Understanding People with Dyslexia Support Strategies for Students and Employees

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Understanding People with Dyslexia

Support Strategies for Students and Employees

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to find out the experiences and obstacles that people with dyslexia face during their education and how it continues in work life. This paper investigates both the emotional state as well as the task side of people with dyslexia and their ability to deal with this disability. A focus group was conducted among four college students from different degree programs where they shared their experiences about dyslexia and how do they cope with this disability today and what is their opinion on their future employment. The task challenges that these students faced was mostly during their education, where they had uneducated teachers who didn't provide enough support for them. The positive side was the actual support from the parents of the participants, which was extremely important in their further improvement.

Educational institutions need to create an educational system that needs to be more adaptable for students with learning disabilities. The employers need to be aware of this type of people which can contribute a lot, but sometimes maybe they need some extra time

The importance of this paper is to educate people about dyslexia and how with small adaptations in school or at work a lot of things can be done for people with dyslexia.

Key words: dyslexia, employment, education, psychology, emotional experience

INTRODUCTION

Dyslexia definition, incidence, and causes

Dyslexia is defined to be a learning disability that is manifested in reading and writing difficulties which are associated with receiving information. Dyslexic see and perceive the world slightly differently. The way how many dyslexics see their text is that the text starts to move around, missing the letters out and reversing them, text may appear blurry and they sometimes mix up letters such as B-D, P-R, E-F. This learning disability is one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders, that can affect individuals at any age, however, it is most common with children around the age of 10 to 15 years old. Dyslexia is also known to be the disability of the new age. About 5-10% of the general population has dyslexia, which means that 1 out 5 people. (Habib, & Michel,2000) However, many adults with dyslexia are still undiagnosed, especially in developing countries. One from three children in a regular elementary school classroom might be affected by dyslexia. It is shown that dyslexia is equal to both male and female. Dyslexia mostly inherited. Lots of studies have shown the linkage between dyslexia and genetic, in fact, a child who has an affected parent with dyslexia has a risk of 60% developing the disorder. This risk can also increase 3 times if other close family members have this disorder. (Tunmer, et.al.,2010)

The environment is also considered to be the other cause of dyslexia, factors such as home environment or economic status. Stress and negative emotional environment have even been shown to increase the likelihood of developing dyslexia. Most individuals that live with these reading difficulties are not fully aware of the phonological weaknesses that they have. Dyslexia people may also face difficulty with analyzing sounds and letters. People with dyslexia also face problems with their short-term memory. (Dilnot, Julia, et.al.,2017) Short-term memory deals with how dyslexic people process the information to remember it.

Studies have shown that people with dyslexia rely more heavily on the right hemisphere of the brain, which deals with art and other creative kinds of thinking than on the logical language processing centers on the left hemisphere. (Hudson, et.al, 2007) With the upcoming generations more and more people are already diagnosed with dyslexia and already they know which kind of treatment suites them the best, but also there is a majority of people who are still struggling with their work and with their disability that they are even not aware of.

Emotional and psychological effects

In addition to problems with reading and spelling, people with dyslexia also have emotional and psychological challenges. People already know and say that they are not doing good with specific information that they get. (Nordqvist,2017)

The frustration and misunderstanding that children with dyslexia face during their education continues on with adulthood. The biggest problem in adulthood is a misunderstanding, which is on both sides. A lot of dyslexic adults don't understand how their dyslexia impacts them in the workplace and a lot of employers don't understand the memory difficulties and low self-confidence that adults with dyslexia (AWD) often have. (Nalavany, et.al, 2018)

Studies have shown that emotional experience with dyslexia (EED) and work self-efficacy are closely connected and they can impact the work of adults with dyslexia. Work self-efficacy is defined to be a task to get the work done, which is also connected with being self-confident, it's the way how people evaluate their work abilities which can boost their motivation. If the level of work self-efficacy is high the more likely it is that the person will succeed in a given work task. (Nalavany, et.al, 2018)

AWD often can have low work self-efficacy in some spectrum of work, but they can also have high work-efficacy in others. As mentioned before many of AWD have low job

satisfaction, because many of them also have low educational achievements and also the emotional effects that they have faced. (Nalavany, et.al, 2018)

