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Dyslexia, Literacy and Inclusion

CHILD-CENTRED PERSPECTIVES

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN WITH DYSLEXIA AND DEVELOPMENTAL LITERACY DIFFICULTIES: HOLISTIC APPROACHES

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Chapter aims

- To explore the nature of emotional intelligence and its relevance to children experiencing difficulties with the acquisition of literacy.
- To examine how developing emotional intelligence can impact positively upon children with dyslexia and developmental literacy difficulties.
- To explore the importance of self-efficacy and its relevance to children with dyslexia and developmental literacy difficulties.

Introduction

A century ago the celebrated author D.H. Lawrence (1915, p. 24) in addressing the emotional responses experienced by children failing with literacy, wrote as follows:

> Then he reddened furiously, felt his bowels sink with shame, scratched out what he had written, made an agonised effort to think of something in the real composition style, failed, became sullen

with rage and humiliation, put the pen down and would have been torn to pieces rather than attempt to write another word.

Now compare Lawrence's account with the following taken from an interview by the author (MacBlain) with a young adult during the course of writing this text:

> *People have no idea how difficult it is. They don't realise how humiliating it is, having to read in front of others when you know you just can't do it or to have your written work given back to you when you know it is going to be full of mistakes … it really hurts and it still makes me tearful when I talk about it.*

Whilst both accounts highlight the painful experiences associated with poor reading, they also reveal deeper feelings of shame, embarrassment and anger that can be associated with low levels of literacy. Here readers may be drawn to ask why such feelings, experienced at the beginning of the last century, remain evident in the 21st century. Readers may also be drawn to asking why many children in mainstream schools who are given additional support for learning and who may have individualised learning programmes can still experience significant feelings of humiliation and hurt. In a recent study, Long, MacBlain and MacBlain (2007, p. 124) drew attention to the importance of teachers working with children with literacy difficulties being properly aware of the crucial link between difficulties with acquiring literacy and emotional development and personal well-being:

> The shame and frustration that often come with living with literacy difficulties require that teachers be cognizant of the interdependent nature of academic and personal growth in the provision of individualized learning experiences.
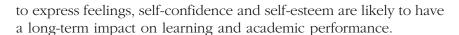
For some time, the lack of attention given to the social and emotional side of dyslexia and developmental literacy difficulties has been recognised but not fully explored or understood. Almost a decade ago Hartas (2006, p. 28), for example, commented, in regard to children with dyslexia in the early years, as follows:

> The social and emotional consequences of dyslexia have been neglected despite accumulating evidence suggesting a strong link between dyslexia and difficulties with regard to social interactions and emotional maturity … language and social-emotional development are interconnected … difficulties with social adjustment, ability

to express feelings, self-confidence and self-esteem are likely to have a long-term impact on learning and academic performance.

It is of particular note that Hartas appears to be drawing particular attention to problems with social adjustment and interaction, which arise from the difficulties that can be experienced by young children with dyslexia. One is immediately drawn to the realities that face many children who may struggle within classroom situations to demonstrate their abilities because they are failing to read or write as well as their peers and this might, for example, affect their friendships and the manner in which other children perceive them and wish to interact with them. One is also drawn to thinking about older children who may have developed low self-esteem and poor self-confidence and who choose, often reluctantly, to withdraw from social situations. Interestingly, Hartas also draws particular attention to the area of emotional maturity. Readers may wish to consider the view that children with dyslexia as well as other specific learning difficulties such as dyspraxia can often present in some situations as being severely frustrated (Department of Education for Northern Ireland [DENI], 1998, p. 71) and highly sensitive (Burden and Burdett, 2005; Long et al., 2007; Ott, 1997). Some would suggest that this is, in part, due to immaturities in the development of parts of the brain. Of interest, also, is the emphasis that Hartas appears to place upon the interconnectedness between social-emotional development and language. In its broader sense, language, of course, includes written expression, which is the area that many children with dyslexia fail in. It also includes, however, such areas as 'word finding' difficulties, which is another area that many children with dyslexia can find problems with. In addition, the retention of instructions or directions given orally by others can again present problems for some children with dyslexia, making oral communication, in some situations, a very challenging business. Take the case of Michael, below.

