, with or without help. But I would say, I think with coaching and mentoring, if we'd have got the information sooner and we got the help sooner. Proper help. Then we would have got to the point, we'd have been able to have moved forward a lot quicker than possibly what we have done.

His assertion that he will get where he wants to be irrespective of what help he might receive exemplifies the resilience and perseverance that many entrepreneurs with dyslexia demonstrate. Dale's experience introduces a new perspective on the timing and quality of support. While he expresses confidence in his eventual success, he also acknowledges that earlier access to structured guidance could have accelerated his progress. This shows the importance of proactive, developmentally appropriate interventions, as emphasized by Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2016), who argue that coping strategies evolve over time and are shaped by both internal capacities and external resources.

Dale's belief in his ability to succeed aligns with the concept of self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (2006) as the confidence in one's ability to exert control over life's events and challenges. Entrepreneurs with dyslexia often develop resilience as they navigate systemic barriers (Miller & Kass, 2023). Those individuals with dyslexia who have low self-efficacy in general academic settings may exhibit higher confidence when focusing on specific strengths like entrepreneurship (Stagg *et al.*, 2018). Dale acknowledges that mentorship could have accelerated their journey further, which shows the role of external guidance in reinforcing self-efficacy. Alexander-Passe (2017) emphasizes that mentors and coaches not only help clarify pathways to success but also provide validation and encouragement.

While success may ultimately result from perseverance, access to mentorship strengthens self-efficacy and accelerates the ability to overcome obstacles.

These experiences show the pivotal role of mentoring and support networks in the entrepreneurial journeys of individuals with dyslexia. While self-efficacy and perseverance are central to their ability to overcome challenges, mentorship helps to provide insight and emotional reassurance. As my respondents have shown, guidance and coaching not only enhance confidence, they help entrepreneurs navigate complex decisions. This aligns with Bandura's (2006) emphasis on the relationship between external support and the reinforcement of self-efficacy, as well as Alexander-Passe's (2017) findings that mentors offer both practical advice and a sense of validation.

Additionally, the reliance on trusted networks for advice, whether familial or professional, shows the importance of collaboration in navigating the barriers faced by entrepreneurs with dyslexia. Tanner (2009) and Wissell *et al.* (2022) further highlight how this support not only addresses cognitive and emotional challenges but also reduces the isolating effects of entrepreneurship. However, as these entrepreneurs strive to overcome systemic barriers, the importance of delegation becomes evident. While mentorship provides clarity and direction, the ability to delegate tasks – particularly those involving significant literacy demands – emerges as a key strategy for managing workload and maximizing efficiency.

7.2.4. Delegation as Strategic Coping

Delegation emerged as a recurring and multifaceted coping strategy among several participants in my study. For individuals with dyslexia, particularly those running their own businesses, delegation is not merely an issue of efficiency, it is a deliberate and often emotionally charged response to the

persistent challenges posed by literacy-based tasks. Operating alongside the ability of my respondents to recognize their strengths was a corresponding ability to recognize and mitigate their difficulties. Clara (actress, 30s) found that she needed to delegate some responsibilities as she found she lacked sufficient time to take on everything:

There's really so much to do, and just keeping it balanced and keeping on top of things, because you've got to kind of, deal with getting a job ... you not only do it, you have to keep getting yourself out there. So, to keep on top of all of that, it's quite hard work. Because you're doing it all yourself, and sometimes there just isn't enough hours in the day, to get it all done. And that's quite a big challenge, and still, just keeping on top of kind of the reading, and not kind of getting fazed by things, because of the dyslexia.

Clara's experience reflects the cognitive overload that can result from juggling multiple tasks like reading and organization, especially when this is compounded by difficulties relating to dyslexia. Her solution is to delegate tasks that are particularly taxing. This echoes Logan's (2012) findings that entrepreneurs with dyslexia often face significant barriers in balancing the demands of running a business. Like Logan, Mazzarol (2003) identifies delegation as a key strategy for reducing cognitive load and managing time effectively, noting that entrepreneurs who delegate tasks can better allocate their energy to critical aspects of business operations. This also supports Miller and Kass (2023), who note that delegation is particularly valuable for tasks involving literacy demands and, by giving these responsibilities to others, entrepreneurs with dyslexia can mitigate frustration and focus on areas where they excel. When asked what advice she would give to someone with dyslexia who wanted to become self-employed, Clara said:

Don't try and do it all on your own, try and ask people advice constantly, if you get stuck don't be proud to think you've got to do it all on your own, and you know, it's alright to ask for help.

Here, Clara encourages others to ask for help and not to be proud, suggesting that fear of appearing dependent might be a barrier to others seeking help. This advice captures a key aspect of problem-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), where individuals take direct action to manage the demands of a stressful situation. It also aligns with Skinner *et al.*'s (2003) negotiation and delegation families of coping, which involve enlisting others to help manage stressors that exceed one's personal resources. The use of delegation is interesting because Mazzarol (2003) notes that entrepreneurs often struggle to delegate because they perceive it as a loss of control. However, my participants show that overcoming this hesitation can significantly improve efficiency and reduce stress. This is a sentiment shared by Bernard (IT systems manager, 40s), who spoke more directly about written tasks:

*... a dyslexic person is always going to need someone there with them, like a left-hand man ...
a dyslexic person will have confidence problems, where sometimes they have got to do a letter
or a presentation and the dyslexic person is always going to need someone who is going to be
in the office two or three times a week just to read things for them.*

Bernard touches on how dyslexia affects confidence in professional contexts, particularly with tasks like letters or presentations, echoing Logan's (2012) findings that confidence issues often arise from repeated exposure to literacy-based challenges. Here, the importance of delegation to trusted individuals is shown to help mitigate these stressors. Indeed, issues with reading and writing were mentioned frequently by my respondents, challenges considered synonymous with dyslexia. Bernard

highlights the chronic nature of certain stressors for individuals with dyslexia. Unlike situational stressors that can be resolved, literacy challenges are often persistent, requiring long-term coping strategies. Delegation, in this context, is not a temporary fix but a sustainable adaptation. It is a way to maintain functionality and confidence in professional settings.

Ben (industrial salvage manager, 50s) struggles with reading and writing, even with re-reading notes he had written himself, and he offers a particularly vivid example of how delegation intersects with interpersonal trust and communication. When it comes to business correspondence, Ben has grown accustomed to seeking help from his wife to make sure that the letters he was sending out were suitable for their intended audience:

I struggle with the writing of things, getting my message across, I can write an email and write a letter and then my wife will look at it and she will say what is this. She says what, you can't send this out to anybody and I say why not, I look at it and it looks all right, when I tell her what I want and what I am trying to say, she writes it, it comes out fine ... obviously you have got to have somebody around you that can write letters and get that.

Ben's reliance on his wife to translate his thoughts into a written format illustrates the relational dimension of coping emphasized by Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2015). Ben's strategy also reflects self-awareness, a recognition of his limitations, and resourcefulness in finding ways to work round them. However, it also raises questions about dependency and equity, and what happens to individuals who do not have a supportive partner or colleague to assist them.

These narratives all illustrate how dependable human support with literacy tasks enhances confidence in professional environments. By delegating this kind of task, entrepreneurs with dyslexia can reduce

anxiety and focus on their strengths, a strategy supported by Alexander-Passe (2017), who links effective delegation with improved emotional wellbeing and productivity.

Yet, conversely, Michael (marketing executive, 50s) struggled with delegation, and suggested that managing people is the worst part of his job. When asked to elaborate on the issue, he explained that this partly comes down to staff continuing to burden him with day-to-day decisions. But more broadly, he is troubled by the fact that his employees do not keep step with his laser-focused dedication to his business:

I've brought on some ... I brought on some really good people that ... I'm able to turn more of the operations over to, which was very difficult for me because when you build a business based on everybody telling you you're wrong and you're the only one that believes you're right, you believe ... well, I'm the only one that can do this then, and that's ... that's not the case, there's ... I am replaceable. I just need to get over myself and invest in some of these younger guys. And ... and so I've started investing in some younger guys that have worked for me now for several years and this year I am turning more and more of my businesses, the daily operations over to them.

Michael acknowledges the difficulty of letting go of control, a common challenge for entrepreneurs who have had to rely on self-belief to counter external scepticism. This is in line with the findings of Mazzarol (2003) and Foss *et al.* (2007), both of whom identify such reluctance as a key barrier to delegation, particularly for entrepreneurs who feel their personal involvement is critical to success. This also builds on Miller and Kass's (2023) argument that delegation is about strategically compensating for individual weaknesses, and on what Welter *et al.* (2016) discuss in relation to

creating social networks to get ahead, by introducing the notion that delegation is also about cultivating talent within the organization, which can help ensure long-term stability and growth.

Michael reveals the psychological barriers to delegation, particularly for individuals whose self-efficacy has been forged in opposition to external doubt. His reluctance to delegate is not rooted in arrogance but in a deeply ingrained belief that his success depends on personal control. This aligns with Mazzarol's (2003) and Foss *et al.*'s (2007) findings that entrepreneurs often struggle to delegate due to fears of losing control or compromising quality. From a theoretical standpoint, Michael and Ben complicate the assumption that delegation is a straightforwardly adaptive strategy. While it clearly reduces cognitive load and enhances productivity, it also depends on interpersonal trust, emotional readiness, and access to reliable support. The literature often treats delegation as a managerial skill rather than a coping mechanism, overlooking its emotional and psychological dimensions. My respondents suggest that for entrepreneurs with dyslexia, delegation is both a practical necessity and a strategic coping response. It allows them to focus on their strengths, such as creativity, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication. But it also allows them to mitigate the stress associated with literacy tasks. Its effectiveness is contingent, however, on the availability of trustworthy collaborators and the individual's willingness to relinquish control.