There is very often the growing element of lack of motivation, low self-esteem, and frustration, which develops pressure. The problems mostly manifest itself through a range of ways where people become very quiet and internal. The anxiety level often grows and the frustration, sometimes high level of anger is also present. The problem here is that most AWD face is that they are marked for their life as being dyslexic, which adds more frustration. (Nalavany, et.al, 2018) The only way the get out of it is to look for strategies and to have ways around difficulties that they face. It can add even more anger when dyslexic people look around and see everybody else appears to do much better than they are, often they fell as life is treating them quite badly. Often AWD is undiagnosed and they start to label themselves as being stupid. Situations can get even worse when employers make huge demands and when they begin to fail. When the dyslexic people start to feel bad about themselves, they become more vulnerable, they can be on the edge of exhaustion. (Grace,2018) Many AWD feel very vulnerable, sensitive and they always feel that they're not quite good enough or not good enough as everybody else. (McLoughlin, 2016)

“According to a study where 89 graduate student during their first employment report, 70% did not disclose their dyslexia to employers.” (Morris, et.al, 2007) This often happens because a lot of dyslexic people feel that they are embarrassed about their disability. Identifying and diagnosing people with dyslexia from an early age as possible, which will, of course, help them more to develop. There is a lot of advantage of being diagnosed so that they know that there is a reason for it that there is nothing wrong with their brain, that they are not stupid or lazy, but that they need to learn ways of how to actually learn best. (Grace,2018)

When people feel discouraged at school or work when they start to feel that learning is not for them, then some kind of simple treatment is needed to support them.

There is no proper way that can be done in for treating dyslexia, important is to diagnose symptoms from an early age. One of the best treatment is education, in this form of treatment the teacher is an important part, who will from the start provide enough support, adjustments, and understanding for those dyslexic children. (Tunmer, et.al.,2010)

Without proper diagnosis and treatment, dyslexia in elementary school can cause difficulties in progress in schools, which then can be effected through middle school and high school. Which is creating feelings that they are not at the expected level as their peers are. Not only does dyslexia affect a child with difficulties, progression in school but also it affects one's social abilities. With dyslexia, a child will have a hard time remembering things or not knowing the right words to express themselves. A child with dyslexia will be in situations such as not participating in class, finding it hard to deal with some learning materials and especially problems with time when they have to do things at a specific time frame. (Gooch, 2013)

High level of discrimination is also present in the work environment but also in university. One example of discrimination that happened in a university in Wales where students with dyslexia were forced to wear a badge, where it says “I am a disabled student”. (Lodge, 2005) Another example is where a woman that worked in Starbuck was fired because she entered the wrong information, because of her difficulties with reading even though she stated the problem to her employer. (Weaver, 2016)

Strengths

The focus of dyslexia should not be presented as a deficit side but actually as a strength and that it has many advantages. A lot of dyslexic people are connected with the

weaknesses that they face, that they are not good at spelling, that they have a hard time with directions, saying wrong words to express themselves, but some of the most creative people are actually dyslexic. (McLoughlin, 2016) AWD are seen as having the strengths of being creative, this creativity is connected with really strong “interconnected reasoning” and the way how they store pieces of information. (Quinn, 2018) Some of these elements are also connected with the way of how the brain of dyslexic people is structured. Some of the differences in the brain of people with dyslexia create different ways of processing information. Interconnected reasoning is the way how they store ideas and the way how they process ideas. (Quinn, 2018) For example, a non-dyslexic persons brain stores the information in categories, so they know where the information is stored and they are isolated from other ideas. While a dyslexic person stores their information in a way that they connect with other information in order to make sense for them. This then actually creates the creative side of people with dyslexia, because of their ability to find a connection with other pieces of information and to combine them. (Hudson, et.al, 2007)

Most AWD see things holistically and in three-dimensional perception, so they have a strong natural ability in problem-solving and seeing solutions that most people wouldn't. (Giovagnoli, et.al. 2016)

The skills that dyslexic people are at their best are: “coding, learning languages, marketing, and entrepreneurship”. (Giovagnoli, et.al. 2016) Coding for a dyslexic is great because of their ability to see things in symbols and in three dimensional way. Learning languages for example such as Asian languages is easier for dyslexic because there is no spelling but rather there is the use of symbols. While marketing is connected with how dyslexic people use their creativity to make things more appealing. Most of the dyslexic people are at their best when they are entrepreneurs, where they are on their own without any deadlines, without any pressure or quilt that they are a fraud to a business. (Giovagnoli, et.al. 2016)

During the job selection process people with dyslexia first should be focused on the strengths that they have, they have to be focused which industry suits their ability and also they have to be focused which employer will meet the special needs of dyslexic people.

