

# Drama, Performance Ethnography, and Self-Esteem: Listening to Youngsters With Dyslexia and Their Parents

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## Abstract

Self-esteem affects learning, performance, self-worth, and quality of life, particularly in persons with dyslexia, or rather how students with dyslexia are mis/understood and supported. Dyslexia does not only affect literacy but also affects emotional well-being. Webb concludes that for children to feel successful, they need to become aware of their unique learning strengths to apply them effectively to strengthen weaknesses. Drama and Performance Ethnography (PE) can be support strategies. Workshops were carried out with a group of adolescent youngsters with dyslexia. The aim was to provide a safe environment where they could find their voice and gain self-confidence through drama and PE to provide opportunities to address self-esteem and to provide insights for policies and practice. This article intends to listen to these youngsters', also co-authors, and their parents' narratives of this experience.

## Keywords

dyslexia, drama, Performance Ethnography, self-esteem, self-confidence

The messages given to students with dyslexia, due to a lack of understanding of their abilities and needs, may be negative and need to be offset with positive messages (Burden, 2008; Burden & Burdett, 2005, 2007; Humphrey, 2002, 2003). Research findings and a series of events inspired us to create a series of workshops and performances for youngsters with dyslexia. This research intended to explore the effects of drama and PE on these 12 youngsters as perceived by themselves and their parents, in the context of a highly academic and competitive Maltese educational system. The aims of this research project were to (a) provide a safe environment where participants with dyslexia could find their voice and gain confidence in their abilities, talents, and challenges (Burden & Burdett, 2005); (b) provide the opportunity for participants to, through drama and PE, address self-esteem as this affects their quality of life and effective living in the community (Eaden & BDA, 2005); (c) compile qualitative evidence-based research to explore the meaningfulness of such experiences on students with dyslexia as, through drama, children can provide themselves and audiences with greater insight into possibilities and challenges (Burden & Burdett, 2007; Eaden & BDA, 2005); (d) in a context where Burden (2008) notes a lacuna of research in this area, create public debate to affect policies and practices; (e) give audiences the opportunity to see students with

dyslexia in a different setting (Davis & Braun, 2010; West, 1997); (f) to raise awareness that the Maltese National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012) tends to marginalize the creative aspect in learners, and that these experiences can be used to promote this concept (Birdwell, Grist, & Margo, 2011; Robinson, 2001).

This research project was inspired by a performance held in February 2009 to launch an autobiography (Scurfield, 2008). One of the authors of this article, Falzon, attended this book launch and witnessed such a powerful message from the author - Matthew Scurfield, who was also the main actor in the performance, that she invited him to repeat the performance. Following five runs of this performance for an audience of more than 1,000, the idea of drama workshops to address self-esteem for youngsters with dyslexia arose. Matthew was one of the three leaders for these workshops and eventually one of the co-researchers.

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We wanted to give the opportunity to 12- to 15-year-old youngsters with a profile of dyslexia to have a better understanding of themselves, their coping mechanisms with their environment and culture, and their potential and creativity through self-expression, as well as empowerment through the processing of feelings and experiences (Falzon & Muscat, 2009) to be more self-aware of their profile of abilities and challenges (Matthews, 2006; Steiner, 1997). Performances (held in October 2011 and July 2012) were intended to promote the importance of self-confidence, self-expression, self-esteem in children's education and development, particularly for children with dyslexia.

## The Terminology

Self-esteem refers to a sense of personal self-worth - the sense of one's own value as a person - and abilities that are fundamental to the development and maintenance of one's identity, whereas self-confidence is the belief in one's ability to succeed. These develop in oneself as one relates to and receives feedback from one's environment and also affect self-concept. In turn, self-concept is a system of beliefs in oneself, which, in themselves, follow "similar patterns and trajectories" (Cole et al., 2001, p. 2). A person's self-concept is therefore affected by self-esteem and self-confidence, as these develop during childhood (Harter, 1996; Stone & May, 2002). A profile of dyslexia refers to a

language processing disorder [which] can hinder reading, writing, spelling and sometimes even speaking. Dyslexia is not a sign of poor intelligence or laziness. It is also not the result of impaired vision [or hearing]. Children and adults with dyslexia .... process and interpret information differently. (National Center for Learning Disabilities, n.d., para.1)

## Self-Esteem, Self-Concept, and Profiles of Dyslexia

Self-esteem affects learning and performance, and outcomes of learning and performance affect self-esteem (Lawrence, 1996). A profile of dyslexia, or rather how students with dyslexia are supported or not supported at school and in general, may affect the learning, performance, self-worth, and quality of life of students with such a profile (Humphrey, 2002, 2003). In some cases, the feeling of low self-esteem can be so severe that suicide or revenge is seen as the last and only option (Riley & Rustique-Forrester, 2002).

Self-esteem is influenced by what is valued within society and culture. Persons with dyslexia tend to see themselves as less competent academically due to these societal demands - the emphasis placed on literacy to access learning, given that literacy is for them a challenge (Burden, 2005). Consequently, students with dyslexia tend to perceive school as a negative experience (Burden, 2005). In his meta-analysis on dyslexia and self-worth, Burden (2008) concludes that

"in a society such as ours, where literacy is a highly valued skill or commodity, a perceived inability to acquire that skill is highly likely to have a negative effect upon any individual's conception of themselves as competent" (pp. 188-189). Furthermore, Glazzard (2010) concludes that such students tend to get mixed feelings from their school experience. Most of these feelings arise when students with dyslexia compare themselves with their peers. They see that they struggle more to comprehend teachers and to express themselves. Most of the time, although these students work as hard as they can, they still feel a step behind their class mates, resulting in feelings of "giving up" (Riddick, Sterling, Farmer, & Morgan, 1999). Older children start questioning their ability to comprehend academic material, losing motivation as a consequence (Palombo, 2001; Riley & Rustique-Forrester, 2002). Riley and Rustique-Forrester (2002) note that students with dyslexia in their study found school a profoundly sad and depressing experience, emphasized by shouting and retributions: "isolated children and shouting teachers. A recurring image is of school as a prison from which children continually try to escape . . . small voices crying for help, caught in a cycle of circumstances they felt largely unable to influence" (p. 33). Burden (2008) indicates that, although there are enough research findings to conclude that self-esteem is affected by literary failure and challenges, findings "tell[s] us very little about why particular individuals or groups feel the way they do about a particular field of endeavour" (p. 193).

