

## **Schoolwork of Adolescents with Dyslexia: Comparison of Adolescents', Mothers' and Teachers' Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

*In the rare qualitative studies of the experience of adolescents with dyslexia in the school context, the authors looked at the perspectives of the adolescents themselves. Attention is rarely focused on the perspectives of mothers and teachers, which are also important in order for the adolescent to cope successfully with challenges in the school context. In the present research, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with four adolescents with dyslexia, as well as their mothers and class teachers. The study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which focused on the adolescents' experiences of dealing with schoolwork. Three themes emerged from the interviews: the sources of distress in school situations, response to problems, and expectations regarding the provision of assistance. The comparison of the adolescents', mothers' and teachers' perspectives has shown that the individual groups of participants have quite different ways to approach difficulties and to offering the support that is required. These*

*findings suggest a need for greater understanding and partnership in the cooperation between adolescents, mothers and teachers when it comes to planning the support the adolescent needs to deal with schoolwork difficulties.*

**Keywords:** *adolescents, dyslexia, experiences of schooling, teachers, mothers, qualitative research*

## **Introduction**

The authors begin by discussing *ways of perceiving the adolescent in relation to schoolwork, the way he or she responds* using the characteristics of adolescents with dyslexia and examining the five-stage model that has been established in Slovenian schools for working with students with learning disabilities. The introduction provides an overview of previous qualitative research findings that focus on the experiences of adolescents with dyslexia within the school context. The research available to us primarily concentrated on the individual perspectives of specific groups, for example, adolescents, parents or teachers; however, we have not come across research that compares and contrasts these perspectives, which we wish to make the central focus of our article.

## **Characteristic of students with dyslexia**

Dyslexia is reflected in the individual's characteristic inabilities or deficits in areas of learning, such as, reading, writing and spelling, unexpected at the individual's age, grade, social and cultural background, and level of intellectual ability (IDA - International Dyslexia Association, 2012; Kavkler, Košak Babuder, & Magajna, 2015). Adolescents with dyslexia are often unsuccessful in dealing with primary difficulties in reading, writing and spelling. The demands of school can, therefore, be particularly stressful for them. Students with specific learning disabilities, including dyslexia, often use less efficient ways of coping with schoolwork, such as strategies of cognitive withdrawal, social isolation and ignoring problems (Kavale & Forness, 1996; Firth, Greaves, & Frydenberg, 2010). This way of coping with problems often result in various forms of emotional distress, low self-esteem, and a lack of interest in schoolwork (Alexander-Passe, 2007; Beck & Clark, 2009; Leite, 2012). In spite of those consequences, most interventions for students with dyslexia focused on assistance in dealing with learning difficulties – reading and/or writing, while other areas are often overlooked (Singer, 2005; Macdonald, 2010).

In Slovenia, experts in the field drew up a comprehensive model for working with students with learning disabilities in 2007 (Magajna, Kavkler, & Košir, 2011). The model is presented below.

## **The five-stage model for working with students with learning disabilities in Slovenia**

The model for working with students with learning disabilities includes five stages, each indicating who provides and what kind of help is provided (Magajna et al., 2011). It was developed based on the characteristics of Slovenia's existing school system. At the first stage, teachers offer additional help to a student, especially during lessons and remedial lessons, because at school, teachers are the ones who spend the most time with the students, should know them well, and be the first to recognize their difficulties. Teachers report their observations to the parents and other professional workers at school, who cooperate with each other to help the

student surmount his/her difficulties. At the second stage, the student is offered additional help by the school's counseling service (e.g., a psychologist, special education teacher or social pedagogue), which works at a deeper level to discover the weaknesses and strengths of both the student and his or her environment. The school's counseling service works with the student, the parents and the teachers, offering guidance and advice. At the third stage, the school's counseling service conducts additional help, more thorough diagnostic procedures to determine the student's strengths and deficits, based on which it formulates an individual and group assistance plan. This assistance is provided by teachers, a mobile service of special education teachers or by school counselors in a more regular and intensive manner than at the previous stage. At stage four, the school can request an additional expert opinion from an appropriate specialized institution (e.g., a counseling center), and at stage five, a program with adapted implementation and additional help from experts is prepared for the individual student. It is carried out by special education teachers or teachers of specific subjects, who have additional competences for working with special needs students.