Motivation to hire AWD

The legal requirements differ from country to a country, some countries also define and diagnose dyslexia differently. The treatment and support for a lot of people are not even present. There are no exact overall legal regulations across Europe. Some of the countries such as Italy and England where a lot of effort is put into recognition and legal support for people with dyslexia, where a lot of organizations are present who want to support other countries. (Cappa and Giulivi, 2012)

The USA has a rapid growth of the laws and regulations that are present in 22 states, where a lot of other states are bringing up the awareness of dyslexia. Experts even predict that in a few years from now all states will have specific laws and regulations for people with dyslexia. California, for example, implemented a law for “universal screening”, where they screen kids and students for dyslexia. (Youman & Mather, 2018)

For employers, this means that they will be regulations and laws which will support employees with dyslexia. Employers moral and ethical values are affected by those regulations because they would be the ones who have the follow the regulations. Also, besides the moral and ethical responsibilities that the employer has, they also don't want to lose a valuable employee who has a lot to contribute if properly placed and supported.

Situation in Croatia

According to Hrvatska Udruga za Disleksiju (HUD) the legislation and law procedures for people with learning difficulties is not mentioned in any form, which can create a lot of problem for AWD. The situation in Croatia is the same as in other countries where dyslexia is connected and declared as being disabled. There has never been any action taken in consideration to take legal proposals that can change the whole educational program for students who have learning disabilities. The incidence in Croatia according to HUD is that 30% of students in universities are diagnosed with dyslexia and there are no rights and adaptations for them available. The same situation is with children in school where 10% of them are diagnosed with dyslexia. (HUD, n.d.) Just taking into consideration how many students and young adults are not even diagnosed properly and are struggling with their work and studies. There is also no research done on the incidents of how many adults are actually diagnosed with dyslexia or any learning disability. The treatment options according to HUD are offered in a way of having a speech therapist and educations in schools for parents and teachers. Still, for people and young adults, this cannot be helpful enough, there is the need of legal laws and regulations that can secure people.

Workplace solutions

It is recommended that both parties go with these situations responsible because it is important that the problem is recognized and that the adjustments are made. (McLoughlin, 2016) In today's world of technology for the employer, it is easy to do some online screening that can be done individually with each employee. From the employer's point of view, they are two things that can be done with their dyslexic employee the use of technology (recording messages, spelling machines) and coaching or training. (Moody, 2016) There is a lot of little basic adjustment that can be done in the workplace.

METHOD

The method that was used in this research paper is a moderated focus group of college students. The focus group had four participants, two males, and two females. The reason for a smaller number of participants in this analysis was to collect exact data of real-life experience about the struggles and obstacles that these participants faced. The focus group had thirteen open-ended questions.

The advantages of using this method are that it's more interactive, it is a more productive way of reaching the emotional side of the participant and where the participants can share their honest opinions about their disabilities. Focus group is qualitative research, which means that there are no numbers and percentages, but rather it provides with information about problems and reasons. (DeVault, 2018)

The content of the questions is based on a personal background of the participants and on their early diagnosis, their childhood experiences with dyslexia, challenging tasks, the supportive factors that helped them, previous and current employment plans and all the feelings and concerns that are connected with dyslexia.

The focus group participants were recorded and notes were taken by the assistant. The participants are RIT Croatia students who are diagnosed with learning disabilities, who shared their experiences. The duration of the focus group was for one hour.

Participants who were invited to join the focus group are recommended by the Academic Support Manager of RIT Croatia. Participation was completely voluntary. The population of the group that participated in this discussion was: freshman and senior college students who were diagnosed with dyslexia. The degree program of the participants is in IT and IB sector. The meeting was conducted via video conference between RIT Croatia campuses: Dubrovnik and Zagreb.