Dyslexia does not only affect the academic component of learning - literacy - but also affects emotional well-being (e.g., Batshaw, 1997; Connor, 1994; Gross, 1997; Humphrey, 2003; Humphrey & Mullins, 2002a, 2002b; National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1990). Webb (1992) indicates that for children to feel successful, they need to become aware of their unique learning strengths, so that they may apply them effectively while working to strengthen the lagging areas.

Humphrey and Mullins (2002a) conclude that children with dyslexia attribute success to external factors rather than internal ones. Some perceive the source of the problem outside of them, whereas others perceive their profile and experiences as an implication of their limitations (Scott, 2004). Burden (2005) notes that when children with dyslexia were asked to visualize their dyslexia, most used metaphors representing obstacles or barriers interfering with the learning process. Humphrey and Mullins (2002a) explain that students with dyslexia in their study did not feel in control of their successes when it came to learning because of their profile. Burden (2005), in the context of Ajzen's (2005) theory of planned behavior, which explores the control one has over oneself against being driven by an external force, notes that what might restrict students with dyslexia from raising their academic self-esteem is (a) lack of intention and determination to overcome their difficulties, (b) the lack of belief that their future success lies in their own hands, and (c) the kind

of learning environment in which others with a similar set of goals work together to help each other succeed.

Glazzard (2010) notes that many students with dyslexia feel isolated: “[I] thought there was only me in the classroom that was struggling and finding it really hard” (p. 65, Student no. 9). Zeleke (2004) and Gerber et al. (1990) note that students with dyslexia distinguish themselves from their peers, and this affects their academic self-concept. Humphrey and Mullins (2002b) describe how students with dyslexia are often ridiculed by peers when they try to give explanations about their learning difficulties and their need for help. When learning disabilities (LD) are mistaken for stupidity, students with dyslexia develop a negative self-esteem due to experiences encountered, especially at school (Burden, 2008).

The very anxiety experienced leads to heightened self-awareness and self-consciousness, in turn increasing clumsiness, errors, and anxiety levels (Rome, 1970). Scott (2004) finds better experiences, performance, and behavior when there is less self-consciousness. Furthermore, although persons with dyslexia experience a great deal of anxiety and frustration at school, they may not have the means to express themselves in the school environment and many end up misbehaving or becoming the class clown (Bender, 2001; Riley & Rustique-Forrester, 2002). Scott (2004) concludes that misbehavior becomes a way of getting recognition from peers.

Bandura (1997) describes that when appropriate support is not offered, students with LD tend to discourage themselves further, and when support is given, they feel encouraged (Burden, 2008). Once they admit and accept their profile (Burden, 2008; Falzon & Camilleri, 2010), they learn how to overcome their difficulties and manage to cope, seeing positive results and adequate achievement, thus increasing their self-esteem. Falzon and Camilleri (2010) note that Maltese school counselors express that once students with dyslexia accept their dyslexia and become more confident, they elicit their potential more and feel better. Braden (1997) notes that for improvement to occur, the person must achieve. Research findings prove a correlation between literacy interventions and emotional adjustment, where effective literacy intervention is likely to result in optimistic emotional adjustment (Burden, 2005; Connor, 1994).

Research findings indicate that academic self-concept, self-concept, self-worth, and self-esteem may be improved, especially if effective coping strategies are implemented. Scott (2004) finds that, in most research studies, most coping strategies suggested are based on social support and encouragement, effort, parental modeling, and using the adversity as a tool to feel stronger and more in control. The decision of accepting dyslexia is up to the child, yet society can be of help to facilitate this process (Burden & Burdett, 2005; Falzon & Camilleri, 2010; Scott, 2004). Adults with dyslexia who manage to accept and overcome their challenges manage to build effective coping strategies that come handy in work settings and gain emotional recompense in adulthood

(Everatt, Steffert, & Smythe, 1999; Fitzgibbon & O’Connor, 2002; McNulty, 2003; Taylor & Walter, 2003). Some view their issue with dyslexia as a learning difference, helping them accept their individuality more easily. McNulty (2003) notes that there is a tendency that those who accept their dyslexia manage to nurture their self-esteem as they grow older. Furthermore, parents with dyslexia who have children with this profile revise their self-concept while helping their children adapt.

Gross (1997) concludes that frustration and failure are experiences in learning activities that lead to feelings of disappointment and a lowered sense of self-worth, especially in academic environments. Humphrey and Mullins (2002a) note that students with dyslexia experience significant challenges and difficulties with regard to self-esteem and self-perception. It is possible to address these with a more respectful inclusive curriculum and pedagogy and through the use of drama (Eaden & BDA, 2005; McNulty, 2003).