The authors believe that the effectiveness of the help given the adolescent depends on coordinating the perspectives of everyone involved in the process of support and assistance. They should cooperate with each other as closely as possible, both when it comes to planning and execution. Some qualitative research findings show the perspectives of those involved in the process of assisting an adolescent with dyslexia during schooling.

### **Different perspectives on the schoolwork of adolescents with dyslexia**

From an examination of the rare qualitative studies (e.g., Hellendoorn & Ruijsenaars, 2000; Kenyon, Beail, & Jackson, 2014; Singer, 2005) of adolescents with dyslexia, it is evident that authors are mainly interested in the adolescents' perspective on adverse experiences in the school context. Some studies include analysis of the adverse experiences of adolescents with dyslexia in the current period, while others undertake this analysis retrospectively, with adults with dyslexia reporting on their experience with dyslexia during schooling.

A study by Hellendoorn and Ruijsenaars (2000) included adults with dyslexia, who described the entire period of schooling as being very unpleasant, particularly with regard to dealing with school obligations. The respondents reported being perceived as less capable of learning than their classmates, and therefore invested a great deal of effort in schoolwork in order to avoid ridicule from classmates due to their learning difficulties. Similarly, in a survey by Kenyon et al. (2014) in which adults with dyslexia also retrospectively reported on their experience of schooling, the participants recounted that it was important for them to maintain a positive self-esteem in the presence of others, and to be seen as "normal". The children and adolescents with dyslexia studied by Singer (2005) reported their adverse experiences of being exposed before classmates. Reading aloud and situations in which teachers announced their poor grades in front of classmates were highlighted as being particularly unfavourable. From these studies, it is clear that adolescents with dyslexia are more vulnerable than their peers in the school context (Macdonald, 2010), and therefore find it more difficult to deal with a variety of problems without the social support of parents and teachers. The study by Hellendoorn and Ruijsenaars (2000) found that the majority of children and adolescents with dyslexia confided their school-related problems to their parents, who often supported them in dealing with these problems. Only a minority sought the support of teachers in solving their problems.

Silva (2009, as quoted in Leite, 2012) found that most teachers did not understand the difficulties faced by the students with dyslexia and did not know how to respond, which led to

uncertainty and anxiety on the part of the teachers. Other studies (Bingol, 2003, as quoted in Yildiz, [Yildirim](#), Ates, 2012) observed that some teachers associated the failure of children with dyslexia with a lack of interest by their parents in their problems.

Some authors (e.g., Karande, Kumbhare, Kulkarni, & Shan, 2009; Yildiz et al., 2012) studied the perspective of parents of children with dyslexia. In interviews, parents often emphasized the negative attitudes of teachers towards children with dyslexia and the failure of teachers to adapt schoolwork to such students (Yildiz et al., 2012). In interviews with mothers of children with dyslexia, Karande et al. (2009) found that, on learning of the diagnosis, mothers are most worried about their child's lack of success in education and about his or her future in general. Also Diakogiorgi and Tsiligirian (2016) found that parents of children with specific learning disabilities had high expectations with regard to their children's academic achievement, and believed that their children could improve their learning achievements if they invested more effort in schoolwork.

Studies on the subject have mainly concentrated on the adolescents' perspective on dealing with adverse experiences in the school context, while less attention has been paid to comparing and contrasting the perspectives of all the various individuals involved in the process. These represent a valuable foundation for providing functional assistance in schools. The present study attempted to shed light on the responses of adolescents not only from their own perspective, but also from the perspectives of their mothers and teachers.

### **Research questions**

This study explored in more depth which experiences and responses of dealing with schoolwork – defined as anything that children do for school learning, both in the classroom and at home – were regarded as important by adolescents with dyslexia, as well as by their mothers and teachers. The themes reported by the participants emerged as common, and which are specific to each group of participants. Adolescents' experiences and responses were compared from different perspectives. This facilitated the planning of comprehensive assistance and the preparation of more effective interventions to help adolescents deal with distress in the school context.