✒ Example

Michael is 10 years of age and was assessed as having dyslexia when he was 8 years old. His parents, however, have remained anxious about his continued lack of progress and increasing isolation from other children, and his growing frustration, weakening self-confidence, and unhappiness about attending school. When assessed more recently

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by a different educational psychologist, this psychologist reported as follows:

… Michael presented as an articulate, pleasant and cooperative child and impressed with his willingness to attempt a number of sub-tests that clearly presented him with some difficulties. In conversation with Michael I learned that whilst he liked his teachers and was generally positive about his school he had been, at times, very unhappy. Michael told me that he often felt isolated from his friends and 'especially when they are doing something where you have to be really clever… they don't really want you in their group if you are a bit thick'.

Parental interview

Michael's mother described Michael as 'a very reserved and quiet child … his teacher says that he doesn't get involved in discussions with the others in lessons … he has such lovely ideas but when he tries to put these down on paper he really struggles … he gets really frustrated … he has always been a very sensitive child, quick to tears … his dad and I worry about him, we feel he's far more capable than his work suggests … it's almost as if the real Michael can't break out and let others see what he can really do…'.

Current level of intellectual functioning

Table 3.1   Case study – Michael (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children IV – Composite Scores)

Scale	Centile	Average Range
Verbal Comprehension	79	High Average
Perceptual Reasoning	55	Average
Working Memory	21	Low Average
Processing Speed	16	Low Average

Table 3.2   Case study – Michael (literacy scores)

Test	Centile	Age Equivalent
Word Recognition	16	6 years 6 months
Reading Comprehension	07	6 years 3 months
Spelling	14	6 years 3 months

It is generally accepted that two-thirds of children are considered to function within the average range of ability and this range is represented between the 16th and 84th centiles … The 85th centile upwards represents increasingly higher ability with the 99th centile representing the top 1% of ability and the 1st centile representing the lowest 1% of ability.

Having undertaken an assessment of Michael and gained information relating to Michael's cognitive functioning, his intellectual ability and attainments in reading and spelling, the educational psychologist then went on to offer her conclusions and make a number of recommendations (see below). It is important to note that whilst she made recommendations in regard to Michael's academic performance she also made recommendations relating to his self-belief and self-esteem and the importance of developing these in regard to Michael's progress. She also placed particular emphasis upon the need for Michael to learn new strategies for managing his learning.

Example (contd.)

Conclusions

The above results suggest to me that Michael is of at least average ability but with the specific learning difficulty, Dyslexia. There is a marked discrepancy between Michael's scores (see Tables 3. 1 and 3.2), which, in my view, explain many of the difficulties he experiences with formal learning. Of particular note was Michael's score on the Coding sub-test, which provides a measure of speed and accuracy of hand–eye co-ordination, short-term memory and attention skills. When scores on the Coding sub-test are taken together with scores on the Symbol Search we gain a measure of Processing Speed. Michael achieved a centile score of 16, which places him at the very bottom of the average range. This suggests to me that in formal learning situations he will experience greater difficulty than the majority of his peers with processing written symbolic information. I would suggest, for example, that Michael will take longer copying work from another source such as a White Board or textbook because he is having to give greater attention to processing individual features of the material he

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is reading. This will slow him down and within formal examination conditions he will require additional time … I noted that on the Digit Span sub-test Michael performed much better on the first part and less well on the second part … Michael's weaker performance on the latter part of this sub-test indicates the existence of specific learning difficulties relating to Working Memory and suggests that within classroom situations he will experience difficulties following longer instructions and directions. He may, for example, appear at times to be easily distracted and as being inattentive and having poor concentration when, in reality, he is probably struggling to process and organise the verbal instructions and directions he is being given.

Michael achieved high average scores on other sub-tests indicating strengths in these areas … Michael's literacy scores (Table 3.2) clearly indicate that he is experiencing significant difficulties in all aspects of literacy.