### *Drama and Self-Esteem*

Martin (2004) reports positive effects of drama on children in several studies carried out in the United Kingdom. and Roche (1996a, 1996b) suggest that it is important that performing arts become an effective tool for understanding, monitoring, and maintaining or enhancing self-concept in specific domains in education. The different activities involved in drama offer the opportunity for students to become more in touch with themselves, thus becoming more aware of who they are and of their feelings. Being in touch with one’s reality is the first step toward building one’s self-esteem and self-concept (Braden, 1997).

Social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills are especially promoted in socio-dramatic play (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Smilansky (1968) insists that socio-dramatic plays need to include imitative role-play, make-believe objects, make-believe actions and situations, interactivity, verbal communication, and persistence. Socio-dramatic play provides situations of controversy and hot discussions that in most cases lead to conflict.

Using improvisation, children must think for themselves, be creative, and improvise (Noble, Egan, & McDowell, 1977). The enhanced creative skills can be useful during everyday conversations. Greene (1971) notes that creativity skills are sometimes taken for granted, but it takes commitment and hard work to gain mastery over them. Improvisation also helps children become more expressive and use less the dimensions of pretence, formality, or shyness (Buss, & Briggs, 1984; Goffman, 1959). Smilansky (1968) notes that the skill of fantasizing scenery and acting impulsively to it as if it were real life is very helpful for full personality development. Thus, socio-dramatic play also helps in understanding, expressing, and processing emotions (Dayton, 1990).

Socio-dramatic play promotes cooperation skills and teamwork. Participants must work together and, as a group,

feel that they own the play. If the end product is good, participants are rewarded through a strong sense of achievement. Smilansky (1968) concludes that persons participating in socio-dramatic play experience increased creativity, heightened concentration, more abstract thought encoded in language, greater flexibility and empathy toward others, improved imitation of models, and enhanced self-awareness and self-control. Through these invented situations, participants can live new experiences with opportunities for development. Thus, socio-dramatic play becomes a “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978) and a vehicle for emotional literacy to develop. As Tew (2008) notes, effective and well-facilitated groupwork needs to be at the heart of all emotional literacy curricula. Erikson (1940) also proposes that socio-dramatic play - imaginative play - can be a tool to increase the child’s sense of mastery over what is unknown, such as unfamiliar roles and relationships, thus reducing anxiety. Mead (1934) further argues that the characteristics used during social interaction become part of the individual identity - experiences in socio-dramatic play provide the cognitive system with new patterns of interaction that in turn control behavior.

Kennedy (1990) notes that adolescents in his study felt proud and successful after interpreting their unique role in front of the school. Such experiences help develop speaking and listening skills and further support and help develop self-concept and self-esteem. Kennedy concludes that such drama activities include a cognitive academic component and an affective, social component. This provides great opportunities for children to experience a variety of emotions and learn to deal with them. Pradier (1990) adds that the live performance itself involves a simulation of everyday behavior, using the biological component, making the simulation a physical experience. Whether drama is really effective needs to be addressed taking into consideration theories that distinguish domain specific self-esteem from the global self-esteem. Drama self-concept in relation to drama leads to domain specific self-esteem, and one queries whether this also affects global self-esteem. Marsh (1990) finds that the self-concept in main school subjects is more highly correlated with general school self-concept and self-esteem than the self-concept in non-core subjects such as drama, art, music, and physical education. One reason behind this may be that in schools, the non-core subjects are given less credit (Turner et al., 2004).

The basic goals of drama are to encourage creativity and independent thinking, provide opportunities for social cooperation, develop empathy and understanding the self, allow for controlled emotional releases, and develop clear expression of ideas (e.g., Arts Council England, 2003; Department of Education and Science, 1989; Department for Education and Skills, n.d.; Dickinson, Neelands, & Shenton Primary School, 2006; Somers, 1996). Such opportunities in the school setting may be limited due to the great focus given to academics (Birdwell et al., 2011). During drama sessions, a

trusting environment is ensured enabling students to feel at ease (Crimmens, 2006; Eadon, 2005; Turner et al., 2004).

Eadon (2005) points out different factors that might help students with dyslexia bring out their potential during drama. In a drama setting, teachers promote self-discipline but do not interfere too much to let imagination and creativity lead, resulting in more freedom for self-expression (Eadon, 2005). Students with dyslexia can strongly benefit from this because many have strong visual skills and creativity (Davis & Braun, 2010). Story-drama allows room for peers to interact and work alongside each other to achieve a goal (Crimmens, 2006). Turner et al. (2004) conclude that students like the flexible, inclusive, and not-so-ruled approach. Children with LD benefit from the active plots as they are allowed to freely express themselves in safe surroundings (Scott, 2004). Furthermore, group games such as mirroring, trust exercises, freeze frame, still pictures, and tableaux help establish this safe environment and trust, awake minds and bodies, help develop physical coordination and memory, and encourage confidence in speaking up and the ability to think as much as they can (Turner et al., 2004). Most students with dyslexia have high creative skills (West, 1997), and drama has a range of possible activities in which the students can take part (Crimmens, 2006).

The activity in which dyslexic students might struggle the most is when they have to work from a set script. This is because they would be more focused on reading and understanding it rather than the performance itself (Eadon, 2005). Eadon (2005) suggests that one way of working through this is to verbally introduce the new script by summarizing the whole plot and then reading through all of it with the group, as well as using dyslexia-friendly measures to access the printed text. In their study, Turner et al. (2004) find that children learn very complicated texts and concepts unconsciously while working with mini scenes of various plays. When considering other factors of drama, persons with dyslexia tend to excel in oral skills, mimicry, timing, and long-term memory for lines and movement. They also tend to be very aware of the environment and thus are highly intuitive and perceptive, very good at relating movement to speech, and very keen in observation skills (Dyslexia Scotland, 2007).