### **Method**

#### **Design**

Semi-structured interviews were used to investigate the experiences of adolescents in dealing with schoolwork. Interviews were conducted with three groups of participants: the adolescents themselves, their mothers and their class teachers. Reporting from the perspective of different sources can deepen the understanding of the topic treated (Flere, 2000). The research was approved by the expert committee for postgraduate studies at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, which took into account the ethical dimensions of the planning and execution of the study.

#### **Participants**

Four adolescents were selected for the sample, along with their mothers and class teachers. The inclusion criteria for the selection of the adolescents were: a diagnosis of specific learning disabilities characteristic of dyslexia, the absence of other major additional disabilities, and attendance of the higher grades of primary school.

In working with the adolescents, their schools used the five-stage model for discovering, monitoring progress and providing learning assistance to children with learning disabilities (Magajna et al., 2011). In accordance with Slovenian legislation (Placement of Children with Special Needs Act, 2011), all four adolescents had been diagnosed by a team of experts as students with specific learning disabilities characteristic of dyslexia.

Dyslexia was diagnosed in the adolescents based on the following five criteria (Magajna et al., 2008): 1. discrepancy between the student's general intellectual abilities and actual academic achievement in specific areas (reading, writing and spelling); 2. extensive and distinct difficulties in reading, writing and spelling to the extent that these impeded the student's learning progress; 3. a lower level of learning efficiency due to deficient cognitive and/or metacognitive strategies or disrupted tempo of learning; 4. disruption to one or more psychological processes for processing information, such as attention, memory, language processing, social cognition, perception, coordination, orientation in space and time, and organization of information; 5. exclusion of sensory impairment, impaired mental development, emotional and behavioral disorders, cultural differences and unsuitable teaching as the main causes of learning difficulties.

Based on their guidance orders, a program with adapted implementation and additional help from experts was drawn up for each of the students (one girl and three boys). They were all found to have severe specific learning disabilities – they met all five of the diagnostic criteria for dyslexia listed above. Anja, aged thirteen, was an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student. She had significant difficulties reading and writing, trouble spelling words when reading, confused sounds with one another had a resistance to reading and a notably slower reading speed compared to her peers. The guidance order enabled her to have an additional lesson once a week from both a Slovenian and a foreign language (English) teacher.

Twelve-year-old Anej was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. He had difficulties reading and writing, as well as problems relating to his working memory, paying attention and concentrating. The guidance order provided him with four additional lessons: one with a special education teacher, one with a social pedagogue and two with a foreign language (English), a Math and a Slovenian teacher.

Klas, also twelve, was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. He had significant problems reading and writing, with organization and study planning. The guidance order enabled him to have three lessons of additional help a week: one with a special education teacher and two with a foreign language (English) and a Math teacher.

Twelve-year-old Ron was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and struggled with the characteristic reading and writing difficulties, as well as problems to do with paying attention and concentrating, social-emotional problems, difficulties with organizing his studying, independence and motivation for learning. The guidance order provided him with three lessons of additional help a week, two with a special education teacher and one with a teacher.

As mentioned before, the study also included the mothers of the adolescents and four female class teachers of the students. It was decided to select mothers to report on the adolescents' experiences with schoolwork because research shows that, compared with fathers, mothers are more familiar with adolescents and maintain closer relationships with them (Laursen, Wilder, Noack, & Williams, 2000; Ule, 1995).

## **Procedure**

Prior to commencing data collection, the adolescents, mothers and teachers were familiarised with the purpose and content of the research and assured of the anonymity of the data obtained. All of those invited to participate in the survey consented to do so. Interviews lasting 45–60

minutes were conducted with the adolescents, mothers and teachers in April 2015. The interviews with the adolescents and teachers were held in schools, while mothers were interviewed in their own homes.

### Measures

All of the participants were asked about the characteristics of the adolescents' experiences with schoolwork (e.g., how the adolescents felt in the classroom, how they coped with schoolwork, which situations they recognized as difficult, how they resolved these situations, how adults supported the adolescents). The questions served as a guide for the interviewees and more depth was sought in those parts where the answers indicated that the topic was important for the participants.