Recommendations

Given my assessment of Michael, I would recommend the following:

- *Increasing Michael's understanding of how he approaches new learning situations and material and especially how he organises his work schedules in relation to the type of demands these make upon him.*
- *Increasing Michael's own understanding that his specific learning difficulties/dyslexia will place greater demands upon him especially in lessons where he is involved in processing larger amounts of verbal information. Michael should understand that from time to time he will experience much greater difficulty than his peers with sustaining his concentration and attention when doing school work that Michael finds of little relevance. This will support him with developing a better sense of himself and of his true levels of ability and potential. In this way Michael will be helped to prepare himself for future transition to secondary school.*
- *Michael's handwriting is usually difficult to read. He should continue to work at developing his skills in this area especially if this is linked to his attempts at spelling new words as well as those words with which he finds particular difficulty. This will also be of particular benefit to Michael if this is done in unison with his attempts at developing his skills in the area of Information Computer Technology (ICT) and, in particular, his keyboard skills.*

- *As Michael progresses through secondary school his teachers will expect Michael to word-process the majority of his work. If he has developed good skills in this area then this will help him enormously as he prepares for his GCSE examinations.*
- *Employing ICT to support his work in the area of word recognition, reading comprehension and spelling will also be very beneficial and will offer Michael regular opportunities to record and then proofread his written work.*
- *Michael will benefit particularly from using structured literacy programmes, which emphasise the learning of new and efficient strategies for the reinforcement and consolidation of prior learning in the area of spelling. In addition, he will benefit from activities which use multi-sensory techniques and which are aimed at supporting the development of his kinaesthetic memory. This will be particularly helpful if these activities form part of his spelling programme and are linked to the development of a cursive style of handwriting.*
- *Increasing Michael's knowledge of sound/symbol correspondence and the principles that underpin this will be an essential feature of Michael's progress in spelling, as well as word recognition. He should also continue to develop his knowledge and understanding of the structural analysis of words, for example, he should increase his understanding of how words are formed using prefixes, suffixes and so on. I would suggest that he could also use the programme Letters Form Words (published by SMB Associates SW LTD: enquiries@seanmacblain.com)*
- *Given Michael's level of intellectual ability, he can be more closely involved in monitoring his own progress in developing higher order reading skills and skills in the area of spelling as well as across the wider curriculum.*
- *Whenever possible, Michael should be encouraged to set personal targets and to monitor his own progress and efforts against these.*
- *Michael can improve his reading skills through access to material, which he can read with ease, which is of high interest and which links to his natural curiosity. When engaged in paired reading with an adult he can also be encouraged to seek connections between his own ideas and those he is reading by talking about them.*
- *Michael will also continue to benefit from having opportunities where he is supported in raising his self-confidence and boosting his self-esteem, which will I believe have a very positive effect on the acquisition of higher-order reading skills. Michael's self-esteem*

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> *objectives could incorporate the development of those skills and aspects of his reading and writing that he wants to improve for himself. It will be important, however, for adults working with Michael to find creative and effective ways of encouraging him to take greater risks so that he can remain motivated and want to learn.*
> - *Of particular benefit to Michael will be having opportunities to use specific examples of his own personal success to convince himself that he is very capable of doing much better and that definite improvements are taking place in key skill areas. This will help him to internalise a strong self-belief that he is, in fact, improving in all aspects of literacy and numeracy and that this is due in large part to his growing confidence in his own abilities as well as his learning of new and efficient strategies, and his own direct efforts…*

✎ Exercise

Having read the educational psychologist's recommendations:

1 What key elements should Michael's teacher include within an individualised programme to shift his reading comprehension and spelling scores into the average range?
2 What key elements should Michael's teacher include to improve his word recognition score?

The nature of emotional intelligence

In order for children to function effectively and respond purposefully to the vast array of demands made upon them as they grow, they need to be able to understand and manage their emotions (Goleman, 1996; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). However, not only do they need to make sense of their own emotions, they also need to understand those of others with whom they come into contact. To fail to do so will almost certainly bring its problems. This is especially important in those growing years whilst at school, and this has been recognised and written about for generations, by, for example, such notable philosophers and theorists as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and

Maria Montessori, and more recently, John Holt, A.S. Neill and the contemporary American philosopher Nel Noddings. Take the following quotation offered by A.S. Neill in the 1960s, whose radical ideas on education were located within the then popular theoretical perspective, *Psychodynamics*, developed by Sigmund Freud, cited by MacBlain (2014, p. 24):

> Freud said that the unconscious was infinitely more important and more powerful than the conscious. I said, 'In my school we won't censure, punish, moralize. We will allow every child to live according to his deep impulses'.