Research results on the effects of drama on the self-esteem of children with dyslexia are very scarce. The research findings available conclude that the main factor that limits students from embracing their full potential is lack of self-esteem and confidence (Eadon, 2005). Artists working with such students do their best to maximize hope, confidence, and encouragement for success so that failure that contributes to low self-esteem, and vice versa, can be avoided (Eadon, 2005). For example, when persons feel tense due to lack of self-confidence, there is a tendency to “hunch up,” bending forward with head down. In drama, the person is made aware of when this happens. Participants are shown the correct upright posture, which also helps in efficient and appropriate



breathing. This technique helps gain self-control, thus leading to improved self-confidence (Eadon, 2005).

Drama also leaves room for reflective learning. This is based on exploring the conditions (the situation) that lead to particular thinking influencing the behavior (Eadon, 2005). For instance, in drama, children are taught different ways of saying a word. Then they explore the different reactions to the tonality, emphasis, and pitch used. However, to be good at reflective learning, through the use of storytelling, participants are also made aware of the importance of listening skills through powerful themes such as jealousy, rivalry, revenge, and reconciliation to encourage children to talk about their own feelings and emotions (Turner et al., 2004).

Eadon (2005) notes that children perceive drama as helping them gain self-confidence, coordination, and social skills. In drama, they do not experience the frustration felt in class because they can express their abilities more freely and in a “safer” non-judgmental environment (Turner et al., 2004). Children are able to express themselves more through facial expressions and became less shy; whereas with their teammates, they may learn to accept others’ mistakes and develop their communication skills, concentration, enthusiasm, cooperation, dedication, responsibility, ability not to lose control, and even literacy skills. Some learn that they are skilful at looking after each other. The main gains, however, are drama literacy and self-confidence.

A Maltese study (Debono, 2011) exploring whether persons with dyslexia who have experienced drama managed to improve their self-esteem concludes that being artistic was not just about being creative:

but a wholesome activity in which they truly committed themselves and revealed who they were. The group work offered in drama was seen as a great opportunity to reveal to peers their creativity . . . [D]rama [which] helped them gain self-confidence . . . [and] become more confident . . . When comparing the effects of drama and the self-concept . . . it was noted that drama had a long-term effect and helped the core of self-confidence which led to improvement in other areas . . . more limited to a domain specific self-esteem. Thus a broader perspective of drama and its therapeutic aspects emerged as part of the results. (Debono, 2011, pp. 45-46)

### *Experiencing the Research Process-The Conceptual Framework of the Method*

Socio-dramatic drama is then taken a step further in Performance Ethnography (PE). Pelias (2007) explains that PE takes as its working premise that a theatrical representation of what one discovers through participant-observation fieldwork provides a vibrant and textured rendering of cultural others. Performance for the performance ethnographer is typically understood as an aesthetic act within a theatrical tradition. In Western cultures, this artistic endeavor calls on actors through their use of presentational skills to evoke others for the consideration of audiences.

Pelias cautions that one should not confuse PE with the ethnography of performance which in turn “examines cultural performances as objects of investigation” (p. 3391). Pelias (2007) defines PE as relying on the “embodiment of cultural others” (p. 3391) and is therefore a method of inquiry that enshrines the body as a “site of knowing” akin to other standard ethnographic practices where performance ethnographers use the same ethnographic methodological strategies: qualitative research design. This is used to explore cultural phenomena that reflect the knowledge and system of meanings of a cultural group, attempting to explore the social, behavioral, and linguistic patterns of a chosen cultural group (Hays & Wood, 2011) and trying to understand “social action . . . within a discrete location . . . from first-hand experience” (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p. 17). The difference is the mode of representation - performance - supported by written reflection.

Ethnography allows for understanding the meaning subjects give to their experiences (Chang, 2008) and how “motivated actions arise from and reflect back on these experiences” (Brewer, 2000, p. 11). This also allows readers to empathize, learn, and be sensitized to the specific cultural group (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Michelson, 2011; Tillmann, 2009), also giving space for minority groups to narrate the otherwise untold stories (Smith, 2005). In the case of this research, autoethnography was also utilized because youngsters and one of the adult authors of this research (Matthew Scurfield) were not only involved but also had a profile of dyslexia. Personal experiences were given a voice through Matthew and the youngsters for better sociological understanding (Ellis, 2009; Ellis et al., 2011; Wall, 2006, 2008), and then also validated through the parents’ voices. In a context where Ellis (2009) describes ethnography as “unruly, dangerous, passionate, vulnerable, rebellious, creative-in motion, showing struggle, passion, embodied life, and collaborative creation of sense-making” (p. 360), we feel privileged to form part of this process. Ellis (2009) comments on Chang’s (2008) work and notes that stories presented are “evocative, dramatic, engaging . . . concrete [with] . . . layered details . . . [and] heart-breaking” (p. 360) and engage the readers aesthetically, emotionally, politically, and also ethically (Tillmann, 2009). Our aim was to give these 12 youngsters and their parents the space and the opportunity to contribute with a narrative that is untainted, reflexive, emotional, and real (Denshire, 2006; Speedy, 2008), where we were aware that, as Winterson (2004) poetically expresses, “the stories . . . will light up part of [our lives] and leave the rest in darkness. [We] don’t need to know everything. There is no everything” (p. 134).

Performance ethnographers do not reflect the experience of others based on observations or participation but strive to represent cultural findings based on experiences through the enactment of cultural others. Pelias (2007) notes that “By doing so, they believe they add flesh to the dry bones of traditional ethnography” (p. 3391). In the context of this

research, we created a model where the drama experience and performance autoethnography were blended together for the experience to be both enriching and empowering, as well as a research process in itself.