While it does not directly exemplify delegation, Ben (industrial salvage manager, 50s) spoke in detail about his own approach to avoiding having to conduct business in writing, and he presents a compelling account of his own coping strategy:

When I speak things, when I see letters, when I see things on the internet, when I see specifications, I tend to more or less memorise them, they stick in my head ... and when I am at a meeting ... I take notes and I go away and I look at the notes and I don't understand them, I don't know what I have written down ... I tend to pick a phone up and speak to them, or speak

to them directly and try and sort out whatever else it is verbally and then confirm it in one sentence ... that it has trained me in a certain way that I know that I am not going to be good at the written communication but I can actually speak to the people because I am not frightened to pick the phone up and tell them things, that they might not want to hear.

This quote shows the interplay between self-awareness, adaptive communication strategies, and delegation. Ben reflects on how verbal communication and interpersonal skills compensate for difficulties with written communication, showcasing how he adapts and leverages his strengths in a professional context. This supports research by Logan (2012) and Wissell *et al.* (2022), who identify similar patterns among entrepreneurs with dyslexia, who often delegate or reframe written communication to focus on their other strengths. This also confirms what Maughan *et al.* (2020) found in relation to individuals with dyslexia facing persistent communication difficulties in both academic and professional settings due to their struggles with reading and writing, often relying on support from peers and colleagues in adult life.

My respondents reveal that the process of delegating tasks – particularly those requiring written communication – allows them to focus on their strengths and innovate without being weighed down by barriers related to literacy. Delegation is not solely about task distribution, but it actually involves a strategic adaptation to the cognitive challenges individuals with dyslexia face. This supports the findings of Logan (2012), Maughan *et al.* (2020), and Wissell *et al.* (2022), who emphasize that the delegation of reading, writing, and administrative tasks is not just a practical strategy but an emotional necessity.

The shift from self-reliance to trust in others is not easy, and entrepreneurs with dyslexia often struggle with the psychological barriers of letting go of control (Mazzarol, 2003; Alexander-Passe, 2017). But delegation not only addresses logistical challenges, it also empowers entrepreneurs with

dyslexia to leverage their alternative cognitive processing strategies. This creative thinking forms the bedrock of their entrepreneurial success.

7.2.5. Creative Reframing and Thinking Differently

Linked to the theme of delegation was a pattern among some of my respondents of having developed a means of getting around their difficulties with written administrative tasks. Evie (dressmaker, 40s) shared how dyslexia has encouraged her to develop creative problem-solving skills. Rather than being discouraged by spelling difficulties, she has learned to adapt and find alternative ways to express herself effectively:

But one of my friends who's got a degree, he says to us, the thing is with you [Evie], you're cleverer than you think, because if you can't spell a certain word you have to find a word that you can spell and totally rephrase the whole sentence, just so you can find the words to spell.

This adaptive approach not only demonstrates resilience but also highlights Evie's ability to think outside the box and overcome challenges posed by dyslexia. This strategy exemplifies what Skinner *et al.* (2003) classify as cognitive restructuring, a coping mechanism that involves altering one's interpretation or approach to a stressor. Rather than surrender to her inability to spell a particular word, Evie adapts by reconfiguring the sentence entirely. More than merely a workaround, this is a demonstration of linguistic creativity and cognitive flexibility. This resonates with the broader themes

of compensatory strategies (Kapoula *et al.*, 2016) and creativity (Cancer, 2016) discussed in the literature.

Creative abilities in individuals with dyslexia often emerge as a result of the innovative thought processes they use to overcome literacy-related obstacles (Everatt *et al.*, 1999; Kapoula *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, creative thinking is not just an incidental trait but a crucial coping mechanism that allows entrepreneurs with dyslexia to thrive. Evie's approach also aligns with the broader theme of compensatory strategies in coping theory. According to Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2016), effective coping often involves identifying and leveraging alternative pathways to achieve a goal. In Evie's case, the goal is clear communication, and her strategy reflects a sophisticated understanding of how to achieve that goal despite her barriers.

Despite facing challenges with class reading and spelling, Ben (industrial salvage manager, 50s) developed alternative strategies to cope with his learning difficulties. Rather than focusing on lengthy written explanations, he learned to communicate concisely and efficiently, seeking the shortest and quickest ways to convey his ideas. Speaking about his difficulties at school due to dyslexia, Ben said:

[School] taught me to ... to look for alternatives, if I am going to write something or I want to say something, I actually have to write as opposed to having loads and loads of words, I would look at the shortest, quickest way to write something.

In a similar vein to Evie (dressmaker, 40s), Ben reveals how he has fostered creative problem-solving skills by seeking out alternative solutions when faced with difficulties like spelling or being required to write at length. Instead of becoming discouraged by these challenges, he adapts by finding the shortest and most efficient way to communicate, a strategy which reflects a broader theme of

creativity in coping mechanisms. This again echoes the findings of Kapoula *et al.* (2016) and Cancer (2016), who found that individuals with dyslexia often develop creative problem-solving skills as a natural response to their difficulties with literacy. Indeed, these accounts also support what Everatt *et al.* (1999) suggest about individuals with dyslexia excelling in non-verbal creativity and problem-solving tasks due to their adaptive thinking.

Ben's strategy is rooted in efficiency and minimalism, a form of coping that prioritizes clarity and brevity over conventional literacy norms. Like Evie, he demonstrates a high degree of self-awareness and adaptive problem-solving. His approach also reflects what Skinner *et al.* (2003) describe as accommodation, a coping family tied to autonomy that involves adjusting one's goals or strategies to fit the constraints of the situation.

However, these narratives also challenge some of the assumptions embedded in traditional coping theory. For instance, the transactional model of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) tends to emphasize either problem-focused or emotion-focused strategies, often overlooking the creative and transformative dimensions of coping. Evie and Ben are not simply managing stress, they are redefining the task in ways that align with their cognitive strengths. The adaptive/maladaptive divide that underpins many coping taxonomies becomes problematic in this context. Evie's avoidance of complex vocabulary might be seen as a limitation. Yet in practice it enables her to communicate effectively and maintain professional competence. Similarly, Ben's minimalist writing style might be dismissed as overly simplistic, but it serves as a functional and efficient means of expression. Ben and Evie also raise important questions about the role of the environment in shaping coping strategies. Both have developed their approaches in response to environments that do not accommodate their cognitive profiles. Their strategies are not just personal adaptations, rather they are responses to systemic exclusion. This underscores the need for coping theory to engage more deeply with issues of access, equity, and neurodiversity.

The coping strategies employed by Evie and Ben illustrate the power of creative reframing as a means of navigating literacy challenges. Their narratives support a more expansive view of coping, one that values innovation, flexibility, and contextual intelligence. These insights challenge traditional models to move beyond rigid classifications and embrace a more inclusive, dynamic understanding of how individuals adapt to adversity.

7.3. Manifestations of Self-Efficacy

In this final section, I will reflect on those accounts in which my respondents describe perseverance and determination, along with aptitudes and skills that are manifestly a result of being dyslexic. Through discussion of their hard-won successes, my respondents demonstrated differing degrees of self-efficacy, and none more laconically than Michael, with whose personal narrative I open and close this section:

I've learned to ignore the people who say that I can't. My phrase that my wife and my employees get sick of hearing is 'don't put your shortcomings on me'. Because people will come in and say, 'well, you can't do that'. 'No, you can't do that'. I can do whatever I put my mind to.

Michael encapsulates a strong manifestation of self-efficacy. He reflects a firm belief in personal capability and resilience. This aligns with Bandura's (1997) notion of the role of personal mastery and overcoming adversity in fostering confidence and persistence. Self-efficacy is crucial in the context of

dyslexia precisely because it enables entrepreneurs with dyslexia to navigate challenges related to literacy or self-perception. By dismissing the doubts of others and asserting his own agency, Michael affirms his confidence in his capacity to achieve his goals. There was no doubt in his mind that he would be successful. His words echo those of Jamie, a respondent in the Armstrong and Humphrey (2009) study, and provides further evidence that those who embrace their dyslexia diagnosis and develop a positive narrative around it tend to demonstrate higher self-efficacy. Michael also supports Leitão *et al.* (2017), who found that once they understand their challenges, many individuals with dyslexia can develop a more optimistic outlook, viewing themselves as capable of achieving success despite the difficulties they face.

Like Michael, Dale (used car retailer, 30s) showed self-assurance and determination to pursue a career where he could leverage his strengths and expertise, choosing to resign from his job and become self-employed the next day on the grounds that he believed he could be one of the best electricians working in his area. He took decisive action to take control of his career path and chose to start his own business as a means of regaining autonomy and pursuing a career that resonates with his personal aspirations. Similarly, Erin (IT trainer, 40s) spoke about the same desire to see what opportunities lay ahead in the pursuit of entrepreneurship. Her experience of being made redundant and facing difficulty in finding suitable full-time employment led to a feeling of being undervalued and unfulfilled in traditional job roles:

... although you may say being freelance or self-employed has no guarantees to it either, I have got an opportunity to better myself by working as hard as I can whereas if you are working for someone else on a zero hours contract you have no say in it. What you get is what you get. Whereas this way I have an opportunity to improve my circumstances which unfortunately I have hit rock bottom and I am clawing my way back out of.

The quote from Erin reflects a manifestation of self-efficacy in the pursuit of entrepreneurship as a means to regain control and improve personal circumstances. This echoes Logan's (2012) findings that entrepreneurs with dyslexia often pursue self-employment to bypass the constraints of traditional employment. Similarly, Erin confirms what Powers *et al.* (2020) said about self-efficacy playing a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurial aspirations, particularly when conventional roles fail to align with a person's strengths. Erin's experience mirrors this dynamic, where entrepreneurship offers a way to escape undervaluation and assert control over career progression.