What teachers observe on a daily basis when working with children are the children's behaviours. They do not observe actual thinking or underlying cognitive processes, only the manifestation of these as behaviours. They then make interpretations of these behaviours. In the majority of cases their interpretations will be accurate. There will be occasions, however, when interpretations may be flawed and driven by teachers' own emotional states and predetermined mindsets. In the case of children who are failing to access literacy, especially during their first years at school, teachers may attribute failure in these children to such factors as lack of concentration, ease of distractibility, poor attention span, naughtiness, and so on, when in reality these children are trying to manage significant specific difficulties relating to, for example, poor working memory, perceptual disturbance, slow processing speed, and so on. The result of inaccurate attributions may well mean that children with dyslexia are perceived, and even labelled, as a distraction to others, a nuisance, and even in some cases the 'class clown'. In such instances, not only will their learning difficulties go unnoticed but they will, almost certainly, fail to have underlying emotional states such as frustration, anxiety, and even fear, identified, as was emphasised by A.S. Neill, above.

Most practitioners working in the field of education today will be familiar with the following two terms, which are often used interchangeably when talking about children's learning and cognitive development: *emotional intelligence* and *emotional literacy*. This idea of emotional intelligence offers a most useful framework through which we can better understand the need for teachers to adopt a more holistic and child-centred approach to working with children with dyslexia and developmental literacy difficulties. To begin with, it is necessary to understand what we mean by this term emotional intelligence. Salovey and Mayer (1990, p. 189) have defined *emotional intelligence* as:

> … the subset of social intelligence that involves the *ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions.*

These terms are particularly relevant to the emotional and social development of children with dyslexia and how these children grow up attempting to manage their own sense of achievement and progress, and in too many cases, failure. It is helpful, therefore, to look more closely at emotional intelligence and how it relates to children with dyslexia and developmental literacy difficulties.

Salovey and Mayer have proposed four key factors in developing *emotional intelligence*: perceiving emotions; reasoning with emotions; understanding emotions; and managing emotions. With the first, children begin from a very early age to develop their ability to accurately perceive emotions, for example, interpreting the body language of those around them, identifying facial expressions, and so on. In doing so, they come to learn how to observe the emotions of those around them and they do this by developing their understanding of patterns of behaviour and language. The degree to which they will come to develop their own sensitivity in this area will depend on a number of factors, most particularly perhaps, the explanations provided by adults and older siblings. As they participate in this process they will increasingly also engage in reasoning with their personal emotions and will extend their own thinking and understanding of situations, and, in the process, will develop their cognitive capacity. They can be observed, for example, to form judgements as to the appropriateness of responding to the emotions of those around them, and if so, how. Readers may wish to consider, at this point, how young children who are failing in literacy and who may have dyslexia interpret the emotions of those around them. More specifically, readers may wish to consider how these children come to internalise their interpretations of the behaviours and emotions of the key adults who are responsible for their education and how these interpretations might come to define the way in which children come to view themselves as learners.

With the third factor, individuals attach meaning to their emotions through making accurate interpretations of them. A teacher may, for example, experience a child being very aggressive towards them and they might then interpret the child's aggression simply in terms of it being an angry outburst when the child's aggression may, in actual fact, be due to feelings of embarrassment and even guilt derived from a misplaced sense of causing the original upset. Take a further example, where a teacher may experience a child being very sullen and non-cooperative, and interpret the child's behaviours in terms of the child being oppositional

and rude when, in reality, the child's lack of cooperation may be due to the child feeling very embarrassed because of their fear of failing in front of their peers, coupled with an internalised sense of failure by the child. Children need to be supported in making accurate interpretations of their own emotions. This is crucial for children who are failing with reading. For this group of children, the interpretations of the emotions they feel in response to the behaviours of others around them, and especially those adults responsible for managing their learning can be of the utmost importance. They must, for example, learn to differentiate between the variety of emotions they feel when their teachers are responding to the frequent mistakes they make with their writing and spelling, and demonstrating, however covertly, feelings of frustration and exasperation, and in some cases, perhaps, dislike.