### *Logistics of the Project*

A series of workshops building toward an end production to celebrate the 2011 International Dyslexia Week (November 2011) were planned. The aim of these workshops was to create a safe environment of trust so the young participants with dyslexia could find their voice through a creative medium. These workshops were facilitated by director Lena Scurfield, Matthew Scurfield, and Maltese actress Clare Agius. Participants were also supported by group processing sessions to enable and empower them to understand themselves and this experience. These sessions were co-facilitated by qualified counsellor and co-author Mifsud, and by co-author, personal and social development trainer, and project coordinator Falzon. Following the November 2011 performance, workshops continued in preparation of another presentation (July 2012) during a summer school for university students and professionals organized by the Department of Counselling of the University of Malta, where the 12 youngsters' and the professionals' experiences were used to present the effects of performance autoethnography through audio-video clips of the children's experiences and their participation in an interactive session with the audience.

### *Participants*

During the third week of May 2011, an e-mail was sent to members of the Malta Dyslexia Association explaining the project. The target audience were youngsters aged between 12 and 15 years with a profile of dyslexia. A first-come-first-served basis was used. Relevant information letters and consent forms were then sent to parents and youngsters, indicating also that this was a research project, and the project started during the first week of July 2011. As the project developed, the 12 youngsters began expressing the wish for their names not to be changed in the research. This led to challenging reflections and research by the adult members of this project, particularly within the concept of emancipatory research and Speedy's (2011) work on collective biographies. Oliver (1992) explains that trust, respect, participation, and reciprocity should underpin emancipatory research that focuses on understanding the meaning of individuals' experiences. As Speedy (2011) notes:

We [were] caught between two ways of "capturing" this experience. We [were] stuck between the proliferation of strategy documents, generalizations . . . and statistics . . . and the "real-life stories" . . . at the other. None of these genres is making

the difference we want it to - our thinking is familiar, unchallenged and well-worn (p. 139).

In this context, and after ensuring consent from the parents and processing their decisions and consequences thereof, it was agreed that the names of the youngsters would not be changed and that they now were effectively co-authors. This decision was processed a number of times with the group to ensure empowered informed decision making (Speedy, 2011).

### *Ethical Considerations*

Wiles, Heath, Crow, and Charles (2005) note that principle-based approaches to ethics in research involve "adherence to moral principles." All ethical considerations as proposed by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2009) - beneficence and non-maleficence, fidelity and responsibility, integrity, justice, respect for rights, and dignity-were taken into account.

### *Data Collection and Presentation*

The project presents the participants and their parents and embraces Speedy's (2008) argument that narrative inquiry and therapeutic work have quite a powerful affinity. Speedy (2008) argues that narrative inquiry should "illustrate and suggest [not] explain and evaluate" (p. 142) and, as in therapeutic work, should evoke surprise and perceive events and experience with a different lens that can act as an agent for change. Similarly, Bochner (1997) believes that stories should "compel . . . [and] touch[ing] readers . . . offering details that linger in the mind" (p. 434). In the context of this research, the presentations of the narratives "are not so much academic as they are existential, reflecting a desire to grasp or seize the possibilities of meaning which is what gives life its imaginative and poetic qualities" (Bochner in Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p. 262). The parents sent e-mails to the project coordinator, whereas the children either sent e-mails or dictated to one of the adult authors or their parents. In spite of being aware of the option to communicate in Maltese, all communications were in English. Bochner (1997) and Speedy (2008) inspired us to present the findings using the co-researchers' own words and transforming them in poetic form, whereas Zeeman, Poggenpoel, Myburgh, and Van Der Linde (2002) enthused us to consider the "the existence of alternative stories on one event, the existence of more than one interpretation of the world and the thought that the self has more than one view" (para. 2). In our attempt to present these narratives, we are both interpreting and allowing the readers to create their own meaning of the youngsters' experiences through the voices of the youngsters and their parents.

## The Parents Reflect

### Stanza 1

I feel a privileged parent

I have witnessed your presentation

My eyes welled up with tears as labels were peeled off<sup>d</sup>

Very moving for me till the very end

Whether one has dyslexia or not,

we are all being labelled, labelled negatively

I have no worries for Mike's future

He will all make it in his own different ways. I am sure

What about those children who were not here?

Those parents in denial?

Those parents who think a problem will go away?

We need more awareness

We need more empowerment

So parents can support and help their children

This hill ahead is long and tough

The academic rewards are great

The non-academic rewards are great

### Stanza 2

My 12-year-old attended

My 12-year-old enjoyed

At first very reluctant

Very secretive about what goes on

Whatever it is, it is working well with him

### Stanza 3

Helping our kids defend themselves

Giving them courage

Bringing back their self esteem

No one at home believes that what I'm doing is right

Yesterday I felt it in every one of the other parents

Continue helping our kids

Please also help us parents

Don't stop the project

I dreamt about our kids making a song about Dyslexia!!!

Each of them sang about their talents and hobbies

### Stanza 4

Valentina has changed

Valentina used to be very shy

Valentina used to be very quiet

The summer workshop came

She opens up

She speaks her ideas in front of strangers

No longer that quiet girl who sits and listens

She has become assertive

She knows when to say NO

She explains the reason for her NO

She looks forward to the workshops

The day at the field - A one-time experience

For me a very good sign

Her friends' experiences disturbed her

Her friends' experiences shocked her

Why do teachers and friends not understand?