### Data analysis

The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), following the guidelines of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). IPA was chosen because it was decided to be the best way to research the experiences of the participants in the study and analyze them meaningfully. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. All of the transcripts were analyzed by the authors of the paper. After reading the individual interviews several times and writing out the comments, the key themes and subthemes of each interview were identified and discussed with reference to the research questions. In the final part of the analysis, themes and subthemes were illustrated with concrete statements by the participants.

### Results

Three themes with eleven subthemes were identified in the qualitative analysis procedure; the frequency of the subthemes was also identified for the individual groups of participants (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Themes and subthemes**

Themes	Subthemes	Adol. (f)	Moth. (f)	Teach. (f)
1. Sources of distress in school situations	Learning activities and assessment	4	4	4
	Teachers' lack of understanding	4	3	0
	Acceptance by classmates	3	2	1
	Mothers' high expectations	3	3	2
2. Response to problems	Adolescents' experience of intensive distress	4	2	0
	Mothers take on learning obligations	3	3	2
3. Expectations regarding the provision of assistance	More understanding of emotional distress	4	2	1
	Greater independence of the adolescent	0	3	4
	More adaptation of teaching	4	4	0
	More guidance of special	1	2	3

	education teacher			
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Note. Adol. = adolescents; Moth. = mothers; Teach. = teachers.

The first theme demonstrated the sources of distress in school situations, the second response to problems and the third expectations regarding the provision of assistance. In the following section, the themes are analyzed through subthemes and illustrated with statements from the participants.

## 1. Sources of distress in school situations

### Learning activities and assessment

All adolescents, mothers and teachers highlighted and described the adverse experiences of adolescents in various school subjects, most frequently in Slovenian and foreign language (English). As expected, the adolescents experienced the most distress due to reading and writing.

*“At school, it’s reading that causes her the greatest discomfort, especially reading an unknown text, as she needs a lot of time to read. This puts her under stress.” (Anja’s teacher)*

The participants mentioned specific learning activities as triggers of adverse experiences, with most of them highlighting required home reading. The mothers and adolescents also emphasized the problems associated with homework, while some teachers and mothers mentioned copying material from the board, as well.

*“From the very beginning, Anja resisted reading at home. She knew she had to read. She cried and complained.” (Anja’s mother)*

*“From the start, he did not make any effort with mathematics homework. He regarded it as unnecessary.” (Ron’s mother)*

*“I think even copying from the board is difficult for him. He turns around, looking for help from classmates ... he diverts attention from what he should be doing.” (Anej’s teacher)*

The adolescents, mothers and teachers also highlighted assessment as a source of stress for the adolescents, who were afraid of receiving bad grades.

*“I always think that the test will be tough. It really stuck in my mind when I got a bad grade in science. I studied a lot. I was questioned and I received the grade ‘satisfactory’.” (Klas)*

*“He’s afraid that he won’t be able to do it, that he will be get a low grade. He says ‘Oh no, what if I get a grade of two [satisfactory]’. He’s afraid of the grade ... He’s afraid of failure.” (Klas’s teacher)*

Unlike the mothers and teachers, the adolescents reported the greatest difficulty in the assessment of reading or knowledge in front of their peers, e.g., if they had to read aloud in front of classmates, or when the teacher asked them questions in front of the entire class. They worried that their classmates would notice their lack of knowledge and laugh at them.

*“When my classmates start laughing I feel embarrassed ... But I laughed back at those who said something to me ... If I read in front of the whole class I get nervous, I’m worried that I might mix the letters, and that they will laugh at me.” (Ron)*

The teachers recognized the adolescents’ distress when reading aloud in front of their peers, but often associated it with poorer understanding of what is being read, and consequently with an inability to meet the learning requirements.

*“It’s most difficult for him when he reads, as there are a lot of things he doesn’t understand.” (Anej’s Teacher)*

Certain mothers pointed out that the time the teacher allowed the adolescents for completing learning tasks was too short, adding that teachers often do not respect the principle of providing additional time for writing tests.

*“The teachers dictated too fast. He didn’t manage to write everything. After class, we had to get the material from his classmates and copy it out.” (Klas’s mother)*

### **The teachers’ lack of understanding**

All of the adolescents and certain mothers provided an extensive description of the dimension of the teachers’ relationship, while the teachers did not mention their role in relation to the adolescents in adverse situations. The adolescents and mothers also pointed out the teachers’ lack of understanding and consideration of the specificity of the adolescents’ problems.