Dave (double glazing manager, 30s) discussed how he makes strategic decisions to not replace employees who have left their business, suggesting that he is confident in his ability to streamline operations and maintain productivity without increasing staffing levels.

I've over five or ten month period set my business up as people have left, I haven't replaced them ... I've then used my knowledge that I've gained over the last twenty years and the finances that I've gained and bought another property to now develop a kennels and cattery ...

Here, Dave demonstrates a manifestation of self-efficacy through strategic decision-making and confidence in his ability to streamline operations effectively. He has accumulated knowledge and financial resources from running the business for the past twenty years and reflects confidence in his expertise and financial management skills, as well as belief in his ability to leverage these assets for further growth and diversification. Furthermore, it demonstrates confidence in his vision for the future and a willingness to pursue new opportunities for expansion and diversification beyond his current

business ventures. He epitomizes how a successful entrepreneur can make bold strategic decisions, leveraging their experiences and adaptive strengths, as supported by Bandura (1997), Logan (2012), and Powers *et al.* (2020), demonstrating that self-efficacy is a driver of resilience and success in entrepreneurship.

Dave indicates a coping strategy of adapting their mindset and approach to their business. By focusing on jobs and clients that he feels comfortable with and trust, he aims to reduce stress and maintain a sense of control over his workload:

Here and now I've changed my mindset of the business life that I want to do So only take on jobs that I want to do, people that I trust, people that I want to work for ...

Here, he is leveraging self-efficacy to adapt his work strategies, focusing on manageable tasks and trusted relationships to reduce stress and enhance productivity. Despite not fitting the traditional mould of a businessperson, he persists in his role and in operation of the business, which requires a level of belief in oneself and one's capabilities. This is in direct support of Logan's (2012) argument that entrepreneurs with dyslexia develop adaptive strategies to navigate professional challenges, such as leveraging their strengths while minimizing exposure to areas of difficulty, and Miller and Kass's (2023) argument that self-efficacy fosters resilience and strategic decision-making.

Determination was a characteristic demonstrated by several of my respondents, including Dale (used car retailer, 30s), who highlighted the increased accountability faced by entrepreneurs:

You need a lot of determination because things do go wrong. Sometimes money is tight, so you've got to have a lot of determination and never give up, never even think about giving up. You just think well, if something goes wrong, I've got to fix it. I've got to deal with it. you can't stick your head in the sand like you would do when you worked for somebody else. You know, you've got to deal with it. So, determination's the biggest thing I think really.

Indeed, Dale cites determination as perhaps the single most important attribute of the successful entrepreneur.

Dyslexic people, obviously I would say if, I think if you've got the determination and you've got the will and it's something you really want to do, then I would say one thousand percent go for it. Because if you've got those things in place, then you can't really fail.

Here, Dale reflects the entrepreneurial persistence highlighted by Logan (2012), who found that entrepreneurs with dyslexia often view challenges as opportunities for growth, and who leverage their resilience to navigate uncertainties in business. Their determination to succeed supports Alexander-Passe's (2016b) and Sanki and O'Connor's (2021) findings that post-traumatic growth builds resilience, adaptability, and self-efficacy. Erin (IT trainer, 40s) echoes this, suggesting there is a trait of determination common among people with dyslexia:

I want to succeed. I have got that – I have part of the dyslexic trait that some people have, perhaps we all have, where I do focus on things and I do want to be the best I can be and years

of being told I would never succeed, I wasn't good enough, I had to right to do something – do you believe that? I use an expression that somebody said to me – dog with a bone. I cannot fail.

Erin's approach emphasizes self-confidence and strategic decision-making, linking with Alexander-Passe's (2017) findings that entrepreneurs with dyslexia reframe failure positively and implement strategies to mitigate limitations. This similarly dovetails with Snyder's (2002) argument that individuals with high self-efficacy are invigorated by ambitious goals and persist despite stress. Erin places greater importance on determination than any other facet of business acumen, arguing that the key elements to success in business are self-belief and vision.

When asked what advice he would give to a person with dyslexia who wanted to become an entrepreneur, Pete (photographer, 30s) said:

Not to give up, no matter how difficult it gets, whatever barriers are in the way just, I am very persistent, I would just advise them to be very persistent and sometimes you have just got to keep going and my opportunity hasn't, the window or door hasn't really opened for me yet but I am not prepared to give up, I mean I love what I do, I love creating images, I love taking photographs and I am going to keep going until I get where I want to be.

As stated earlier, self-efficacy is a dynamic construct that results from experience and the development of adaptive strategies. The ambitious goals and the tenacity to navigate obstacles demonstrated by Pete is written about widely in the literature (Snyder, 2002; Logan, 2012; Miller & Kass, 2023). Pete's determination to persist in the face of adversity exemplifies the manifestations of

self-efficacy that are crucial for entrepreneurial success. His account supports the idea that self-efficacy is not just about belief in one's abilities but also about a drive to persist, adapt, and find innovative solutions.

Similarly, Clara (actress, 30s) discussed her resilience and highlighted the effect her childhood struggles had on her determination to succeed in life:

I think at first I felt like a chip on my shoulder, that I had to prove something, I think I've probably still got that in me quite a bit actually ... I kind of felt like, well, I've got to prove that I'm not thick, in a way. So I think I just over-compensated by working really hard. Because I actually did quite well in my GCSEs and A-levels and my degree, but it came at the expense of wearing myself ... I don't shy away from a problem, I kind of push through it, even though things are difficult, I kind of, I always see things through.

Clara frames her determination in terms of feeling she needs to prove herself. When considering the forms of compensation described by McNulty (2003), she seems most closely to align with 'gifted overcompensation', where she has found a niche in an area of giftedness whilst overcompensating for her past experiences of failure. The pursuit of acting has required her to work much longer hours due to the amount of reading required, which resonates with the description of a fighting spirit described by Alexander-Passe (2017), and the notion put forth by Miller and Breton-Miller (2016) that people who have faced significant challenges throughout their lives are 'inoculated against failures'.

Isabelle (dyslexia tutor, 50s), on the other hand, emphasized her personal experience with dyslexia as a significant strength in her role as a tutor for people with dyslexia. Her ability to empathize with their clients' struggles enhances her effectiveness in providing support and guidance:

My biggest strengths are that I can understand and empathise with people who are dyslexic because I am also dyslexic and I have been in situations where they have been in certain ways and I have got an understanding to help them.

Throughout the literature, there are numerous accounts of people with dyslexia developing coping strategies (Everatt *et al.*, 1999; McNulty, 2003; Logan, 2009; Kapoula & Vernet *et al.*, 2016) and methods of compensation (Mazzarol, 2003; Pollack, 2004; Palombo, 1994; 2001; Logan, 2012), and of the positive impact of a dyslexia diagnosis (Glazzard, 2010; Doikou-Avlidou, 2015). In an unusual account of the positive aspects of dyslexia, Isabelle describes how her experience and struggles have given her a unique perspective framed in empathy and understanding, traits discussed by Sepulveda (2013), Sanki and O'Connor (2021), and Sepulveda and Nicolson (2021). Isabelle's ability to draw on her own experiences allows her to connect with her clients and provide effective support.

In line with the findings of Eide and Eide (2011), who suggest that individuals with dyslexia are often predisposed to three-dimensional spatial reasoning and innovative thinking, Evie (dressmaker, 40s) described her ability to visualize solutions to problems:

I can problem solve in that way with cloth or I can basically, there was one time I got asked to make this prom dress and I couldn't think for weeks and weeks and weeks how to make it. And believe it or not, I went to sleep one night and I dreamt how to make this dress and I went to work the next day and I made the dress within four hours.

The visual and spatial thinking used to work through the dress design reflects Cancer's (2016) assertion that individuals with dyslexia often approach problem-solving in creative and innovative ways. This ability allows people to approach challenges from unique angles, enabling them to excel in fields requiring creative, non-linear problem-solving. Evie provides further support for the notion that dyslexia fosters a unique form of creativity that is particularly evident in non-verbal problem-solving tasks, and that this can be leveraged for entrepreneurial success. Similarly, Pete (photographer, 30s) acknowledged that dyslexia is intrinsically linked to his creativity and unique perspective.

... if I wasn't dyslexic, I might not be creative, so I sometimes I often wonder about those artists who are creative but not dyslexic ... [i]t is a blessing and a curse, it is an advantage because my own quote is, if I didn't have a creative mind, if I didn't have a dyslexic mind, I wouldn't have a creative mind so that is quite, something I will bear in mind all the time and thinking about the barriers and things like that but I try to remain positive at all times.

Pete's account further supports research that suggests that individuals with dyslexia are particularly adept at visualization and spatial reasoning (Eide & Eide, 2011; Kapoula *et al.*, 2016). He suggests that his dyslexic mind allows him to think differently and approach tasks in unconventional ways, which can be advantageous in artistic endeavours such as photography and art. He further highlights how dyslexia honed his problem-solving skills, suggesting that overcoming challenges related to dyslexia has equipped him with the ability to find innovative solutions to problems, a valuable trait in entrepreneurship and creative fields.

Ben (industrial salvage manager, 50s) emphasizes the importance of having vision, being aware of opportunities, and actively seeking them out. This proactive approach demonstrates confidence in his ability to identify and pursue opportunities:

You have got to have vision, you have got to be aware of what is happening around you, you have got to keep looking for opportunities. I always have a policy that if you are not out there, it's not going to happen, you have got to expose yourself all the time. You have got to be strong to start off, with the disappointments and the let downs.