Compared, she has been lucky

"You know, Ma, I now know

I know why I used to be very angry

Before going to school

Because I was frightened

She [the language teacher] would tell me to read in class

She knew I did not want to read

She thought she was helping!

'Come on try!'

Then when I made an error

She used to lift her eyebrows."

The joy of seeing her happy

No words can express

She is looking forward to meet her new friends

They accept her as she is

She does not have to prove herself like she has to do at school

These are friends whom she trusts

They showed her that she is loved

They showed her she has abilities

They showed her it is the society that is a failure and not her

We always tell her so

We always show her so

Hearing and seeing it from others

made for her the difference

## Stanza 5

Before he attended the sessions

He was able to dream

Express what he thought

But what about what he dreamt?

But nowadays!

Now I see more POWER in him

He believes in what he dreams

He insists to be heard too

Day by day

Session after session

I began to see

I began to hear

Sentences he had never spoken before

The session is over

He comes home excited

He tells me how he shall be going strong

He won't let anyone stop his dream

He pains for his friend

He does not want to be misunderstood

The strength in his voice

"Mum now I NEED to rest

I'll do my room later but

NOW I need to rest"

And he keeps his word

He does all he needs to do

BUT in his own time

in his own way

As a mother I cry a lot

when I remember

I see people who don't understand

Like most mummies

I am the only one who is behind my son

I cannot explain how frightening it is to feel alone

I cannot explain how frightening it is

that I'm not for eternity

He has to be on his own,

without being understood

These sessions are sure to be remembered

The kids must keep on meeting

These keep our children's inner strength steady

They need you more than they need us

Matthew you understand them most



Lena you give our kids all the attention a “mother” instinct

Clare you taught them to relax and release their tension

The power is created

They know there’s power which they can use

#### Stanza 6

Encounter loads of difficulties

We accept our children’s way of learning

We accept our children’s “life”

Dyslexia-a wild flower

Few admire it for its strength

Few realize how it faces the cold

The rain.

The wind.

The heat

We most appreciate those sensitive and difficult to grow

What about the others out there?

The wild flower survives

The wonderful house plant dies easily

### The Youngsters Share

#### Stanza 7

Meeting Matthew and Clare

Made a big difference in my life.

Through the sessions

I’ve learned what life has to give you

And that no matter things seems,

We MUST never give up. (Gary Lee)

#### Stanza 8

Dyslexia is something to be proud of. (Sasha)

#### Stanza 9

This group helped me not to be shy

to tell others that I am dyslexic. (Dario)

#### Stanza 10

It was a really good experience for me.

I learned not to be shy.

I learned that there are more people who have dyslexia

and I am not afraid to talk about it anymore.

And I made new friends. (Mark)

#### Stanza 11

I know there are many others

Who managed to reach the top

I am asking them to help us

Give us the push we need

Committee please go

Go to our government

Tell them that in other countries

There is so much more help

It seems that I cannot stop

Still have so much to say

You are playing with our lives

This is not a joke!

Give us what we deserve

This would surely not cost much

Do not let this mistake grow

Do not throw our lives away

Why do you drag your feet?

Why do you forget us?

If we were your children

Would you have the heart to throw us away? (Shane, translated  
excerpt from his poem-*Why such a system?*)

#### Stanza 12

The workshop helped me by:

Building my self-esteem.

Made new friends.

I am not the only one.

My feelings

and anger are the same

like those of my friends. (Valentina)

#### Stanza 13

I was shy

Now I am more confident

that there are more dyslexic children like me

and

I know more things about dyslexia. (Liam)

#### Stanza 14

Me entering this group helped me

because I shared my feelings

with people who have

the same difficulties like I do.

It helped me

in my self-confidence.

It also taught me to

never give up in the future. (Leah)

#### Stanza 15

I learn about school

what they don't like and they like.

Like Maths, science, Maltese, arts and religion.

But everyone don't like at school.

So I tell the teachers and tell them what they like.

I don't like religion, me and English literature.

But I like Maths, English language,

science and arts.

I like the group we learn about school

I like it and my brother likes it too. (Luke)

#### Stanza 16

Seeing stuff in different ways.

Dyslexia makes me feel

proud of myself

and not ashamed of it.

Why can't I get

a reader in O-levels? (Kurt)

#### Stanza 17

It's fun and exciting,

Find it difficult to explain what we do

but usually we get to talk about dyslexia

and we discuss how we can make school

a better place for other dyslexic children.

We play games, pretending we are in court

and accuse each other of mistakes

such as spelling and slow writing.

We also pretend to "kill" our teacher

because he does not make it fair on us kids

and does not try to teach us in a way we can learn.

I now know more about dyslexia

I feel I can adapt my brain  
 to remember things for a longer time.  
 I feel that I am not alone in this situation  
 Now that I have met  
 so many other dyslexic children and adults like Matthew  
 I am sure I can reach my dreams.  
 I am more confident now.  
 I can speak up for myself at school  
 when I don't get the help I need.:) (Mike)

### Reflection

The voices of the youngsters and their parents reflect the literature with regard to the positive effects of drama (Eaden & BDA, 2005) (stanza 3, line 3), the therapeutic value of the narrative (Speedy, 2008) (stanza 4, line 5) - the empowerment voicing and sharing of experiences have on individuals (stanza 5, line 6) (e.g., Burden & Burdett, 2007; Eaden & BDA, 2005; Scott, 2004; Turner et al., 2004) - and the benefits of performance autoethnography (Brewer, 2000; Pelias, 2007) (stanza 2, line 5). The youngsters provided a “vibrant and textured rendering of cultural others. . . [and] through the use of presentations skills” (Pelias, 2007, p. 3391) managed to evoke feelings in others (Speedy, 2008) (stanza 1, lines 2-18). The youngsters further allowed us to understand the meaning of their experiences (Brewer, 2000) allowing us to empathize, learn, and be sensitized to their specific experience as evidenced in their and their parents' voices (stanza 3, line 4).