The participants had an equal chance to speak and contribute their information to the research of this project. Confidentiality was guaranteed to the participants. At the beginning of the meeting, it was mentioned that the whole conversation will be recorded and that the assistant will take notes for an easy data collection.

All participants of this focus group are diagnosed with dyslexia in the early adolescence, mostly during their high school years. Most of the participants are not only diagnosed with dyslexia but also with other learning disabilities such as ADHD and Dysgraphia. Three of the participants are in IT and one participant IB program. The country of origin of these participants is Croatia and USA.

RESULTS

Several broad topics were discussed during the focus group session. Those included challenging tasks, coping strategies, emotional experiences, support received, and current and future employment. Some of these themes according to the participants had their positive and negative sides.

All the participants and their families gradually became aware of their condition and eventually received a formal diagnosis, although in some cases not until high school. Participants reported receiving support from parents at home regarding their school activities beginning at an early age, even before a formal diagnosis was received. However, none of the participants reported receiving any sort of formal recognition of their disability from their schools or teachers. No formal reporting mechanism was used, and no formal accommodations were made. Although the students were somewhat aware of their own condition, neither their teachers nor their peers were informed.

Task Challenges

The first theme is the task side and the problems that the participants faced where mostly connected with their education. Most of the participants agreed that they had a problem with writing their exams, also the national graduation exam was the hardest part of their high school education. The problem continues and with the school activities. One participant shared his experience of how a lot of material is covered during the class that he didn't have enough time to go through all the materials at home, as he said: "I usually need twice as much time to learn something then people without disabilities.". The problem with exams that one participant faced was that there was not enough paper provided to them during exams or even the extra time that was needed for them to finish the exam. Some subjects were hard for them where they all agreed that math and languages were the hardest.

“It’s not about languages that are hard, but the problem is spelling.” “I never know how many zeros do I have to put.”.

All of the participants faced a huge problem when it comes to oral dictation which is common in Croatian classrooms. This type of oral examination is present in both native and foreign languages, where the teacher is reading a text and the students have to write down the sentences, also it is timed, which creates additional pressure and insecurity to the student the teacher's side. Most of the participants said that they face problems when they write e-mail the reason is how the other side is going to react. “Communicating via e-mail is hard, I can not see people’s expression.”. One participant stated that things that needed to be “learned by heart” made it just harder. Notes taking were not useful for one participant, because it was hard to be focused on what the professor was speaking and to write things down, “It would be always too messy for me to read after the class.”

The Croatian educational system works in this way that there is an emphasis on the public examination during the class time where the teacher is questioning the students both orally and on the chalkboard, in front of the peers with immediate public grading. This situation creates a lot of stress for students. Especially for students with dyslexia they are focused on both the performance and on the academic task, but they were also worried about the social judgment of their peers. “I was afraid that everyone would see my disability and look at me differently.”

Accommodations and Solutions

The solutions for the task difficulties that are most effective and that they use were mostly connected with the use of technology. Typing on a computer is one of the solutions for the participants, where they use autocorrect which makes them recognize their mistakes faster and there is no embarrassment for them. Use of online video tutorials program is also

one way of learning strategies that help them a lot. One student said that the use of the dyslexic font is helpful. The use of more visual aids that can create and online courses are for all participants is one way of solving their problems.

All participants agreed that the extra time during studying or exams is extremely important to them. One student suggested that double checking and good concentration on the material that she is studying is just enough. As said before the use of technology is from huge importance for all the participants but for some things they say that reading from the paper instead of the screen makes a huge difference in understanding the text.

Emotional Factors

The second theme was the emotional state and the level of support. All participants reported negative school experiences with teachers who were unaware of their condition or were uneducated about dyslexia in general. “I was characterized as a lazy person.” One participant didn’t feel even enough motivation to go to school, because of the embarrassment in front of the peers and the teacher. One participant admitted that low self-esteem is present because of being looked differently.

The positive is that the participants had the full support of their parents, where mostly all of them agreed that mothers helped them during their education. One student shared that his grandfather would read required school books out loud for him, instead of reading them on his own, and that this strategy helped him pass his Croatian language class.