*“One teacher doesn’t understand my problems. If you get a bad grade, she accuses you of not studying ... I think it’s because no one has told her anything. I would like her to understand me when I have oral assessment. In tests I have adaptations, but in the oral assessment she doesn’t understand.” (Klas)*

*“Not all teachers understand his problems ... Legally everything is taken into account, everyone allows adaptations ...” (Klas’s mother)*

Certain mothers also recognized problems in the adolescents’ conflictive relationships with teachers. Conflicts arise due to the high demands that the teachers place on the adolescents, the lack of appropriate adaptation of teaching, and discrepancies in the working relationship.

*“If there is someone who is disorderly, who doesn’t place clear demands on him, who has no rules, Ron doesn’t function with such people ... he misbehaves. They don’t know how to motivate him, how to calm him down, he causes trouble.” (Ron’s mother)*

### **Acceptance by classmates**

Fear of not being accepted by peers in the classroom was sensitively emphasized by the majority of adolescents and by certain mothers, but was not mentioned by most of the teachers. Only one of the teachers highlighted the adolescents’ unease in the classroom.



*“I was afraid of not having any friends. No one stood by me, I didn’t trust anyone.” (Klas)*

*“He wants to be friends with everyone. He says that they’re all his friends. Anyway, you can’t be friends with everyone. He would like to be everyone’s friend.” (Ron’s mother)*

### **Mothers’ high expectations**

The statements of the participants indicated the high expectations of the adolescents’ mothers regarding schoolwork and showed how this is reflected in the adolescents’ experience. Most of the adolescents were concerned about the high demands of their mothers. Even the mothers described themselves as demanding and persistent in meeting the adolescents’ school obligations, and regarded this as appropriate. In two cases, the teachers also highlighted the adolescents’ fear of disappointing their mothers with a low grade, or their anxiety about being punished by their mothers.

*“The hardest thing for me was that I really tried, but my mother didn’t see that.” (Anja)*

*“I insist that he does it. He has to be told ten times, until I get mad, then he does it. With or without tears. He has to do what he’s told. That’s that! I’m not going to change this. If his homework isn’t done as it should be, I tear out the page ... Sometimes he even cries because of this. He’s angry because he has to do it again. Then he does it the way he should.” (Klas’s mother)*

*“He’s afraid of the grade. His mother has told him that he mustn’t get less than three [good].” (Klas’s teacher)*

*“Anej didn’t want to copy. He got a signature, but he didn’t show it to his mother. I think it’s because he didn’t want to disappoint his mother.” (Anej’s teacher)*

The sources of distress can be summarized in the following way: all adolescents, mothers and teachers highlighted learning activities and assessment as a significant source of adverse school experiences for the adolescents. Participants often attributed the causes of the adolescents’ negative experiences to other people (e.g., the mothers to the teachers, the teachers to the students etc.). Comparison of the individual groups had shown that adolescents and mothers pointed out the teacher’s lack of understanding for the student, the adolescents laid more emphasis on being accepted by their peers than the mothers or the teachers, while all three groups agreed that the mothers’ expectations for the adolescents are (too) high.

## **2. Response to problems**

### **Adolescents’ experience of intensive distress**

All adolescents primarily provided a detailed description of the experiential aspect of their experiences, whereas the majority of their mothers and teachers focused on behavioral responses. Both mothers and teachers reported on insisting that the adolescent changed his/her behavior, which gave rise to feelings of rejection in the adolescent, as well as triggering rebellion or reinforcing the adverse experience. Some adolescents told their mothers about their distress, while others talked to their classmates, but none of them confided in their teachers.

*“I was nervous, my heart was pounding and I felt flushed. The teacher noticed, but didn’t say anything.” (Anja)*

*“I felt get angry, I tell her that I got a bad grade because the teacher turned the questions around, that I don’t understand her.” (Klas)*

Some mothers and teachers reported that the adolescents seek to conceal adverse experiences or divert them elsewhere.