The final element requires an ability to manage, but more importantly to regulate feelings and emotions. Here, children need, for example, to give appropriate responses to the emotions they observe and experience in others with whom they interact. Again, readers may wish to consider the difficulties that children who continually fail with the acquisition of literacy have in regard to regulating their feelings and emotions when they find their attempts at reading, spelling and writing being perceived by adults as undesirable and something of a nuisance, or in relation to the disappointment of high-achieving parents. Salovey and Mayer (1990, p. 200) have posed an important but rather appealing conundrum:

> People who have developed skills related to emotional intelligence understand and express their own emotions, recognize emotions in others, regulate affect, and use moods and emotions to motivate adaptive behaviors. Is this just another definition of a healthy, self-actualized individual?

Making reference to the work of Mayer (co-author with Salovey referred to above) Goleman (1996, p. 48) has offered the following:

> Mayer finds that people tend to fall into distinctive styles for attending to and dealing with emotions.
>
> - *Self-aware*. Aware of their moods as they are having them … When they get into a bad mood, they don't ruminate and obsess about it, and are able to get out of it sooner …
>
> - *Engulfed*. These are people who often feel swamped by their emotions and helpless to escape them … They are mercurial and not very aware of their feelings, so that they get lost in them …

As a result, they do little to try to escape bad moods … They often feel overwhelmed and emotionally out of control …

- *Accepting.* While these people are often clear about what they are feeling, they also tend to be accepting of their moods, and so don't try to change them …

More astute teachers and Early Years practitioners will be only too well aware of when their pupils present with the second of these styles and become 'engulfed' by emotions that they do not understand but that reflect the disappointment they observe in others, and especially, the key adults in their lives. Readers may wish to reflect upon how some parents of children with dyslexia find their children swamped by feelings of failure typically characterised by avoiding doing homework, a reluctance to read, frustration and upset when faced with weekly spelling tests, and so on. When children come to *accept* their condition (the third distinctive style referred to above), then, it can be suggested, that they have gone a long way in internalising a negative self-image of themselves as failing learners.

In *An Intelligent Look at Emotional Intelligence* (2005, p. 6) commissioned by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), Professor Guy Claxton offered the following:

In school, young people's emotions are much more present in classrooms – and playgrounds – than they used to be. For example:

- With what sociologists call the 'decline of deference' (and what teachers simply label as 'bad behaviour'), pupils and students bring more of their complicated emotional selves into the classroom with them.

- Living with the consequences of 'inclusion', teachers are sometimes faced with challenging behaviour and displays of strong emotion that they struggle to know how to deal with.

Claxton (ATL, 2005, p. 9) went on to propose that *emotional intelligence* differs from more traditional perceptions of intelligence in two critical ways. First, *emotional intelligence*:

… values different ways of being bright. It asserts that understanding someone else's point of view, or knowing how to deal with stress, are forms of intelligence, just as useful – indeed, quite possibly more so – than being able to solve logical brainteasers fast under pressure.

Secondly, unlike popular notions that hold that intelligence is being fixed in some way, for example, with the notion of Intelligence Quotients (IQs), emotional intelligence:

> … focuses on the extent to which emotional competence can be developed. Whereas a child of 'low (intellectual) ability' tends to be seen as a prisoner of their genes, Emotional Intelligence is of interest to so many teachers because they believe they can do something to help.

This second point is an important one and directs us to seeing why the concept of *emotional intelligence* or *emotional literacy* has gained in popularity amongst Early Years practitioners and teachers not just in the UK, but across the globe. In developing the concept of *emotional intelligence* and shifting from the more traditionally held view of intelligence as something that we are born with, Early Years practitioners and teachers are increasingly recognising that what they do with children, and the way in which they do it, can have a significant impact upon the way in which children think. More particularly, this process offers teachers and Early Years practitioners the means by which they can observe and interpret more fully the ways in which children think rationally, and effectively interact with their environments and with those around them, which is really the basis of intellectual functioning (Wechsler, 1944, quoted in MacBlain, 2014, p. 137). It also draws particular attention to the challenges facing Early Years practitioners and teachers when creating effective learning environments where children feel supported in aiming high and achieving their potential, which is a far stretch from acquiring skills and developing abilities to simply allow them to 'get by' in life.