This emphasizes resilience and opportunity-seeking as personal traits, which Alexander-Passe (2017) argues are attributes that often develop as a necessity in people with dyslexia. The mention of being prepared to take risks, but in a managed way, highlights a sense of control and capability in navigating challenges. Ben expresses confidence in his understanding of the market and product, as well as his ability to communicate effectively with others, indicating a strong belief in his skills and knowledge:

... they say you have got big balls, I am prepared to take risks but managed risk, managed risks that I take. I think that I have got quite a good vision and understanding of the market. I have got an excellent understanding of the product. I can get on with people, that is another thing I am able to do. Talk to people, understand people, at most levels you know.

When talking about the positive aspects of his dyslexia, Michael (marketing executive, 50s) highlights a strong belief in himself despite outside perceptions of arrogance. He acknowledges the necessity of believing in oneself, especially when others may not, as a driving force for motivation and action. This indicates a high level of self-confidence and resilience in the face of scepticism or doubt from others:

... it's a bit of a paradox because I can come off as arrogant because I just feel like I can do anything and people to some people, that turns them off that well this guy just thinks he can do anything and I don't mean to be arrogant, but at the same time, when nobody else believes in you, you have to believe in yourself because nobody else is doing it, and if you don't believe in yourself, you just don't ... you don't ever get out of bed.

Michael's acknowledgment of being perceived as arrogant aligns with Keh *et al.*'s (2002) argument that overconfidence can be a double-edged sword for entrepreneurs. Indeed, Russo and Schoemaker (1992) suggest that the projection of confidence even when it perhaps cannot be justified can lead to success. At the same time, Michael's resilience and self-assurance resonate with the strengths highlighted by Miller and Kass (2023), emphasizing the importance of self-belief in overcoming barriers. Together, these perspectives illustrate that for entrepreneurs with dyslexia, confidence can be both a tool for success and a potential social obstacle.

Michael goes on to showcase his resourcefulness and determination to overcome obstacles. Despite financial limitations, he demonstrated a proactive approach to problem-solving by finding alternative, cost-effective solutions, demonstrating his ability to find creative solutions and adapt to challenges, contributing to a sense of self-efficacy:

It was probably a combination of just being stubborn and being poor, when I would see things that I wanted I would come up with ways that I thought I could build them cheaper or that I could take something that was meant for something else and repurpose it for something that I wanted ... I didn't have the money to go buy what was out there. I had to find a better way or a more cost effective or a cheaper way to do it ... I just started looking at doing things in a less traditional way that made sense in my head.

The focus on creating cheaper solutions despite lacking funds mirrors the strategies discussed by McNulty (2003) who asserts the resourcefulness of entrepreneurs with dyslexia, doubtlessly linked to their capacity to leverage their creativity. This self-reliance, while empowering, can be tied to the difficulties individuals with dyslexia face, where they are often not provided with the same resources or opportunities as others either during school (Miles, 2006) or in the world of work (Madaus, 2008; Wissell *et al.*, 2022).

Finally, Michael explains his journey towards self-confidence and self-acceptance. He reflects on a personal journey of validation, self-doubt, and eventual self-acceptance, shaped by both external criticism and the constraints of traditional systems. In his teens and 20s, he sought validation from everyone, struggling to find confidence while pursuing nontraditional methods that others criticized. This lack of support, particularly when rejecting 'the traditional norm', undermined his belief in his abilities. Despite facing criticism and doubts from others, he found validation in his own successes and experiences. His confidence grew as he realized the effectiveness of his unconventional methods. This progression reflects a growing belief in his own abilities and a shift towards internal validation rather than seeking external approval. In his 30s, his success began to challenge these criticisms, shifting his perspective. The turning point came when he met a successful mentor with dyslexia who encouraged him to trust his outcomes rather than conform to external expectations.

I was in my probably early 30s and I met someone who is very successful, and he was dyslexic and he would tell me, 'Hey, if it's working, don't worry about what other people say.' And he's like, 'if it doesn't work, then maybe listen to what people are saying. But if what you're doing is working, believe in the results, don't believe in them.'

This advice reinforced his growing confidence, helping him realize that his methods, though unconventional, were valid and effective. The usefulness of mentors who have also overcome their challenges to achieve success is supported by Logan *et al.* (2009) and Wiklund *et al.* (2024), who confirm that such mentorship breeds confidence and helps overcome structural and psychological barriers. Now approaching 50, Michael has stopped seeking external validation, embracing his unique way of working and valuing results over societal norms.

Michael embodies a strong sense of self-efficacy characterized by belief in his capabilities, resilience in the face of challenges, and validation through personal achievements and experiences. He serves as a testament to the power of self-belief and determination in the face of adversity. By refusing to internalize the doubts and limitations imposed by others, he developed a sense of agency and confidence in his abilities. His refusal to accept external judgments has led him to define his own path and forge ahead with unwavering conviction. Even though he faced financial constraints and scepticism from others, he demonstrated resourcefulness and creativity in overcoming obstacles. His ability to adapt his approach to suit his unique strengths reflects a deep-seated belief in his capacity to succeed.

7.4. Conclusion

The narratives presented in this chapter reveal the relationship between systemic barriers and individual agency in the entrepreneurial experiences of adults with dyslexia. Through the lens of the social-relational theory of disability, this chapter highlights the disabling effects of societal structures and the strategies that individuals must adopt in order to navigate these challenges. There is an unmistakable tension between the systemic limitations imposed on individuals with dyslexia and the

compensatory strengths they develop, which offer an insight into the ongoing discourse on disability and entrepreneurship.

A central theme was the role of compensatory strategies – whether through technology, delegation, or restructuring work environments. Isabelle (dyslexia tutor, 50s) and Clara (actress, 30s), for example, use *Read&Write* software and mind mapping to manage paperwork, while Bernard (IT systems manager, 40s) developed his own invoicing system to streamline tasks he found cognitively demanding. These strategies reflect a shift from coping as mere endurance to coping as creative adaptation – a shift that is more likely when individuals are supported in understanding their own learning profiles.

My data show the importance of resilience and self-efficacy in overcoming barriers. Respondents like Pete (photographer, 30s), who described ‘soldiering on’ despite feeling frustrated and despondent, show the determination to succeed in situations that exclude individuals with dyslexia. This aligns with the theory of post-traumatic growth as a conceptualization of how people experience positive psychological change after a trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Alexander-Passe, 2016a; Sanki & O’Connor, 2021). The ability to reframe failure and adapt creatively to challenges underscores Bandura’s (2006) concept of self-efficacy, which emphasizes belief in one’s capacity to achieve goals despite external obstacles.

However, the emotional toll of resilience cannot be ignored. Wissell *et al.* (2022) argue that compensatory strategies like working longer hours lead to mental fatigue and stress. This is echoed in the frustrations expressed by respondents like Clara (actress, 30s). There is a palpable need among my respondents to overcome societal barriers as well as intrinsic limitations, which reflects an externalization of disabling effects onto the individual.

In the pursuit of entrepreneurship, the role of mentorship and informal support networks was shown to be pivotal in the journeys of several of my respondents. A key example is Phoebe’s (used car retailer,

40s) reliance on informal discussions with other business owners to navigate administrative challenges, which serves to highlight the value of networking (Logan, 2012). These interactions also serve to help reduce the feeling of isolation that can accompany dyslexia in professional contexts (Wissell *et al.*, 2022). However, questions were raised concerning the accessibility and relevance of formal mentoring frameworks for entrepreneurs with dyslexia. There are conflicting accounts of the usefulness of business support and mentoring among my sixteen respondents, with half of them revealing they have not made use of either type of service. While formal mentorship provides feedback, role modelling, and integration into professional networks (Logan *et al.*, 2009; Wiklund *et al.*, 2024), some of my participants expressed scepticism and outright aversion to such schemes. Some, such as Dave (double glazing manager, 30s), were distrustful of such training because they felt the expertise of those providing the training had been acquired from textbooks rather than from being in the business world itself. Four of my participants had benefitted from mentoring, and there were again concerns, this time from Pete, that business mentors tend to have theoretical rather than real-world experience. Of those Interviewees who did seek business support, only one had anything positive to say. Others stated distrust of such help, or said they were unaware that it was even available.

Assistive technology was highlighted as a useful tool for managing the literacy-related challenges associated with dyslexia. While Mark (builder, 30s) expressed hope in utilizing voice recognition and spell check software to improve his IT skills, respondents like Clara and Isabelle (dyslexia tutor, 50s), who used software such as *Read&Write Gold*, illustrate how technological interventions can foster greater independence and self-efficacy. These tools have not only facilitated written communication but also helped them focus on essential information and mitigate the impact of their reading difficulties. This supports Macdonald's (2009) and Alexander-Passe's (2016a) argument that assistive technologies can reduce disabling barriers by enhancing accessibility and efficiency.

However, reliance on assistive technologies reveals persistent gaps in systemic support. As Ben (industrial salvage manager, 50s) noted, spellcheckers and similar tools often fail to address the

underlying challenges of reading comprehension and semantic processing. These findings point to the inadequacy of technological solutions in addressing the needs of individuals with dyslexia, reinforcing the importance of systemic accommodations alongside personal adaptations.

Delegation emerged as another key strategy for managing cognitive load and literacy-heavy tasks. Interviewees like Clara and Bernard (IT systems manager, 40s) emphasized the value of entrusting administrative responsibilities to others, echoing Mazzarol's (2003) assertion that effective delegation allows entrepreneurs to focus on their strengths while mitigating stress. However, the reluctance to delegate described by Michael (marketing executive, 50s) highlights the psychological barriers entrepreneurs with dyslexia face in relinquishing control. This tension aligns with Mazzarol's (2003) point that a strong personal investment in business operations can be an obstacle to effective delegation.