*“Anej isn’t approaching his problems in the right way. He withdraws ... I think that Anej doesn’t show his distress at school ... When he’s under stress, he doesn’t do the tasks at school, he draws instead doing the task, he looks out the window.” (Anej’s mother)*

*“He’s disruptive in subjects in which he isn’t successful. He gives the impression that he doesn’t have problems. He withdraws, he’s quiet ... I think he avoids things.” (Ron’s teacher)*

### **Mothers take on learning obligations**

Most of the mothers take on the entire organization of the course of learning. They reported widely of reading and working through the learning material with their adolescents. This learning assistance represented a considerable burden for mothers and took a great deal of their time; they reported fatigue and mental burnout. Often, they were uncertain about their choice of approach. In providing learning assistance, the mothers focused mainly on the results of learning. Two teachers also observed that mothers took on the adolescents’ learning obligations, which in their view further compounded the adolescents’ dependency, lack of will, indecision, and fear of poor grades. The adolescents also reported that their mothers helped them with their schoolwork; however, they did not describe it as the mother taking over their responsibilities, but that they usually turned to their mothers in case of learning disabilities.

*“At home, I ask my mother for help with reading. At school, I don’t ask anyone. I think this is right.” (Anej)*

*“When I see he is suffering, I feel sad, distressed, I want us to try to get a grade of two [satisfactory] together. We study together. I read the material aloud and we work through the questions together, finding answers to them.” (Anej’s mother)*

*“When I ask him: ‘When will you improve? When will you be asked?’, he answers ‘I’ll work it out with Mum.’ He relies on his mother. This is one part of his fear, he’s very compliant, and he lacks independence.” (Klas’s teacher)*

When it came to responses to problems, adolescents, mothers and teachers all recognized that the adolescents experience intense distress regarding schoolwork. In describing these stressful situations, the adolescents focused on their negative experiential nature, while mothers and teachers focused more on the adolescent’s behavioral response. Most of the mothers and teachers, but not the adolescents, reported that the mothers excessively took on the adolescents’ learning obligations.

### 3. Expectations regarding the provision of assistance

#### More understanding of emotional distress

In their descriptions of stressful situations, all the adolescents expressed a desire for understanding and relief from emotional distress.

*“Before an English test, I had the feeling that I hadn’t studied enough.... I would have liked the teacher to tell me to calm down, to think positively about doing well.” (Anja)*

When things were difficult for the adolescents, it was important for them to be able to tell someone about their distress.

*“If things are really bad, I would like be able to tell someone ... I studied science really hard, but when I was tested I got a grade of two [satisfactory]. I thought I deserved more. I was angry. I didn’t tell the teacher that, I didn’t say anything to her. I told my mother that I deserved more, that the teacher wasn’t fair. I told my best friend at school, too.” (Klas)*

In their statements, two mothers and one teacher did not focus on the emotional understanding of adolescents who found themselves in distress. They primarily understood the problems of adolescents related to the learning material. One of the teachers pointed out that teachers in general lacked an understanding of adolescents’ emotional distress associated with their schoolwork. The two statements below from an adolescent and a teacher indicated their recognition of the lack of sensitivity amongst teachers towards the plight of adolescents.

*“In tests I have fewer tasks, instead of listening tasks I have different tasks, a shorter text. I would like teachers to understand me better when I don’t understand the material.” (Ron)*

*“You have to feel that there is a problem, not just pretend to understand the student. Generally, teachers don’t understand that there is one student who doesn’t understand. Help is always connected only to the learning material.” (Klas’s teacher)*

#### Greater independence of the adolescent

Most of the mothers expected their adolescents to put more effort into learning and to be more successful academically.

*“I tell her: ‘The sooner we put pressure on, the sooner it’ll come right. You have to try.’ I teach her to be independent, to seek help herself. I tell her again and again: ‘Just don’t be lazy!’” (Anja’s mother)*

All the teachers expected the adolescents to show more responsibility and independence in learning. They believed that the students themselves could ask for help with schoolwork when required.

*“Specialized words create problems for her. She reads them wrongly and pronounces them incorrectly, without knowing that this is a problem. She never asks for help with reading. It would be better if she asked for help.” (Anja’s teacher)*

### **More adaptation of teaching**

All the adolescents expect teachers to explain the learning material in more detail. Their mothers also expected teachers to offer the adolescents more learning assistance, while both the adolescents and the mothers believed that teachers could better adapt assessment.