Claxton also drew attention to the importance of using some form of measurement when discussing *emotional intelligence* so that the term has greater credibility, as has been the case, for example, with the concept of Intelligence Quotient. This is important, for when we talk about 'dyslexic' children having difficulties with emotional intelligence we need to be very clear about what we are saying and implying or others may reject our judgements out of hand. Claxton proposes two ways in which this might be achieved: first, self-reporting by individuals where they might, for example, use questionnaires and interviews; and secondly, what Claxton refers to as 'performance measures' where individuals might be invited to engage in completing particular tasks, with the degree to which they are successful being observed. Claxton has drawn upon the example of one particular attempt at doing this, which was undertaken by the Israeli psychologist Reuven Bar-On who developed the 'Emotional Quotient

Inventory' (EQ-I). In creating self-report measures, which Claxton suggests are more cost effective, Claxton (ATL, 2005, p11) has commented as follows:

> The EQ-I divides Emotional Intelligence into five components, each assessed by a different sub-scale. Drawing on Howard Gardner's terminology, Bar-On calls these *intrapersonal intelligence* (which contains self-awareness, self-esteem and assertiveness); *interpersonal intelligence* (empathy, social responsibility and social awareness); *adaptability* (problem-solving, reality testing and flexibility); *stress management* (stress tolerance and impulse control); and *general mood* (happiness and optimism). Respondents indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with a range of statements designed to tap these qualities, and the replies are statistically aggregated into scores and sub-scores in the normal psychometric ways.

It almost goes without saying that a number of those components identified by Bar-On present difficulties when it comes to defining them and agreeing on definitions, and they are even more difficult to accurately observe and record. How, for example, do we define *happiness* and what do we actually mean by the term *optimism*? Does *flexibility* mean the same to everyone and to what extent does *flexibility* depend upon the situation and the individuals involved?

Developing emotional intelligence

Recently, Hartas (2006, p. 16) commented in regard to pre-school children who were very able as follows:

> … it is not easy to determine whether limited concentration is related to dyslexia or giftedness … they need reassurance and the time and space to talk about their feelings. In the context of circle time and peer-mediated activities … gifted young children with dyslexia are encouraged to display social and emotional intelligence by taking others' perspective and inferring about their thoughts and emotional states and showing good leadership qualities and good language and communication skills.

Here, Hartas is raising some very important issues in regard to how the needs of more able children can be difficult to determine and how they

require carefully managed changes in their environment in order for them to develop and realise their potential. Now let us look at the case of Lauren, who, prior to starting school at the age of 5 years, was considered by those around her to be 'very advanced' and 'very bright'.

> ### 🖻 Example
>
> Lauren is 10 years of age and has just begun a new academic year. Though she has never refused to attend school she readily admits to feeling very unhappy when at school. This was not always the case and when she was younger she was always keen to tell everyone and especially her grandparents how much she enjoyed school. Lauren attends the local school, which is set in an affluent area. The other pupils in her class come from homes where incomes are high and where parents have high expectations for them. Though she started school in a very positive manner and was viewed by her teacher at the time as being very advanced in drawing and speaking, she has always struggled to read and spell and now, years later, tells everyone that she 'hates' reading and that her 'worst' lessons are when she has to 'do writing'.