One thing that unites all of my respondents is the passion with which they talk about their businesses. None of them has entered lightly into entrepreneurship, that assurance to start their own business has been hard won, and so handing the reins to a third party is an understandable challenge. Two participants who recognize that delegation is a strategic tool not an admission of inadequacy are Clara and Bernard, who highlight the importance of delegating tasks that require extensive written communication or detailed reading to alleviate time constraints and allow them to focus on other aspects of the business.

My respondents consistently demonstrated creativity and resourcefulness as defining characteristics of their entrepreneurial strategies. Michael's ability to visualize and solve complex mechanical problems without relying on written instructions reflects the strengths associated with spatial reasoning and non-verbal problem-solving, as discussed by Kapoula and Vernet (2016) and Eide and Eide (2011). Similarly, Evie's (dressmaker, 40s) adaptive approach to designing a prom dress after visualizing the solution in a dream exemplifies the innovative thinking that is often a hallmark of

people with dyslexia. This aligns with Logan's (2012) findings that individuals with dyslexia excel in big-picture thinking and creative problem-solving, traits that are invaluable in entrepreneurial contexts.

However, it is important to critique the framing of these traits as inherent advantages. As the social-relational theory of disability emphasizes, these strengths often develop as compensatory mechanisms in response to systemic exclusion. Rather than celebrating creativity as an innate attribute, these narratives highlight the need for systems that accommodate diverse cognitive profiles, reducing the burden of compensation.

Framing these findings within the social-relational theory of disability challenges traditional narratives that view dyslexia as an individual deficit. Instead, the data reveal how disabling barriers – such as literacy-heavy tasks, inaccessible mentorship programs, or inadequate technological solutions – necessitate the development of compensatory strategies. While respondents' resilience, creativity, and resourcefulness are commendable, they underscore the systemic failures that force individuals to rely on these traits.

None of these coping strategies emerges as a singular, mandatory requirement for adults with dyslexia to successfully start and operate a business. However, it is evident that at some point in their lives, all my respondents have taken ownership of their academic struggles and implemented measures that mitigate them. What is open to interpretation is how far these measures demonstrate self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006) and how far they show risk aversion (Ahn, 2010). Dale (used car retailer, 30s) took the decisive action of resigning from his job and starting his own business in the space of a week, but this could have been a calculated risk. What implies self-efficacy is what he says about the appeal of knowing he could have returned to paid employment at any time, about how the biggest challenge was not simply returning to traditional employment but persevering with his own business.

That he persevered with his business even when, in his words, it was 'literally climbing a mountain', indicates his belief that he could be successful. Erin (IT trainer, 40s) transitioned to freelance work

after facing difficulties in traditional employment, and Pete persistently pursued his passion for photography despite facing obstacles, while Clara acknowledged her past struggles but remained committed to her pursuit of entrepreneurship. Ben and Michael both stated outright that they believed they could be successful in business despite their literacy difficulties.

The concept of self-efficacy therefore offers a lens for understanding how entrepreneurs with dyslexia navigate these barriers. The belief in their ability to succeed, despite external doubts, reflects an interplay among my respondents between intrinsic motivation and external validation. However, we have also seen the emotional and cognitive costs of maintaining self-efficacy in disabling environments, which suggests a need for systemic changes that support rather than necessitate resilience.

Individuals who received support, diagnosis, or recognition of their dyslexia during their school years often developed more structured, proactive, and socially embedded coping strategies as adults. Those who were unsupported or misdiagnosed tended to rely more heavily on self-taught, reactive, or emotionally burdensome forms of adaptation. For those who were diagnosed or supported at school – such as Evie, who was identified through the Prince’s Trust in her late twenties, or Clara, who received exam accommodations after a formal diagnosis at the age of 14 – coping in adulthood often involved support-seeking and strategic compensation. These individuals were more likely to build and maintain support networks, use assistive technologies, and develop routines that helped them manage the administrative and emotional demands of self-employment. Evie, for example, described how her mentor helped her navigate paperwork and customer communication, while Clara emphasized the importance of having multiple sources of support after the loss of her mother, who had been her primary helper. Their coping was not only functional but also relational – embedded in systems of trust, mentorship, and shared problem-solving.

In contrast, those who received no support at school – such as Dale, who left school with no qualifications, or Ben, who was placed in a stigmatizing ‘glass box’ support room – often described

their adult coping in terms of resilience through necessity. These individuals developed strong problem-solving skills, but often at a cost. They spoke of having to ‘figure it out alone’, of feeling like impostors in professional settings, and of carrying the emotional residue of early failure. Ben described how he learned to rely on verbal communication and memory because written forms remained inaccessible. His coping was adaptive but also isolating, driven by a need to survive in systems that had failed to accommodate him.

Even among those who were supported, the quality and timing of that support mattered. Sandra (Maths and English tutor, 30s), who was the slowest reader in her grammar school cohort but only received mentoring later in life, reflected that earlier recognition might have changed her trajectory. Similarly, Scarlett (risk manager, 30s), who received Access to Work support as an adult, acknowledged that while she had managed well, earlier coaching might have eased her anxieties and improved her planning. These reflections suggest that late support can still be transformative, but that earlier intervention could prevent years of unnecessary struggle.

In the end, my data show that promoting adaptation and compensation is not just a matter of equity, but of enabling people to thrive. When individuals are given the tools, recognition, and relational scaffolding to understand and manage their difficulties, they are more likely to develop coping strategies that are sustainable, empowering, and growth-orientated. Early support lays the groundwork for this trajectory, but it is never too late to intervene. The challenge is to build systems that recognize and respond to difference not as deficit, but as diversity.

8. Concluding Discussions

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the experiences and pathways of individuals with dyslexia in education and entrepreneurship. By highlighting the resilience, strengths, and support needs of entrepreneurs with dyslexia, this research informs efforts to create more inclusive and supportive environments that empower individuals with dyslexia to realize their full potential in both academic and entrepreneurial pursuits. My interviews offer insights into the experiences of individuals with dyslexia as they navigate both the education system and the entrepreneurial landscape. Through analysis of those interviews, key themes emerged regarding resilience, coping mechanisms, and the role of support systems in facilitating success. These findings underscore the unmistakable duality in the experience of being dyslexic, where individuals face significant challenges yet also exhibit remarkable strengths. Despite enduring traumatic educational experiences characterized by a lack of support and understanding, entrepreneurs with dyslexia demonstrate resilience and determination in pursuing their entrepreneurial aspirations.

One of the central findings of this study is the pivotal role of resilience in the entrepreneurial journey of individuals with dyslexia. Despite facing setbacks and obstacles rooted in their learning difference, entrepreneurs with dyslexia have developed adaptive strategies and coping mechanisms to overcome challenges and to thrive in the business world. This resilience is not only a personal attribute but also a product of external support systems, including mentors and familial role models, that provide encouragement, guidance, and validation.

My study highlights the importance of reframing dyslexia as a source of strength rather than merely a limitation. Entrepreneurs with dyslexia have leveraged their unique cognitive profiles and communication skills to excel in entrepreneurial endeavours, challenging conventional ideas of success and contributing to the diversification of entrepreneurial talent. But my study also reveals significant gaps and challenges in the support landscape for individuals with dyslexia, particularly in

terms of access to effective interventions and services. Despite advancements in understanding dyslexia, many individuals remain unaware or distrustful of available support systems, indicating a need for greater awareness, accessibility, and tailoring of support services to meet the diverse needs of entrepreneurs with dyslexia. In this concluding chapter, I will reflect on the data analyses I have presented:

- How children with dyslexia survive a disabling education system
- The link between dyslexia and entrepreneurship
- The impact of business startup support

8.1. Surviving a Disabling Education System

Dale (used car retailer, 30s) talked about the transition from school to work, describing this as determination, but many people leave school without qualifications and nevertheless seek employment, so I argue that determination is only part of the picture. Of my respondents, only Phoebe (used car retailer, 40s) continued her education after leaving school.

It is worth re-evaluating the Mourgues (2014) and Kapoula and Vernet (2016) studies from the perspective of the participants growing resilient and developing the ability to adapt in the face of tragedy, trauma, and other adversity (Ayala & Manzano, 2014). For students with dyslexia to continue to university suggests that they have developed the resilience necessary to deal with the challenges of higher education. From the social-relational standpoint, this resilience is not merely a personal attribute but a response to disabling educational environments that create adversity through structural barriers and relational inequities. A study by Tops *et al.* (2013) of first year higher education

undergraduates reveals no differences in personality traits between students with dyslexia and those without. The authors argue that similarity in personality profiles points to the fact that personality is a stable construct over time rather than one which is moulded and influenced by specific experiences. However, this view overlooks how experiences of marginalization within the education system, such as those described by my respondents, shape resilience over time as an adaptive response to systemic failures.

Troubled schooling is a common trend found in studies of people with dyslexia (Alexander-Passe, 2006; 2008; Givon & Court, 2009), yet the picture for entrepreneurs with dyslexia is more mixed. In her 2009 study of entrepreneurs with dyslexia, Logan found that only 11.1% of her respondents reported having had very negative or negative school experiences, while 58.3% reported very positive or positive experiences. This is at odds with her later finding, in which 90% of her respondents reported a poor experience at school. The respondents in Logan's 2009 study had progressed to higher education, which required a high level of academic achievement. I would argue that more positive school experiences of the respondents in Logan's 2009 study helped facilitate their pursuit of university entrepreneurship courses, perhaps through the development of compensatory strategies (Everatt *et al.*, 1999; Kapoula & Vernet, 2016): the school experiences of the respondents in Logan's 2012 study were manifestly more negative.