*“I’m under stress when the teacher doesn’t explain the material and just ‘shouts something’ in English.” (Ron)*

*“Except for in English, he has had only one test adapted this year. He needs more adaptation. That’s all I expect from teachers.” (Klas’ mother)*

### **More guidance of special education teacher**

Most of the teachers and two mothers pointed to a lack of cooperation with the special education teacher, whom they expected to provide specific guidance in adapting instruction and working with the adolescents.

*“We have an agreement with the special education teacher to give her the specific questions that Anja could be asked. I’m not sure, but I think the special education teacher also teaches Anja organization – how to study at home. Personally, I would like more advice from the special education teacher.” (Anja’s teacher)*

*“I asked the special education teacher to work with him more on his English. I’ve only been told that they go through the required subject matter during the additional help lessons. The special education teacher hasn’t given me any advice on how to work with Klas at home.” (Klas’ mother)*

When it came to expectations regarding the provision of assistance, we have found that our research subjects’ expectations concerned the following areas: understanding the adolescent’s emotions and independence, adapting the teaching and finding concrete guidelines for teaching the adolescent and for the adolescent’s own learning. Comparison of the individual groups’ perspectives had shown that it was especially the adolescents (in contrast with the mothers and teachers) who wished for more understanding of their emotional distress. Particularly the teachers and mothers emphasized the need for the adolescents to be more independent in their schoolwork, and only the adolescents and mothers wished to see the teachers provide more adjustments to schoolwork. Meanwhile, the teachers were the ones who most often pointed out that they wished they received more instructions from special education teachers.

### **Discussion**

The experience of adolescents with dyslexia in the school context was analyzed from the perspectives of the adolescents, as well as their mothers and teachers. Adolescents with dyslexia, mothers and teachers all recognized the difficulty of learning situations related to reading and writing, which is in line with other studies (e.g., Singer, 2005; Hellendoorn & Ruijsenaars, 2000). In addition to reading and writing, the participants in our research also regarded assessment as a difficult school situation, highlighting particularly the fear of receiving a poor grade. Unlike mothers and teachers, however, adolescents worried about how their inability to learn would be perceived by their classmates, particularly in situations involving reading and

assessment in the classroom. Similar findings have been noted in research by Singer (2005), with adolescents reporting experiencing distress in situations in which their lack of learning ability could be recognized by classmates, who might make fun of them. The findings of the present study also indicated that adolescents and some mothers worry about the acceptance of the adolescents in the classroom.

Adolescents and some mothers were concerned about teachers' relationships with the adolescents. Mothers expected teachers to show the adolescents more understanding and personal sensitivity in difficult situations. Similar findings were noted in research by Hellendoorn and Ruijsenaars (2000), who reported that the majority of the adolescents involved in their study did not confide in teachers about their problems during schooling.

The present study revealed that adolescents' stress due to schoolwork was often triggered by the high expectations of their mothers, whom the adolescents did not want to disappoint with bad grades. Diakogiorgi and Tsiligirian (2016) also reported about the high expectations of parents regarding the academic performance of their children with dyslexia. Some authors (e.g., Firth et al., 2010; Heiman & Kariv, 2004) found that students with specific learning disabilities frequently used less effective coping strategies, such as withdrawal from the situation and ignoring the problem. From the statements by some of the adolescents included in the present research, wanted more understanding and more opportunities to share their distress with others. They could confide some of their experiences in their mothers or selected classmates, but not in teachers. The study by Hellendoorn and Ruijsenaars (2000) also found that adolescents with dyslexia mainly confided their distress in parents, and rarely in teachers. In providing support and assistance to adolescents, mothers and teachers focused primarily on the area of learning and adolescent's behavior, while the experiential aspect was overlooked. This finding is crucial in planning work with adolescents, as the experiential aspect of distress is very important to them.