It is clear from Lauren's experiences at school that, like Michael in the earlier example, she has poorly developed emotional intelligence and that this is an important factor in her lack of progress in literacy and general development. With the agreement of her head teacher, Lauren's class teacher arranged for the school's educational psychologist to offer one afternoon when all staff can improve their understanding of the type of emotional difficulties that children with dyslexia can experience. The class teacher also arranged to meet with Lauren's mother and the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) to agree a number of interventions. These include the following:

- Lauren's new class teacher will set aside two half-hour sessions each week with her Teaching Assistant over the next month when they can both talk with Lauren about the worries she has in regard to her problems with literacy and numeracy.
- The class teacher will introduce Lauren to a number of new strategies and model these to her Teaching Assistant who can then continue working with Lauren after the two months have passed. During her weekly sessions the class teacher will help Lauren to focus on her

strengths, for example, Lauren is very good at art and especially draw-ing. She will also focus on helping Lauren understand that whilst she struggles with reading, spelling and writing, this is not due to a lack of intellectual ability but because of the way she learns, emphasising to Lauren that everyone learns differently.

- Lauren's mother agrees to give some dedicated time each night to reading a book with Lauren when she goes to bed, with particular attention being given to talking with Lauren about aspects of the story (literal comprehension) and encouraging Lauren to reflect, for example, upon how the story could be different, how the characters in the story could behave differently, what elements she, herself, might add to the story if she were reading it, and so on (inferential comprehension).

Whilst Lauren is now engaging in a programme of work that will support her in making progress, it is worth considering her experiences when she was in her early years. It is also worth considering how other children manage through their primary years to cope with feelings of failure. We now turn to what has increasingly become recognised as a key factor in children's social, emotional and academic progress: *self-efficacy*.

Self-efficacy and its relevance

It should be recognised from the outset that children who struggle with literacy, can also present with a variety of personality factors as well as shades of emotional well-being. Some may, for example, present as being quite extrovert and socially skilled. Some may even present as confident and articulate. For the majority of poor readers this is not, however, the case and many of these children can be observed within schools to be inhibited and self-effacing, introverted and lacking in self-confidence. They may also, for example, internalise feelings of unworthiness and even guilt. They will, typically, be disturbed by their own lack of progress as they perceive those around them making substantial strides with all aspects of literacy, which present significant challenges for them.

These children are highly sensitive to the reactions of those around them, especially their peers, and can become very sensitive to any type of criticism levelled at them by classmates and teachers. Their interpretations of how others see them are especially important and typically more pro-nounced than in other children, for they are faced daily with the prospect of attempting tasks in front of their peers that will cause them significant

challenges and that typically result in relatively poor outcomes, little praise and sense of achievement, and even downright failure, which they perceive to be inescapable.

Drawing upon the findings of an experimental study of college students undertaken some decades ago by Covington and Omelich (1981), Howe (1999, p. 121) summarised their results as follows:

> What happens to a child at school who encounters failure after failure … failure led to the participants having lower estimates of their ability, and in turn they became less happy, more shameful and less confident of future success. With the accumulation of further failures they became increasingly distressed, they experienced feelings of hopelessness and they became anxious to attribute their failure to external factors if it was at all possible to do so. When other strategies for maintaining self-esteem in the face of failure were no longer effective, signs of inaction and hopelessness became common.

Howe goes on to speculate how the effects of failure experienced by older college students would be much 'more devastating' on younger children.

Some decades ago Bandura (1977, 1997) introduced us to the concept of 'self-efficacy', which he saw as the belief that children had in their own abilities to do well and to exercise control over their actions in order to realise success. Bandura viewed self-efficacy as directly allied to how children think and behave, and perhaps most importantly, their emotional state. Children with weak self-efficacy may, for example, tend towards avoiding tasks that represent a challenge to them and may prefer, instead, to direct their thinking towards negative factors. They may frame their thinking in such a way as to gradually convince themselves that they are unable to achieve success. Typically, children who have weak self-efficacy may present themselves to others as having poor self-confidence. Directly related to children's capacity to achieve success are those feelings they have internalised about themselves as well as others, and the manner in which they construct their understanding of the world around them and of which they are a dialectical part.

Bandura identified four key psychological processes, which he claimed are directly influenced by the self-efficacy beliefs that individuals hold, namely, cognitive, motivational, affective and selection (Hayes, 1994, p. 477). With the first of these, the type of thinking that individuals engage in is seen as central to the way in which they behave and how their thinking alters and drives their behaviour patterns. When children, for example, are faced with a problem they will reflect upon the problem and how skilful or adept they might be in terms of solving it. In this way their

thinking comes to define their chosen behaviour and actions. They may think they are unable to attempt the problem and not engage with it or they may think they can attempt it and gain some if not complete success.