The overwhelmingly negative experiences reported in Logan's 2012 study – and echoed in my findings – highlight how unsupportive educational environments can exacerbate the disabling effects of dyslexia. This disparity in school experiences reflects the importance of relational contexts in shaping the paths individuals take. The respondents in Logan's 2009 study who had positive school experiences likely benefitted from environments that supported their needs, whether through relationships with teachers or access to adapted resources, reflecting the way social environments can reduce *or* exacerbate disablement. By contrast, the negative school experiences described by respondents in Logan's 2012 study point to the relational and structural factors that made it difficult for these

individuals to succeed in mainstream education, illustrating how a lack of understanding or support can, conversely, reinforce disabling conditions.

There is, however, no robust answer to why the respondents in Logan's two studies had such different experiences at school. What is apparent is that the experiences of the respondents in her 2009 study are atypical for people with dyslexia. As with Logan's 2012 study, many of my respondents described their schooling as having a profoundly negative impact on them. Whether impacted by lack of support or perceived bullying by teachers, the origin in all cases for my respondents was the inherent difficulty they had with literacy. Research tells us that literacy is the root of the difference between people with and without dyslexia, and improvements in literacy result in the greatest improvements in self-esteem (Riddick *et al.*, 1999; Scott, 2004). For the neurotypical, the impact of differences in ability are negligible, but my respondents demonstrate with one painful memory after the next that, for them, their difficulties with literacy were not a secret shame but rather a public failure.

Alexander-Passe (2015) notes that children, more so than adults, find it hard to hide their difficulties and differences, citing situations such as being made to read aloud or to have their writing critiqued. Indeed, these are the very situations Erin (IT trainer, 40s) and Ben (industrial salvage manager, 50s) talk about when they describe being left feeling worthless by such practices and by the attitudes of their teachers more generally. Practices like reading aloud or critiquing written work in front of peers worsen feelings of worthlessness, reinforcing the disabling effects of the education system. These accounts highlight how relational dynamics – such as the attitudes and actions of teachers – serve as a central mechanism of disablement. Social relational theory highlights that the real source of disablement lies not in reading difficulties, but rather in the systemic prioritization of literacy as a marker of academic worth. This systemic focus disregards other forms of intelligence and ability, turning manageable differences into enduring stigmas.

Alexander-Passe (2016, p. 89) suggests that bullying by teachers and a lack of meaningful differentiation and understanding is routine and leads to depression, withdrawal, self-harming, and

PTSD. It is common for children with dyslexia to avoid the attention of teachers, and to endeavour to go unnoticed to avoid activities like reading aloud. Accounts of the time my respondents spent in the education system therefore support the notion of post-traumatic growth, where people with dyslexia suffer traumatic school experience but paradoxically go on to enjoy success in business (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Weiss & Berger, 2010; Seligman, 2011; Alexander-Passe, 2016). Social-relational theory emphasizes that teacher-led bullying and the failure to differentiate instruction are relational barriers that actively disable students. For my respondents, these barriers contributed to feelings of withdrawal and depression. Yet, although these disabling experiences were traumatic, some respondents demonstrated post-traumatic growth, as reflected in their later success in business. This growth aligns with findings that individuals with dyslexia can transform their negative experiences into sources of resilience and determination (Ayala & Manzano, 2014). However, as social-relational theory reminds us, the focus should not rest solely on individual adaptation but on addressing the systemic and relational factors that create these disabling conditions in the first place.

Research has shown that while children with and without dyslexia have similar anxiety and self-esteem overall, children with dyslexia in a school setting have higher generalized anxiety and lower self-esteem (Novita, 2016). Gleeson (2000, p. 6) asserts that schools are part of a social system which is discriminatory, and which turns education into something exclusive rather than universal. The requirement of academic qualifications to gain entry to certain employment pathways is especially disabling to people with dyslexia (Brunswick, 2012, p. 20). The literature is beset with accounts of people with dyslexia who describe their school years as humiliating (Ingesson, 2007; Riddick, 2010), where they were regarded as lazy or stupid (McNulty, 2003; Ingesson, 2007), and which had a measurable detrimental effect on self-esteem (Burden, 2008; Zuppardo *et al.*, 2021). These relational misinterpretations, coupled with structural barriers, highlight how schools act as agents of disablement. As Burden (2008) and Zuppardo *et al.* (2021) show, the long-term impact on self-esteem is profound, further reinforcing the need to address these relational and systemic barriers.

The respondents in my study were old enough to have attended school at a time when dyslexia was less well understood, and support was in its infancy: the British Dyslexia Association and the Dyslexia Institute were only founded in 1972. It is now increasingly common for mainstream schools to offer interventions for neurodivergent children, but accounts from my respondents suggest that historically these have been scarce, and for Mark (builder, 30s), the interventions that were available served only to isolate and traumatize. Their usefulness is uncertain, however, and some recent research suggests that although intervention programmes have an overall positive impact in perceived coping and wellbeing for all students, there may be no significant difference in outcomes between students with and without dyslexia (Firth *et al.*, 2013). As social-relational theory suggests, a lack of adequate interventions not only fails to mitigate the challenges of dyslexia but often compounds them. The isolating and traumatizing experiences described by Mark highlight how poorly designed interventions can exacerbate relational barriers rather than address them effectively. Intervention programs, while beneficial for perceived coping and wellbeing, may not significantly alter educational outcomes for children with dyslexia because they focus solely on remediating individual deficits without addressing the broader structural and relational barriers that create disablement.

In my study, when Clara (actress, 30s) described her determination to work hard and succeed academically, it is framed in talk of shying away from the written word. Similarly, Erin (IT trainer, 40s) talked about truanting during high school, and the literature attests to this being a typical avoidance tactic to eschew opportunities for failure (Givon and Court, 2009). Dale (used car retailer, 30s) acknowledged that he excelled as an electrician, but he was unable to pursue it as a career due to the barrier his literacy difficulties presented when faced with an entrance exam. Social-relational theory emphasizes that disability is socially constructed through relational dynamics, including how dyslexia is framed by teachers and peers. The bullying and lack of support described by my respondents, such as Erin's experience with truancy and Clara's avoidance of written work, align with Givon and Court's (2009) findings that avoidance is a common response among students in disabling educational environments.

This further reinforces the idea that disability is not simply a result of impairment but emerges also from interactions with systems and people that either support or exacerbate the challenges faced by individuals with dyslexia. On an individual level, this seems at odds with research which shows that some people with dyslexia transcend the barriers presented by their academic difficulties and go on to become successful in their chosen fields (Taylor & Walter, 2003; West 2005). Going into business for oneself is a risk, and risk-taking is common trait amongst entrepreneurs with dyslexia (Logan, 2009). People with dyslexia tend to be less daunted by risks because they do not fear failure, and I would hypothesize this is because they have experienced so much of it in the past: they develop resilience (Belzberg, 2013; Bort, 2014; Foss, 2015; Tickle, 2015).

Several of my respondents spoke about their negative school experiences from the vantage point of owning their own business, demonstrating a positive psychological change following traumatic life experience. There is a recurring theme of resilience in my findings. As Rose (2009), Goldberg *et al.* (2003), and Smith (2008) note, people with dyslexia require – and often demonstrate – strong resilience during their school years. However, when Erin (IT trainer, 40s) talked about her difficult upbringing and described her strong will to succeed as ‘part of the dyslexic trait that some people have’, it is important to consider the idea that this is a trait *everyone* possesses. Resilience may simply be a human ability to cope with distress (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006; Gunty *et al.*, 2011), and while the origin of resilience – be it genetic, epigenetic, or environmental – remains unclear (Obradovic, 2012, p. 383), it is a set of processes we all experience.

Resilience is a key issue here. A pervading view in the literature is that it is the individual’s self-perception which shapes their understanding of dyslexia, and which can help to motivate them to pursue their goals (Brunswick, 2012, p. 6). While self-perception undoubtedly plays a role in shaping outcomes, social-relational theory challenges deficit-orientated frameworks that emphasize individual remediation over systemic reform. The onus should not be on the individual with dyslexia to try and fashion some semblance of positivity from the ashes of their own education. Rather, social-

relational theory compels us to focus on transforming the environments and relationships that contribute to disablement. By shifting the focus from individual deficits to structural barriers, we can begin to rethink how educational systems can be restructured to better support children with dyslexia, moving beyond the current emphasis on literacy-based success and valuing a broader range of abilities.

8.2. Coping in Practice: A Critical Synthesis of Theory and Lived Experience

The coping strategies used by my respondents reveal a complex interplay between individual agency, relational support, and systemic constraint. Drawing on Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck's (2003; 2016) developmental and functional models of coping, it becomes clear that coping is not a static trait or a universal set of behaviours. Rather, it is a dynamic process, shaped by both context and by the individual. My respondents demonstrated a range of coping strategies: delegation, assistive technology, creative reframing, and informal mentoring. These align with several of the 'families' of coping identified in the literature. However, the data also challenge the neat categorization of coping strategies into adaptive or maladaptive binaries, revealing instead a spectrum of responses that are deeply contingent on context and access.

While delegation is often framed in managerial literature as a rational business decision, for many of my respondents it served as a strategic coping mechanism, a way to manage the persistent cognitive load associated with literacy tasks. Clara (actress, 30s) described the overwhelming nature of managing her business alone and emphasized the importance of asking for help and not trying to do everything independently. Elsewhere, Ben (industrial salvage manager, 50s) relied on his wife to help him translate his thoughts into written communication, acknowledging that while he could articulate ideas verbally, he struggled to express them in writing.

These examples reflect what Skinner *et al.* (2003) classify as the 'delegation' and 'support-seeking' families of coping. But this strategy is not universally available. Evie (dressmaker, 40s) stated that without her support network, including a friend who acts as her unpaid personal assistant, she would not have been able to succeed in business. This raises questions about equity of access: coping strategies which appear adaptive in theory may be inaccessible in practice to those without a network of support or financial resources. Coping can therefore be understood not only as a psychological process but also as a structurally mediated one.