Teachers’ reactions were widely varied, from open ridicule to some level of understanding. One participant shared how she would say to her high school teacher that she is diagnosed with dyslexia and the teacher would say to her “you are using this for an excuse to not learn.” One participant shared that her teacher noticed that she is struggling with reading and she asked her in a polite way is she having a “problem”.

Most of the participants did their own research about their disabilities and look for the advantages of having this kind of disability, or what one student called, “my little problem.” One participant was comparing herself with other famous people that have dyslexia. The emotional side of the participants was mixed, where they had a bad emotional experience during education with the lack of support from teachers and peers but in the other hand, the huge amount of the support from their parents and even their own motivation to go further into their future made things bit easier for them.

RIT Croatia has already established the disability service agreement, where students can in privately and freely declare their disability. One participant shared her experience about going to RIT Rochester, were as she said it was sort of “normal” and everyone was well informed about her learning disability.

Employment

All participants reported past and current successful employment experiences. The past experiences of the participants involved car washer, call center, student helper at the college, retail, marketing, tour guide, and receptionist. Variety of job was present in the past of the participants from jobs where physical work is involved in jobs where reading and writing were the main obligations. One participant shared how she was working in a marketing agency where she had to read and write a lot of materials, but she found her successful way out to deal with these challenging tasks.

The third theme was about future employment, where most of the participants were concerned about how can their skills impact their future employment. Many of the participants had a variety of job opportunities, but as said before most of them were actually concerned about their future employment and protocol of the employment itself.

One of the participants is thinking about the next step in education to go for a master outside Croatia. The IT students said that they would like to work on their own or to work in a startup

company where they can be “free” and more creative. Working in the IT sector where there is a lot of coding, cybersecurity and software development is something where the IT participant sees themselves. One participant even said that “IT makes me feel normal”. The IB student is more oriented in jobs where they have a strong interpersonal relationship with other people, such as politics. On the question would they tell their employers about the disability, most of them answered that they would tell them immediately during the interview when they feel it is comfortable for them to say it. One of the participants said that he would even put his disability into his resume. On the question of what strategy would help them at their work, one participant said that having a mentor to guide him, as he said: “Croatian bosses just want things done.”.

The overall result showed that all of the participants struggle a lot during their childhood and education, where they had to deal with the problems that other peers didn’t have problems with. The overall education system didn’t go into their favor, where a small number of teachers helped the participants in understanding their struggles, sometimes it even went into the direction to be hurtful. When growing into the adolescence all participants gained the support of their parents, where they were pushed to the right institutional support and general social recognition. Also, the important result part is that all the participants learned what their strategies are and they are using them in the most effective way that suits them. The participants are also focused on the advantages of having dyslexia and that this is just a normal thing that they have to cope with. The feeling and opportunities that they have when it comes to their future employment are generally positive, where there is high motivation present for further improvements.

DISCUSSION:

Summary

The importance of this research is to educate people about this disability and to raise awareness. It's all about understanding others and their problems. Having dyslexia today is a normal thing that individuals that are diagnosed with it have to cope in their day to day life. There is no right treatment that could be used but rather using the right methods and strategies that help individuals. Problems that are faced during the childhood of people with dyslexia continue during their life. With extra time and with additional help a lot can be reached for these people diagnosed with dyslexia can achieve a lot.

Recommendations

Lack of legal and institutional support and education of the general public throughout all levels of society in the Balkan region is a problem. The situation in Croatian and other Balkan region is not at the side of people with dyslexia, just looking at the regulations and laws there is nowhere to find any kind of support for those people. If there are no rights and regulations this means that there is no understanding nor support. Institutional and general support is actually what these people need, but in this region, people with dyslexia cannot rely on this kind of help. Taking the example from the focus group and looking at how much of the participants suffered during their education, where they needed the most help but they were just disregarded or even ridiculed The best example that supports this is that all of the participants were diagnosed late, most of them during high school some of the even later. With the teachers who are not well educated about this topic, this can create a lot of problems for people who are not diagnosed. The later the students are diagnosed the more time it takes for them to adopt new strategies of learning and coping with dyslexia. The low diagnosis rate is also one evidence that the institutions are not paying any attention to this kind of a problem. Dyslexic people face a lot of problems with reading and writing, but not only that,

they face a lot of indirect judgment from society. Due to uneducated teachers and parents, and due to the low diagnosis rate, these people are often framed as lazy or even stupid, which affects their self-esteem and emotional state.

