



## Project Evaluation Report

Dyslexia and Wobbly Wellbeing:  
Exploring connections between dyslexia,  
literacy challenges and wellbeing—  
a scoping study.

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## Final Report Summary

"Dyslexia and Wobbly Wellbeing: A Scoping Study" explores the relationship between literacy challenges faced by young primary school students, particularly those with dyslexia, and their overall wellbeing. Conducted in Burson Grove Primary School in the Southwest of England, this research explores young people's self-perception, experiences of literacy in the , and school policies that impact their wellbeing.

The study reveals that literacy-related anxiety, particularly around spelling, is a significant source of stress for young learners at Burson Grove Primary School. Learners in this study struggled with feelings of inadequacy, which negatively affects their self-concept and emotional wellbeing. Writing was also identified as a source of anxiety, with poor performance often linked to a negative outlook.

Furthermore, the research underscores the importance of adaptive teaching approaches and flexible learning spaces, such as outdoor areas, in fostering a positive educational environment. Students valued opportunities to learn in spaces outside traditional classrooms, which helped alleviate stress and build confidence. This was supported by the use of tools like affirmation and regulation stations within classrooms.

Despite the challenges of identifying dyslexia early due to limited resources, the study highlights the importance of early intervention and adaptive teaching, which were found to boost both academic performance and emotional wellbeing. The project's findings suggest that a holistic approach to literacy difficulties and wellbeing is essential in supporting students' long-term academic and personal development. The project also highlights the importance of further work, in a wider range of settings to gain deeper insight into connections between young people's experience of literacy in school, whether they have literacy-specific challenges or otherwise, and the links between these experiences and students' wellbeing more broadly.

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## Introduction

The landscape surrounding literacy has been in a state of flux since the Rose Report (2009). Rose argued that young people with dyslexia were a distinct group of struggling readers who needed explicit, specialist support in schools. However, this position is not universally accepted. Elliott and Grigorenko (2014) contest that dyslexia does not exist as a separate category of 'struggling' reader and should not be addressed as such. That said, there is general agreement that young people with literacy difficulties, whatever the underlying 'cause', do have disproportionately high levels of mental health challenges than those who do not (Tarrasch, Berman and Friedmann, 2016). These levels of anxiety have become particularly prominent since COVID 19, and the associated school closures, between 2020 and 2022 (Webster, Skipp and Tyers, 2022). The potential impacts on young people with literacy difficulties in the long term are broader than academic or mental health-related. Alexander-Passe, (2023) has documented the potential journeys for children with dyslexia/challenges in literacy. Life trajectories are often negatively impacted, and individuals can struggle to meet their potential, sometimes concurrently navigating and managing poor mental health. This project aimed to work in depth in a single setting, highlight good practice and areas where practice was improving, through the lenses of both young people in the setting and adults working to support them.

## Background and Rationale

Here, literature linked to supporting young people with dyslexia and literacy difficulties (which were not formally identified) is discussed with connections being drawn between literacy difficulties, wellbeing and how young people are supported in schools. We also make reference to structures around supporting young people with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND).

### Dyslexia, Literacy Difficulties and Wellbeing

Primary school pupils with dyslexia in the UK face higher levels of mental health challenges compared to their peers without dyslexia, as highlighted by Tarrasch et al. (2016). Early implementation of positive support interventions can significantly reduce these challenges, according to Wilmot et al. (2023). However, young people's dyslexia is not always identified early; schools do not have access to specialist teachers//assessors and SEND budgets are increasingly tight, waiting lists for assessment long and access to specialist input is limited. These factors inter alia can mean that children with dyslexia or other literacy difficulties can struggle to be identified, their needs understood and subsequently, they may not be able to access appropriate support (Carroll et al., 2024).

Lack of identification and understanding of themselves can be a source of challenge for young people, whose self-confidence and wellbeing can suffer as a result of the challenges they experience (Riddick, 2000). The wellbeing, mental health, and literacy challenges among young learners have remained prominent following the COVID-19 pandemic, with no significant improvement observed at present (Webster, Skipp, and Tyers, 2022). Additionally, a child's self-concept is closely linked to their overall well-being, as noted by Xiang et al. (2023). In this study, self-concept is used as a proxy for wellbeing; we explore both academic and social self-concept (Harter, 2012) to understand young people's views of themselves in social situations and academically. To understand their

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relationships with their home setting and broader outlook, we use the Stirling Wellbeing Scale (Liddle and Carter, 2010)

Understanding what supports dyslexic children at an early stage is crucial to providing them with the best academic and emotional support. This early understanding can help tailor interventions that not only address their learning needs but also promote their mental health and overall well-being. This project will explore this in depth in a small primary school as a scoping study to inform wider exploration of links in primary school literacy interventions, literacy difficulties and wellbeing.