The parents' perception and the youngsters' voices clearly resonate the literature and are a valuable witness for practice and research. As Bandura (1997) and Burden and Burdett (2007) note, when appropriate recognition and support are given, youngsters with dyslexia feel stronger and more able and empowered to overcome their challenges (stanza 10, line 4). The youngsters speak about the experience as empowering and giving them the strength to both accept their profile and themselves, and to be more ready to confront challenges (stanza 4, lines 1-10). This is akin to the positive effect of drama (Martin, 2004) and Erikson's (1940) concept that drama can be a tool to increase a sense of mastery of the unknown leading to a reduction in anxiety. In line with the literature, an increase of self-confidence and self-esteem resonates from the parents and the youngsters (stanza 5, lines 7-8). Four themes can be gleaned from these experiences: self-worth, empowerment, resilience, and need for support from each other.

**Self-worth.** The youngsters perceived school as a negative experience (Burden, 2005) (stanza 1, line 7) and also tended to compare themselves with their peers (Glazzard, 2010) (stanza 11, lines 13-16). During their workshops, they were able to create scenes that were helpful to translate in real-life situations such that they utilized their role-plays in their school life (Dayton, 1990; Smilansky, 1968) and could narrate these experiences in their workshops (stanza 10). These improvisations helped them become more expressive and empowered them to understand their self-worth (stanza 3, lines 1-3; stanza 9). These youngsters echoed Smilansky's (1968) conclusion on the positive effects of socio-dramatic drama with regard to self-worth (stanzas 12 and 14).

**Resilience.** In a context where they were aware that they needed to put in more effort than their peers and that at times they feel like giving up (Riddick et al., 1999) (stanza 4, lines 14-16; stanza 6, line 1), the youngsters felt that the workshops empowered them to feel more motivated to try (Braden, 1997) (stanza 4, line 36) and that they could confront and explain their needs to their teachers (stanza 4, lines 4-7; stanza 13; stanza 15, line 5). This is a very important finding with reference to motivation and insecurity with regard to academic achievement (e.g., Palombo, 2001; Riley & Rustique-Forrester, 2002). Their pride and success when performing in front of each other and others affected their resilience and their determination to cope and succeed (Eaden & BDA, 2005; Kennedy, 1990) (stanza 5, line 40).

**Empowerment.** The workshops also had an effect on the youngsters' locus of control. Humphrey and Mullins (2002a) note that such experiences are an empowering tool to offset attributions of success and failure to external rather than internal factors (stanza 5, line 6; stanza 7). This sits well with Ajzen's (2005) theory of planned behavior and Burden's (2005) concern that lack of intention and determination to overcome challenges is the major obstacle to academic self-esteem (stanza 4, line 7). The youngsters felt empowered by their shared experiences, role-plays, and mutual affirmations (stanza 17, lines 6-10). They felt empowered to take their future in their own hands (Burden, 2005; Burden & Burdett, 2005) (stanza 14). Whereas the decision to accept one's profile of dyslexia is always up to the self, such workshops can help facilitate this process (Burden, 2005; Burden & Burdett, 2005; Humphrey & Mullins, 2002a, 2002b; Scott, 2004) (stanza 1, line 4; stanza 4, lines 37-40).

**Need for support from each other.** Glazzard (2010) reports feelings of isolation in children with dyslexia. This was also expressed by the youngsters. They also felt misunderstood and at times laughed at (Gerber et al., 1990; Humphrey & Mullins, 2002b; Riley & Rustique-Forrester, 2002) (stanza 5, lines 36 to 37). These negative and anxious experiences (Rome, 1970) were shared, role-played, and processed during workshops and support sessions and led to both relief and

resolution (stanza 17, lines 4 to 12). The youngsters were relieved that they found others with similar experiences, and this gave them the power to resolve their anxiety about their profile, to accept their challenges and limitations, and to be able to express themselves with class peers and tutors (stanza 17, line 13). In line with research findings, increased self-worth and self-esteem were referred to (Bandura, 1997; Burden, 2008; Falzon & Camilleri, 2010). This also reinforces Scott's (2004) meta-analysis of research findings that suggests that such social support is a tool to feel stronger and more in control (stanza 3; stanza 5, lines 38-40).

## Research Implications

These findings yield a number of implications for research and practice:

- a. As recommended by the youngsters and parents themselves, similar workshops should be available for students with dyslexia;
- b. As also recommended by the participants, youngsters with dyslexia who participated in such workshops should then also create other workshops with youngsters who have and do not have dyslexia to create more awareness and thus allow this profile to be better understood. The youngsters also suggested that professionals should attend such workshops;
- c. Parental support groups should be created to help both parents and their children;
- d. We also recommend the inclusion of drama across the curriculum. This then needs to be taken a step further to reflect PE. In the Maltese National Minimum curriculum, there is space for this through Personal and Social Development (PSD), locally a statutory subject (Falzon & Muscat, 2009) and through drama. The Maltese PSD Model allows for processing (Bond, 1986; Egan, 2013; Nelson-Jones, 1991), also leading to emotional literacy (Camilleri, Caruana, Falzon, & Muscat, 2012);
- e. As recommended by the youngsters, publications on their experiences for children and adults are needed. One of the youngsters has already published a book of poems (Borg, 2009) and has motivated the group to express their thoughts to others. This experience and the lack of enough research in the area (Burden, 2008) lead us to encourage others to embark on similar research.
- f. Longitudinal studies of such experiences will help us understand the effects of drama and performance autoethnography, and how this can be linked to professional support, when needed, such as counselling (Falzon & Camilleri, 2010) and other psychotherapeutic practices (Scott, 2004).
- g. Pre- and post-self-esteem inventories may be used to provide standardized measures for the effectiveness of such workshops.