The participants of this project did an amazing thing and it's that all of them are focused on their advantages, creativity and that they are focused on the positive sides of dyslexia. This kind of perception is great for every individual that struggles with dyslexia, just to keep trying to find the positive sides of it.

The schools should also be aware of the disabilities and try to implement some preschool test, that would make things bit easier for teachers and parents. If the effort is put into realizing dyslexia from an early age on, there needs to be some kind of educational programs for teachers so that they are informed about what small adaptation they can use during their classes. The important part here is also to mention that the teacher and the parents have to be on the same page. Parents, of course, should support their child but to know into which direction, so educational programs should be provided for parents that could help them in order to direct their child and to focus on other strengths. Involvement of institutions to this kind of disability should be addressed and to be defined as a learning disability, because still dyslexia in the Balkan region is recognized as being disabled or it’s not even defined as any kind of disability. If the institutions bring some kind of effort into it, then the laws and regulations side would be much easier for dyslexic people, where they would then feel safe at school or at their workplace, because someone stands beside them.

As the results show these participants demand small adaptation in their environment which can everyone provide, but also it is important that dyslexic people say that they need some kind of accommodation for their needs.

Limitations: The small number of participants in the focus group. Lack of time to go through all questions, where they needed to be explained in more detail. Lack of institutional results and support. The wording of some questions.

Further research:

Further research questions should address the exact number of people with dyslexia. Question will investigate the knowledge and attitudes of teachers. The question could examine the role of a speech therapist (logoped). Research should also include what kind of educational program can be addressed in schools that are helpful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Importance of early diagnosis. Preschool screening.
2. Involvement of institutions
3. Ministry (a joint project between the ministry of health and ministry of education) to investigate best practices in other countries and propose a formal method of both screening and accommodations for such students.
4. Recommendations for students: some self-help, groups of students who support each other, especially older students.

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APPENDIX:

Focus Group Protocol

First of all, I would like to thank you all for coming and devoting time for my research project. The purpose of this focus group is to analyze and conduct the information about experiences of learning disabilities with the task part and the emotional state of people. We would like to hear about the struggles, or obstacles you faced at school or work, and how you managed with them.

All participants are voluntarily here, the answers are anonymous and in the research paper, we will not mention any names or any personal details.

All the questions are open-ended and there are no right or wrong answers. The purpose of this project is simply to share your experience with us.

Each participant will have equal time to speak and I kindly ask you for your honest response to each question.

1. Please share a little bit about yourself, where you are from, your year at college, your degree program and your learning disability. How did you and your family first become aware of your diagnosis/condition?

2. What was school like for you when you were young? Which subjects or tasks were the most challenging for you?

3. What kind of help or support did you get, and from whom? Can you remember specifically anything your teachers did or did not do that particularly helped you or hurt you? What about your parents? Brothers or sisters? Friends?

4. Which strategies did you try in order to help yourself? Which ones worked best? Do you still use them now?

5. What particular coping strategies do you use in your study/work environment?

6. Do you think that being of a different gender with dyslexia would have made a difference? If so, how? If not, why not?

7. How have you dealt with your dyslexia in interpersonal relationships with family, friends, teachers, colleagues?

8. Do you think dyslexia had an impact on your progress at school?

9. Has dyslexia impacted your day to day duties outside of school?

10. Has dyslexia impacted your choice of high school or college? Choice of courses or concentration?

11. Who in your circle of family, friends, colleagues, and teachers knows about your diagnosis? What made you decide to tell people about it, or decide not to tell people about it?
12. Do you have any work experience? Did your diagnosis impact your choice of employment? Did you tell your employer, supervisor or colleagues about your diagnosis? Do you feel it impacted your work performance? How did you cope?

13. For your future employment, what kinds of jobs or careers are you considering? Are you concerned about any aspect of employment regarding your diagnosis? Would you tell your boss or colleagues about your needs?

14. How big of a problem do you think your actual capabilities are? How much of the problem involves your own feelings (embarrassed or uncomfortable) and other people's reactions to your condition?