ISSN: 2690-909X

Review Article

Advances in Neurology and Neuroscience

The Hidden Cost of Being Misunderstood: Unrecognised Dyslexia and High-Functioning Autism in Childhood

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Submitted: 2026, Apr 13; **Accepted:** 2026, May 08; **Published:** 2026, May 20

Citation: Knox, B. H. (2026). The Hidden Cost of Being Misunderstood: Unrecognised Dyslexia and High-Functioning Autism in Childhood. *Adv Neur Sci, 9*(2), 01-03.

Abstract

This paper explores the lifelong impact of growing up with dunrecognised dyslexia and unrecognised high-functioning autism. Through a first-person-informed narrative case study, it shows how a capable child could be consistently positioned at the bottom of the class because the education system measured literacy performance more easily than it recognised hidden ability. Dyslexia may affect spelling, decoding, reading fluency, and written expression, while autism may shape communication, processing, executive functioning, sensory experience, and the need for order and predictability [1-5]. The paper argues that one perceptive teacher can become a decisive interruption in a child's internalised failure narrative [6-8].

The following link takes you to a musical presentation of this medical narrative.
https://heyzine.com/flip-book/df57e3dd1b.html

1. Introduction

There are learners who fail in school not because they lack intelligence, but because the system cannot read them correctly. Dyslexia is a specific learning difference affecting literacy-related processing, including spelling, decoding, and written expression [12]. Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference affecting cognition, communication, sensory experience, and social interpretation [3-5]. When these remain unrecognised, the learner is judged primarily by output rather than underlying capacity [1].

2. Early Childhood: Order, Control, and Difference

Before formal schooling began, difference was already present.

As a preschooler, there was a persistent need for order: books aligned, edges straight, objects placed correctly. This continued throughout childhood, particularly in the home environment. In retrospect, this pattern aligns with autistic traits related to predictability, structure, and sensory-cognitive regulation [3-5]. Such behaviours are often misinterpreted socially when no diagnostic framework is applied [5].

3. Primary School: Punishment Instead of Understanding

Primary school turned difference into visible failure.

Spelling was inconsistent. Writing was disordered. Words did not reliably appear on the page as intended. Dyslexia commonly affects phonological processing, spelling accuracy, and written expression, even where comprehension is relatively intact [1,2]. Reading presented a paradox: silent reading could be manageable, but reading aloud under pressure introduced disruption and error. This aligns with known dyslexic profiles where decoding, fluency, and working memory interact under performance conditions [1]. The educational response was punishment rather than adaptation. The child was struck across the knuckles and later strapped for repeated "errors". Such responses reflect historical deficit-based interpretations of learning difficulty rather than evidence-based intervention [10].

4. The Bottom of the Bottom Class

Students were ranked according to performance. The child was consistently placed at the lowest level. Repeated low ranking contributes to internalised academic identity and reduced self-

efficacy in learners with dyslexia [10]. Over time, performance positioning becomes identity formation, particularly when reinforced through teacher expectation and systemic placement [6].

5. Secondary School: The Failure Narrative Becomes Institutional

At secondary school, the judgement became formal: the student was deemed not academically able. This reflects a systemic tendency to equate literacy performance with intellectual capacity, despite clear evidence that dyslexia affect expression rather than intelligence [1,2]. Educational streaming decisions often reinforce early misinterpretations, limiting access to opportunity [10].

6. The Bookkeeping Teacher: The First Adult Who Saw Ability

In the third year of high school, a bookkeeping teacher recognised underlying ability.

Teacher expectations are strongly correlated with student achievement, motivation, and identity formation [6,7]. When a teacher identifies potential beyond observed performance, it can disrupt negative academic self-concept and open new pathways for engagement [8]. In this case, the teacher's belief challenged the internalised identity of failure and created the possibility of reinterpreting ability.

7. School Certificate: Capacity Breaks Through

The student prepared intensively for School Certificate under self-directed conditions.

The success that followed—achieving top results in a large school—demonstrates that when barriers are reduced and motivation is engaged, learners with dyslexia can perform at very high levels [10]. This reflects the distinction between capacity and mode of assessment. The disbelief of teachers illustrates the persistence of expectation bias, where prior assumptions continue to shape interpretation even in the presence of contradictory evidence [6,7].

8. University: The Mismatch Returns

At university, the mismatch between understanding and written output reappeared. Dyslexia is well documented as affecting written expression at higher levels of education, including organisation, encoding, and transcription of ideas [10]. Learners may demonstrate strong conceptual understanding while producing written work that does not accurately reflect that understanding [1].

The observed phenomenon—reading one's own writing differently from how others read it—aligns with internal compensation strategies often used by dyslexic learners.

9. The Student Voice

(No citations required here as this is the narrative voice, consistent with medical humanities conventions.)

I was not lazy. I was not unwilling. I was not empty of thought.

I was a learner whose abilities were hidden behind a system that could not interpret them. I learned to sit at the back. I learned to expect correction. I learned that what I thought and what I wrote were not the same thing.

But I also knew something was there.

The bookkeeping teacher saw it before I could prove it.

10. Key Learnings for Educators

Poor spelling and writing are not indicators of low intelligence; they are characteristic features of dyslexia [1,2].

Behaviour that appears unusual—such as a need for order—may reflect neurodivergent processing rather than personality traits [3,5].

Repeated ranking and deficit labelling can shape long-term identity and limit achievement [6,7].

Punishment without understanding is harmful and ineffective for neurodivergent learners [10].

Teacher belief is a powerful intervention; expectation alone can influence student outcomes [6-8].

Assessment must diversify to allow learners to demonstrate understanding beyond written output [9].

https://heyzine.com/flip-book/df57e3dd1b.html is the link to the musical presentation of this narrative. Click on the link, and then click on the bottom right-hand corner of the page. The page will turn, and the music will start.

11. Conclusion

This is not a story of inability, but of misinterpretation.

Unrecognised dyslexia obscured written performance. Unrecognised autism shaped behaviour and processing. Together, they produced a learner who was misunderstood by the system designed to evaluate him.

Yet one teacher's recognition disrupted that narrative.

The lesson is clear: the task of education is not merely to measure performance, but to **recognise potential where it is not immediately visible.**

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