## Conclusion

This team effort combined PE (the youngsters, Clare and two of the authors), written narratives (the parents and the youngsters), and the application of research and writing skills (Debono, Falzon, and Mifsud) to let "the stories [and experiences] themselves make the meaning" (Winterson, 2004, p. 134) in the knowledge that these "stories [we] want to tell you will light up part of [our] lives" (Winterson, 2004, p. 134). The findings speak for themselves. The readers are invited to make meaning of these youngsters' and their parents' experience. The parents' and the youngsters' narratives echo the results of other research findings and further highlight our responsibility toward ensuring that our children and youngsters have positive experiences at school as this has long-lasting effects with regard to self-concept, self-esteem, and quality of life. Furthermore, these narratives highlight the need to allow participants to voice their experiences and become co-researchers as this not only has a therapeutic effect but also embraces trust, respect, participation, and reciprocity, focusing on understanding the meaning of individuals' experiences where researchers and participants become one team addressing the research and making meaning.

The pain, anguish, hurt, bewilderment, shame, and frustration experienced can easily be transformed into enriching experiences of growth if educators and society appreciate and respect these children's profile of abilities and challenges. Furthermore, experiences of drama and performance autoethnography empower youngsters to cope with the adversities and negative experiences that life throws at them and can also support the counselling experience (Falzon & Camilleri, 2010). As Scurfield (2009) notes,

This is by no means the end, but as sure as day gives way to night, the sands of the hour glass have turned. While the wind may crack its tune and the sun beat a torrent drum, I will endeavour to go to the blood heart of the undying, unfathomable now and sit at ease with my sceptre of dust and crown of stars (p. 391).

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1. Labels on T-shirts were peeled off as part of the October 2011 performance.

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## Author Biographies

**Liam Antonelli, Sasha Bilocca, Dario Borg, Shane Borg, Mark Boxall, Luke Briffa, Valentina Farrugia, Leah Gatt, Mike Formosa, Kurt Mizzi, and Gary Lee Vella** are secondary school pupils. They are a group of young teenagers with dyslexia who chose to attend workshops during the summer of 2011 and then continued to meet monthly until the summer of 2012 and are still meeting. They have come to embrace their profile of strengths and weaknesses, and look forward to addressing the challenges of school and learning. They feel that they are ambassadors who now need to empower other youngsters who have not yet had the opportunity to attend such workshops. They have now decided to call themselves dyslexic teens Dialogus (DTD), have a facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/DTDMalta>, and have just completed a video called We Want to Start a Conversation - which is their motto - to raise awareness on dyslexia and to help empower other youngsters with dyslexia.

**Charlene Debono** is a psychology graduate from the University of Malta and is currently a care-worker in a children's home. She has extensive experience in various voluntary settings such as summer schools for children with difficult backgrounds and emotional and behavioral difficulties. Such experiences inspired her to focus her undergraduate dissertation on self-esteem and persons with a profile of dyslexia. Following more work experience, she intends to further her studies at a post-graduate level.

**Ruth Falzon** is a lecturer within the Department of Counselling at the University of Malta. Her areas of expertise include personal and social education, and specific learning difficulties. She coordinates personal and social development (PSD) teacher-training programs and courses at the University of Malta. She is treasurer of the International Association for Counselling (IAC) vice-secretary of the Malta Association for the Counselling Profession (MACP), on the executive council of the Malta PSD Association, and the president of her local primary school council. Her research interests include topics around PSD, dyslexia, quality of life, and counselling.

**Dione Mifsud** is head of the Department of Counselling at the University of Malta and president the IAC. He is also a former head of the Department of Psychology, a former head of the University of Malta Counselling Unit, and a former president of the MACP. He designed and presently coordinates the first master's in counselling programme offered by the University of Malta. He also co-designed and co-coordinates an international master's program in trans-cultural counselling previously in conjunction with the University of Maryland (College Park) and presently with the University of New Orleans, the United States. His research interests include topics around counselling ethics, counselling supervision, and trans-cultural counselling.

**Lena Scurfield** is retired. Her role as a director was born out of her frustration and inspiration supporting a dyslexia project, from the seeds of a book, to the performance that grew out of it. In addition, it gave her a great opportunity to move from a supportive role to one where she can legitimately 'suggest' what the players, especially Matthew, might do. Her passion is connected to the very real emotional responses the three participants in the performance engage in and continue to evolve with.

**Matthew Scurfield** is a free-lance professional actor. He is proud of his dyslexia, which he says has helped him immeasurably to live a spiritual and creative life. As well as appearing in numerous films and television productions, he has traversed the far corners of the stage, from the pantheons of Berkoff's London Theatre Group, to Shakespeare's New Globe, the Royal National Theatre, to a world renowned tour with the groundbreaking Complicite. Since moving to Malta, he has written and published two books. He, along with his wife Lena, and the Maltese actor and TV producer Clare Agius, adapted his first book *I Could Be Anyone* into a play that follows his schooling nightmares and the tangled threads that made up his bohemian, intellectual family background, compelling PE. His passion is bringing attention to the way in which we can so easily inadvertently create a hostile environment for certain of our schoolchildren to fail in.