The transactional model of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which emphasizes cognitive appraisal and problem-solving, provides a useful starting point but proves insufficient in capturing the creative and intuitive strategies employed by participants like Michael (marketing executive, 50s) and Evie. Michael's use of visual-spatial reasoning to bypass written instructions, such as assembling trade show stands by visualizing how the pieces fit together, demonstrates a form of coping that is both contextually grounded and cognitively distinctive. His ability to 'see' mechanical systems in his mind's eye and devise solutions that eluded others exemplifies what might be termed representational or intuitive coping. Likewise, Evie's strategy of rephrasing sentences to avoid words she couldn't spell illustrates cognitive restructuring, a coping mechanism that involves altering one's approach to a stressor. These strategies do not fit neatly into traditional categories of problem-focused or emotion-focused coping, nor do they necessarily align with deficit-orientated assumptions. These approaches are just as valid and effective – perhaps more so – but they don't fit the conventional mould of what would be considered 'intelligent' or 'competent' in school or business. These entrepreneurs are succeeding in business not by conforming to traditional expectations, like being good at reading or following step-by-step logic, but by using alternative strengths. In doing so, they are showing that those traditional expectations should not be the only standard.

These strategies complicate the adaptive/maladaptive dichotomy. Avoidance, often labelled maladaptive, was for some of my respondents a rational and protective response to hostile

environments. Erin (IT trainer, 40s) expressed a deep sense of isolation and frustration, stating that ‘nobody out there appears to be able to help me’. Her withdrawal from formal support systems was not due to a lack of resilience, rather it was a learned distrust rooted in past school trauma. This echoes Vaccaro *et al.*’s (2024) findings that concealment and withdrawal can be protective strategies. Coping should therefore be evaluated not in abstract terms but in relation to the social and emotional contexts in which it occurs.

To speak briefly here about the role of self-efficacy, it plainly has a role to play in shaping coping trajectories. The concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006) was evident in the narratives of respondents like Dale (used car retailer, 30s), who expressed confidence in his eventual success regardless of the support he received, but also acknowledged that earlier access to mentoring would have accelerated his progress. This suggests self-efficacy is relationally constructed through interactions with mentors, family members, and peers. Erin’s reliance on her parents for business and insurance advice, and Mark’s (builder, 30s) inheritance of his father’s business, further illustrate how self-efficacy is scaffolded through informal mentoring and familial support.

Paradoxically, this also suggests that while self-efficacy enables entrepreneurs to persist, it can also mask the structural barriers that necessitate coping in the first place. Michael’s reluctance to delegate owing to years of being told he was ‘wrong’ illustrates how coping can become over-personalized, reinforcing the concept of the self-reliant entrepreneur. This highlights the need for a social-relational reframing of coping, one that shifts the focus from individual adaptation to systemic transformation.

The coping strategies employed by entrepreneurs with dyslexia are not merely responses to individual challenges but are adaptive negotiations with disabling systems. As well as reflecting resilience, they reflect resistance, innovation, and a redefinition of competence. Conclusions drawn from my data call for a recalibration of coping theory to better account for the lived realities of neurodivergent individuals. Coping should be understood as a developmental and relational process, shaped by internal capacities and also by the availability of enabling environments and support networks. We

ought to move beyond binary classifications and incorporate creative, intuitive, and non-verbal strategies as legitimate forms of coping.

8.3. Dyslexia and Entrepreneurship

When it comes to the reasons for pursuing entrepreneurship, many of my participants stated that their reasons for starting their own business stemmed either from motivation from family members, often in the form of prior experience helping run family businesses, or from a realization that their skills and talents would not be put to best use by working for someone else. This supports Logan's (2012) findings. In support of a social-relational view that systemic barriers and relational dynamics push individuals with dyslexia to seek alternative professional pathways, Logan (2009) notes that most of her respondents had held practical or vocational jobs, or had been employed by large firms, before leaving to pursue entrepreneurship. She suggests that entrepreneurs with dyslexia start their own businesses because working for companies controlled by other people requires them to work in ways that do not suit them. In my own study, Pete (photographer, 30s), Scarlett (risk manager, 30s), and Michael (marketing executive, 50s) explicitly described a desire for control and autonomy. Here, we see entrepreneurship become a mechanism for reclaiming agency and self-determination.

The significance of determination and learned resilience is common across my own study, and Logan's 2009 and 2012 studies. In her 2009 study, Logan found that while there was a small trend towards negative school experiences, her respondents nevertheless developed coping mechanisms in relation to them. This issue came to the fore in Logan's 2012 study, in which 90% of her respondents cited a lack of confidence during their education which had an impact on their early careers. My findings echo those of Logan: my respondents had school experiences so traumatic that they led, in one instance, to time in a psychiatric rehabilitation centre; yet, as with Logan's respondents, they all went on to run

successful businesses. The traumatic school experiences described here, including one respondent's time in psychiatric rehabilitation, echo Alexander-Passe's (2016) findings on the psychological toll of dyslexia. However, as with Logan's (2012) respondents, these experiences also catalysed the development of coping mechanisms and entrepreneurial ambitions. We see from these accounts that resilience and determination are not innate traits, rather they are relationally constructed through interactions with disabling environments.

Much of the resilience of the entrepreneurs I interviewed has to do with their attitude to their learning difference and the way in which they frame their formative years. Constructing and reinterpreting past events is part of the process of giving meaning to negative experiences. Hildon *et al.* (2008) suggest that this process helps people to adjust their expectations. One might therefore hypothesize that because Erin (IT trainer, 40s) experienced academic failure at school, she would adjust her expectations in line with a passive acceptance of failure in the world of work. But she is resolute in making a success of her business, saying, 'I cannot fail'. She rises above those negative experiences and steadfastly refuses to let past failure hold her back. Like most of my respondents, her determination is tempered by the systems she has put in place to counteract her weaknesses.

Many of my interviewees talk about mechanisms they have adopted in order to compensate for their difficulties with reading and writing, which aligns with the compensatory strategies highlighted by Pino and Mortari (2014). Whether it be hired help, help from a friend or spouse, or more general workarounds, the businesspeople with dyslexia I interviewed seemed to be aware of their weaknesses. Sandra (Maths and English tutor, 30s) stressed the importance of discovering one's strengths and weaknesses before starting a business. Nalavany *et al.* (2011) previously found that acceptance of their learning difference is essential if people with dyslexia are to develop an awareness of their strengths: this process is not solely an internal journey, rather it is influenced by interactions with enabling or disabling systems. By focusing on their strengths, entrepreneurs with dyslexia

challenge societal narratives that equate literacy with competence, reframing dyslexia as a source of unique capabilities rather than deficits.

Acceptance does not come easily, and it takes perseverance, practice and repeat failure to redefine one's learning difference, shift one's mindset and learn how to capitalize on one's strengths. This notion was raised by five of my respondents when they talked about using their communication skills to counteract their literacy difficulties. Brian (restaurant owner, 40s), Dave (double glazing manager, 30s), and Sandra (Maths and English tutor, 30s) talked about their ability to communicate and build up strong interpersonal relationships with staff, clients, and suppliers. This confirms Logan's (2012) finding that entrepreneurs with dyslexia are more likely to have enhanced communication skills, meaning they will probably have a persuasive personality (Sepulveda, 2014). Logan (2009) also notes that those with strong communication skills will be able to inspire the people around them to help them achieve their vision.

Fawcett and Nicholson (1999) support the notion that people with dyslexia compensate for their lack of written skills by developing enhanced communication skills, a fact reinforced more recently by Logan (2012), who found that the entrepreneurs with dyslexia she interviewed were all good communications with strong people skills. Research suggests that performance in other skills appears to be 'normal' because of the importance placed on performance in reading, writing and spelling. Such skills are subjected to constant examination while other skills are largely overlooked due to their comparative lack of educational importance. The prioritization of literacy skills in educational and professional settings reflects a systemic bias that marginalizes neurodivergent individuals. The development of strong communication skills among my respondents highlights the relational and adaptive processes through which they navigated and countered these biases.

People will tend to explore several different coping strategies which will either promote or hinder their acceptance of their learning difference. Among these are constructive strategies such as rationality in their approach to their weaknesses and the determination described by my interviewees,

but also negative strategies such as avoidance and rebellion as in the case of Erin. Ultimately, whether people perceive their learning difference as a threat or a challenge is a determining factor in the coping strategy they will eventually choose (Givon & Court, 2009). What appears to be vital is that their learning difference no longer defines them. It should, in fact, be defined *by* them. Control of their learning difference is tantamount to control over their environment, and the feeling of control is of great importance, as stated by Brian (restaurant owner, 40s) and Scarlett (risk manager, 30s). This shift emphasizes control over one's learning difference and represents a process of reclaiming agency.

8.4. Business Startup Support

In the discussion of the importance of mentors, I believe my study continues from the work done by Logan (2009). Logan highlighted the fact that entrepreneurs with dyslexia were more likely than their non-dyslexic counterparts to be influenced by familial role models and mentors in their decision to pursue entrepreneurship. She notes that the use of a mentor 'may be a crucial factor in encouraging the dyslexic to overcome difficulties, develop coping strategies and subsequent self-belief' (Logan, 2009). I believe my findings go beyond what Logan found and indicate that these support systems continue to be instrumental in the successful running of those businesses.