With the second process, motivational, children may be very motivated to put in lots of effort to solving the problem and stick at it or they may lack motivation and give up all too readily. The third process, affective, refers to levels of anxiety and stress experienced, for example, by children when they might be faced with attempting or completing a task that may prove challenging. The final process, selection, refers to how children, for example, might or might not choose to attempt a task that is challenging. It is likely that children will attempt tasks that, whilst challenging, will be within their capability. This would suggest, as Bandura himself indicated, that when children's self-efficacy is high then they will be more likely to attempt tasks that present significant challenges. With children with dyslexia, therefore, it can be hypothesised that they will be more likely to attempt tasks such as written examinations if they have high self-efficacy. On the other hand, if they have low self-efficacy then they will be less likely and may give up too readily, thus reducing their rate of success.

Those children who experience significant struggles with literacy will attempt to understand their sense of failure in different ways. They may try to hide their difficulties from others by, for example, not volunteering to take part in particular activities, remaining detached from what is happening around them when literacy is involved, and even turning themselves into submissive and overly quiet participants. Others may present as aggressive and defiant. In very extreme cases, some children may even unwittingly adopt facial mannerisms such as ticks and nods with associated behaviours such as biting their nails excessively and even stuttering when asked questions.
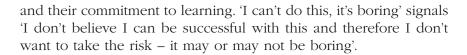
Given the task of identifying personal learning goals, children with weak self-efficacy will typically perform less well than those with strong self-efficacy. They may, for example, demonstrate little interest in attempting and then completing tasks. They may also demonstrate little commitment when asked to work collaboratively with their peers. They may even demonstrate significant levels of anxiety when directed to participate in problem-based learning tasks with other students. Colverd and Hodgkin (2011, p. 36) have stressed how such children, when placed in certain learning situations, may:

> ... place limits on what they think is possible, believing a task is beyond their capability. Lack of self-belief affects their motivation

and their commitment to learning. 'I can't do this, it's boring' signals 'I don't believe I can be successful with this and therefore I don't want to take the risk – it may or may not be boring'.

Bandura proposed that a key factor in improving self-efficacy was the development of a sense of 'mastery' through experiences. Examples of this might be: observing other children succeeding at particular tasks; receiving affirming comments from significant others, such as teachers, parents and fellow students; and comprehending their own feelings and emotions. It goes without saying that developing one's self-efficacy is an important and integral part of the learning experiences of children, and especially in their early years. The implications for teachers and Early Years practitioners, therefore, in developing and strengthening self-efficacy in children are clear. Despite the obvious gains in developing self-efficacy, it can be argued that in the case of too many children with dyslexia and developmental literacy difficulties, opportunities to do so remain few and far between.

It has been recognised for decades (Harris and Sipay, 1990, p. 366) that children who are disabled in aspects of reading can be rejected not only by their peers but also by their teachers, and are frequently reported as having inferior status within their schools. Whilst Harris and Sipay recognised that inferior status may also be due to other factors such as socioeconomic status, they also emphasised that this is an important element in considering the effects of poor literacy skills. They went on to comment as follows:

> Children under the age of 7 or 8 are less likely than older students to conclude that they are low in ability and to decrease their efforts as a result of failure. After the age of 10, failure is much more likely to have seriously debilitating effects on performance … Students with low self-concepts are more likely to attribute failures to lack of ability and to explain their successes as being caused by external factors. Both attributions could lead to lowered motivation … (1990, p. 367)

☐ Summary

This chapter explored the nature of emotional intelligence and its importance and relevance to children experiencing difficulties with the acquisition of literacy. Consideration was also given to how emotional intelligence can be developed and how better emotional intelligence

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can impact positively upon children with dyslexia and developmental literacy difficulties. The following chapter will now focus on child-centred approaches to identification and assessment.

📖 **Recommended reading**

Colverd, S. and Hodgkin, B. (2011) *Developing Emotional Intelligence in the Primary School.* London: Routledge.
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