Mothers viewed their role in helping adolescents to cope with the difficulties of schoolwork as the consistent monitoring, control and organization of school obligations. Despite engaging intensively with their children's schoolwork, mothers had doubts as to whether their assistance was appropriate. Learning assistance represents a burden for mothers, as it required a great deal of time. In providing assistance, they were focused on good learning outcomes, which were difficult for the adolescents to achieve. Other studies also indicated that mothers of children with specific learning disabilities had relatively high expectations regarding academic achievement (Diakogiorgi & Tsiligirian, 2016; Yildiz et al., 2012).

The teachers and the majority of mothers included in the present study often described adolescents with dyslexia as lacking independence. Both mothers and teachers reported that the adolescents tried to avoid schoolwork, and that they were passive and lacked ambition. From the perspective of adolescents, research by Hellendoorn and Ruijsenaars (2000) also found that some teachers labeled adolescents with specific learning disabilities as lazy and less capable.

In terms of the expected provision of assistance, the adolescents and the mothers expressed a desire to see more extensive adjustments in the teaching process; meanwhile, particularly the teachers reported that special education teachers could provide more guidance for working with adolescents with dyslexia. Yildiz et al. (2012) also found that teachers lamented not having sufficient information on how to teach students with dyslexia.

The adolescents included in our research went through all five stages of the model that we presented in our introduction. The model calls for a systematic diagnostic assessment and monitoring of the student's progress, as well as efficient treatment and an evaluation of its success (Magajna et al., 2008). The teacher is a key individual in the five-stage model/process of

providing assistance and support for the student, and it is important that he or she cooperates with parents and counselors in this (Magajna et al., 2011). The results of our research show that teachers focused primarily on the narrower field of teaching, where they emphasized the need for closer cooperation with special education teachers, but they appeared to be less oriented towards cooperating with the adolescent and the parents. According to the adolescents, teachers often did not understand their difficulties. This makes it possible to conclude that in carrying out the assistance program, the teachers work less reciprocally with the adolescents and the parents because they did not report on these experiences. It is clear from the perspectives of the adolescents and the parents that they wish teachers would show more understanding, consideration and cooperation. The latter raises the question of how cooperation between all the participants involved in the planning and execution of an assistance program for a student with dyslexia actually happens in practice. The results of our research indicate that it is necessary to encourage more dialogue amongst everyone involved to establish better conditions in which to help and support the adolescent. It is vital that everyone who works with adolescents with dyslexia together in partnership share their worries, responsibilities and activities and skills, and thus supports each other.

### **Conclusions**

In our study we have compared the perspectives of adolescents, mothers and teachers concerning the schoolwork of adolescents with dyslexia. The overall results of our research revealed that the participants reported on three themes (with subthemes): (1) the sources of distress in school situations (learning activities and assessment, teachers' lack of understanding, acceptance by classmates, mothers' high expectations), (2) response to problems (adolescents' experience of intensive distress, mothers take on learning obligations), and (3) expectations regarding the provision of assistance (more understanding of emotional distress, greater independence of the adolescent, more adaptation of teaching, more guidance of special education teacher). The qualitative analysis of the results has shown that the perspectives of the participants were similar when it came to certain subthemes (e.g., about schoolwork being stressful), but differed quite substantially in others (e.g., the adolescents find peer acceptance far more significant than mothers or teachers). The considerable disparity in the perspectives in the planning and execution stages of assistance may reduce the effectiveness of the support for adolescents with dyslexia. Our findings show that content-wise it would also make sense to steer the study towards identifying the ways for a better cooperation between the adolescent, school professionals and parents. In assisting adolescents, it would therefore be useful to primarily take the adolescents' understanding and experience of distress in their schoolwork as the starting point. It would be desirable for teachers to take a more active role in relieving adolescents' distress. Additionally, school counselors could provide more guidance to students and their families in the common search for appropriate assistance for the adolescents, teachers and their parents. Given that the family, particularly mothers, provide significant support to help adolescents with dyslexia deal with schoolwork, it would be sensible to provide mothers with more support and professional guidance.

The limitations of this study concern the study sample, which consists of selected adolescents, their mothers and teachers. In any future studies it would be interesting to determine experiences with dyslexia in the school context for young and older children/adolescents and how an adolescent's coping with dyslexia is seen by other persons of importance for the adolescent, such as peers.

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