This does not appear to be true of formal training and support services, even those provided by the government, and my respondents were either unaware that such provisions existed – Mark (builder, 30s) and Isabelle (dyslexia tutor, 50s) – or they were distrustful of them – Dave (double glazing manager, 30s), Evie (dressmaker, 40s), Dale (used car retailer, 30s), Erin (IT trainer, 40s), and Bernard (IT systems manager, 40s). This reinforces Logan's (2012) findings that entrepreneurs with dyslexia can feel detached from formal support systems, which are perceived as too rigid or inaccessible. The disconnect between these services and my respondents reflects the disabling nature of these systems,

which are designed for neurotypical individuals, and which therefore fail to accommodate the specific needs of entrepreneurs with dyslexia. Social-relational theory provides a critical lens for understanding this distrust, emphasizing that systemic barriers such as inaccessible training programs alienate neurodivergent individuals. My data suggest that mentorship succeeds where formal systems fail because it is relationally attuned to the specific challenges faced by entrepreneurs with dyslexia. There is a need for an approach to business support where individualized guidance replaces the rigid structures of standardized training programs.

In reflecting on the diverse experiences uncovered in this study, it becomes apparent that dyslexia embodies a complex duality, presenting both challenges and strengths (Shaywitz, 2008; Fung, 2024). From navigating the educational system to venturing into entrepreneurship, individuals with dyslexia demonstrate resilience and determination amidst systemic barriers and societal misconceptions. Yet many entrepreneurs with dyslexia appear unaware and misinformed about what support could be made available to them (Logan, 2009). This could come down simply to how well these services are marketed and promoted in the areas where these interviewees live and work. By reframing support systems to address the specific needs of entrepreneurs with dyslexia, these barriers could be transformed into opportunities for inclusion and empowerment.

There is concern amongst my respondents that those organizations offering support have little or no actual business experience and are instead coming at it from a purely theoretical stance. The negative experiences the interviewees had during their own education may account for their distrust of people from an academic background, since early negative experiences shape attitudes in later life (Alexander-Passe, 2016). Some of my respondents were concerned that they aren't academically minded enough to be able to make proper use of business training or mentoring. Again, this may stem from their school days. Social-relational theory offers a framework for understanding how these negative experiences create long-lasting barriers to engagement with formal support systems. Systemic failures in one context like education can shape individuals' attitudes and behaviours in other

contexts such as entrepreneurship. For my respondents, the perception that such organizations lack practical business experience echoes their struggles within academic settings, where rigid, theory-driven approaches often failed to accommodate their needs.

I believe self-efficacy has a strong influence on whether adults with dyslexia are able successfully to pursue entrepreneurship, which supports Logan's (2009) observations that many entrepreneurs with dyslexia rely on self-belief and the ability to navigate their strengths to pursue entrepreneurship successfully. My respondents shared several key difficulties which manifested in the form of anxiety, stress, and shame. But despite these experiences, they were able to start and sustain their own businesses. Adults with dyslexia who reach a state of self-efficacy – that is, those who can overcome societal barriers and play to the strengths associated with being dyslexic – are more likely to successfully engage in entrepreneurial action. From a social-relational perspective, the difficulties faced by my respondents are not inherent to their dyslexia but are relationally constructed through interactions with systems that fail to accommodate neurodivergent needs. It is through self-efficacy that they counteracted these barriers and focused on their entrepreneurial strengths despite the challenges they faced.

8.5. Implications for Future Research

Further investigation is warranted into the development of self-efficacy among individuals with dyslexia, particularly how they navigate and overcome challenges in education and entrepreneurship. Gerber (2011) emphasized the importance of self-efficacy and self-advocacy in order for adults with learning differences to navigate adult domains effectively, to understand their challenges, and to collaborate on effective strategies for success.

Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of resilience over time could shed light on effective coping strategies and support mechanisms. There is also a need to evaluate existing support systems for individuals with dyslexia in both educational and entrepreneurial contexts. Comparative analyses could assess the effectiveness of interventions such as mentorship programs and government support services, informing the design of more accessible and impactful resources. Evaluation of business startup support services tailored to entrepreneurs with dyslexia would enhance accessibility and effectiveness.

By delving deeper into the entrepreneurial journeys of individuals with dyslexia, longitudinal studies could offer a comprehensive lens through which to examine the evolution of their experiences and outcomes over time. By following entrepreneurs with dyslexia from the inception of their ventures through various stages of development, one could uncover critical insights into the factors that contribute to sustained success or challenges along the way. Conducting such longitudinal studies would allow us to identify critical milestones, adaptive strategies, and support needs.

9. Limitations

This thesis provides a detailed and practical account of dyslexic entrepreneurship, but there are a few limitations to note.

First, although the qualitative approach gives valuable depth, it limits how widely the findings can be generalised. Most participants were either successful or still actively running their businesses. This means the study may over-represent positive coping strategies, like delegation, asking for help, or creative problem-solving, and under-represent ventures that closed before the right support was in place. In other words, it's possible that 'what works' is influenced by who managed to keep going. As my analysis already notes, success depends on individual context and is constantly evolving, so findings should not be stretched too far beyond similar entrepreneurial or policy settings.

Second, the field itself is unsettled. Dyslexia is defined and diagnosed in different ways, and there's no single agreed standard. Differences in how dyslexia is assessed and labelled make it harder to compare studies or even decide who qualifies as 'dyslexic.' This can blur the line between dyslexia, general reading difficulties, and related conditions, which affects how to interpret both prevalence and cause.

Third, policy and support across the UK remain uneven. While the Equality Act and SEND reforms provide strong legal foundations, how these are put into practice varies between schools and local authorities. Because people's education experiences are shaped within these inconsistent systems, it is important to be cautious when linking early support to later business outcomes, especially if trying to apply the findings in other regions or countries with different resources.

Fourth, self-reporting and memory are always part of life-story interviews. People's accounts of school or early business life may be influenced by how they see themselves now, how they've made sense of past events, or by a desire to avoid stigma. Cross-checking themes across different participants and sources helps reduce this, but some bias is inevitable. The data itself show that openness and help-

seeking are ongoing, relational processes, so it's best to see these stories as dynamic rather than fixed records.

Finally, this study focuses mainly on the entrepreneurs' perspectives. It doesn't include the voices of mentors, co-founders, funders, or customers who also shape accessibility or barriers in business. This was a deliberate choice to keep the focus on dyslexic agency, but future research should include this wider 'support network' to understand how specific adjustments, policies, or roles strengthen, or weaken, the success factors identified here.

Overall, these limitations don't undermine the main contribution of this work: showing that coping and compensating can be sophisticated entrepreneurial skills. They simply help to define the boundaries of the study and point to what should come next.

10. Future Research, Policy, and Practice: Next Steps

Research.

Two main priorities emerge.

1. **Longitudinal studies.** Following dyslexic entrepreneurs from start-up through growth and change would show how coping strategies develop over time, when and how assistive technology, delegation, and mentoring become established, and how these influence business survival or exit. A multi-year study combining regular interviews, field observations, and business performance snapshots could be particularly valuable.
2. **Intervention testing.** There is evidence that self-efficacy shapes business intentions among dyslexic young people. This should be tested through short, practical training programmes to measure impact on confidence, willingness to disclose dyslexia, and business outcomes.

Policy.

The continuing gap between policy aims and everyday practice suggests the need to move from reactive ‘accommodations’ to proactive inclusive design.

- In schools, **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** should be standard: Using multiple ways to teach, assess, and demonstrate learning, so students don’t need a diagnosis to access fair opportunities.
- At system level, funding should be tied to clear evidence of implementation, such as how many assessments allow different formats or how much staff training covers assistive technology , rather than paperwork that simply claims compliance. This would tackle the ‘policy in theory, patchy in practice’ problem highlighted in this research.

For the **enterprise pipeline**, schemes like **Access to Work** and local business-support hubs should be treated as core business infrastructure, not optional extras. The application process should be redesigned to remove unnecessary barriers, especially the dense, jargon-heavy forms that disadvantage dyslexic applicants. Clear verbal-first routes (such as video or screen-share interviews that automatically fill out forms), plain English standards, and funded third-party form-filling support should be standard. The evidence shows that these bureaucratic hurdles cost time, money, and credibility; policy should remove those barriers.

Practice.

Business incubators, accelerators, and mentors can start applying neuro-inclusive methods right away by:

1. Holding strategy sessions verbally and saving the transcripts.
2. Separating idea generation from typing, staff can write up business materials from recorded conversations.

3. Setting up a basic 'support stack' from day one (speech-to-text, proofreading tools, checklists).
4. Using clear visual dashboards to track progress and priorities.
5. Keeping a 'wins library' of achievements to build confidence.

These approaches put the findings on help-seeking, delegation, and assistive technology into everyday practice.

Final thought.

If the social model of disability is taken seriously, the goal must not just to help dyslexic entrepreneurs survive within disabling systems, but to redesign those systems so their methods are recognised as expertise. That means teaching effective strategies early through inclusive education, funding assistive technology as part of economic growth policy, and holding schools and agencies accountable for action, not intentions. This research shows how that can work, the next step is to turn it into measurable, sustainable programmes.

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Appendix 1 – Interview Schedule

1. What inspired you to start a new business?
2. What is the nature of your business? What does it do?
3. Where did your funding/capital come from?
4. What are the greatest skills or attributes you think someone needs to run a successful business?
5. What do you think are your biggest strengths in relation to your business?
6. What have been the greatest challenges your business has faced?
7. What have you done to overcome these challenges?
8. Have you ever studied business or undertaken any formal training?
9. Are you aware of the support available from the government (such as HM Revenue & Customs or the National Careers Service) or from independent agencies (such as Google Campus, On Purpose, Entrepreneur First, etc.)?
10. Have you had any support in business from these bodies?
11. Have you had any coaching or mentoring in the course of running your business?
12. Thinking again about the challenges your business has faced: do you think having formal coaching or mentoring would have better equipped you to tackle them?
13. If you had to start all over again, what would you do differently: if you haven't had any support, coaching or mentoring, would you seek this out?
14. What advice would you give to dyslexic people who want to become entrepreneurs?