### Literacy Anxiety: Writing and Spelling

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, primary school pupils in the UK have faced increased challenges in wellbeing, mental health, and literacy attainment. Webster et al. (2022) have identified these issues as significant concerns. The pandemic has exacerbated existing disparities, with literacy attainment and wellbeing continuing to be lower post-COVID for learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), those from lower-income families, and ethnic minorities (Colvin et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2023).

Maths anxiety has been well-documented as a barrier to learning and engaging with numeracy, for both young people and adults (Chinn, 2009). Chinn (2009) does also note that maths anxiety can impact on attainment, which then increases maths anxiety, creating a vicious cycle. Literacy anxiety has been linked to poor attainment and challenges in engagement (Soares *et al.*, 2023) However, literacy anxiety, although addressed in literature, seems to focus primarily on reading rather than writing. Reading anxiety and lower attainment have been noted not only in higher education students (Soares et al., 2023) but have also been specifically linked to the impacts of COVID-19 (Colvin et al., 2022). While there are established links between writing, spelling, and anxiety, more attention appears to be given to reading when considering post-COVID learning challenges for young people (Marks et al., 2022). Additionally, spelling itself can be a significant source of anxiety for pupils (Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2019).

Understanding and addressing these challenges is crucial to supporting the academic and emotional wellbeing of young learners in primary schools across the UK. While this study does not explicitly address and evaluate 'anxiety' linked to literacy, we do discuss the challenges young people experience and how they are able to mitigate any worries or stress in their school setting, to understand what 'good practice' can look like.

### Well-being: Outlook and Literacy

Literacy attainment is (relatively) straightforward to assess and track. However, wellbeing and 'outlook' can be more challenge to quantify, although there is work which both qualifies and quantifies such concepts. For example, research by Gibby-Leversuch et al. (2019) shows a link between spelling difficulties and a negative self-concept among young people in primary schools in the UK. This negative self-concept can significantly affect their confidence and overall academic performance. Negative self-concept and poor attainment can link to longer-term challenges. The life chances and outcomes for those with dyslexia, literacy difficulties, and other neurodiversities are often negatively impacted, as highlighted by Alexander-Passe (2023). These challenges can limit their opportunities and affect their future prospects.

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Marks et al. (2022) have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has had negative impacts on reading and associated effects on the wellbeing of adolescents. This issue is particularly relevant for young people in primary schools, where the disruption caused by the pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges. When young people's academic attainment does not match their effort, it can negatively impact their outlook on life. They may begin to view their future trajectories as limited, which can further affect their motivation and engagement in school. Addressing these issues early on is crucial to support the academic and emotional wellbeing of primary school pupils in the UK. We explore how young people view themselves as learners, and socially, and draw links between their attainment and understanding of themselves.

### Wellbeing: Spaces and Places

In the context of primary school education in the UK, the wellbeing of young people is intricately linked to the elements of choice, flexibility, and success. The SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DfH, 2015) expects young people and their families to have a choice in support strategies implemented. Flexibility is also implied in teacher training standards in the UK Pope et al. (2021). Research by Xiang et al. (2023) and Gibby-Leversuch et al. (2019) underscores the importance of these factors in fostering a positive educational environment. As such, young people's wellbeing and outlook may be linked to choices and flexibility in their learning.

Flexibility in educational approaches is increasingly expected, with adaptive teaching methods being central to pedagogical models that support all learners. This approach, highlighted by Hamilton and Petty (2023) and Pope et al. (2021), ensures that teaching strategies are tailored to meet the diverse needs of students, thereby enhancing their learning experiences. A universal design for learning approach to pedagogy and classroom instruction can benefit all learners, as teaching does not need to be differentiated, learners' needs are anticipated and met, so they do not need specific or separate instruction (Reid, Strnadová and Cumming, 2013). Choice and flexibility of learning space also encompasses outdoor/non-classroom space.

The importance of outdoor spaces in promoting better wellbeing among students has been well-documented. According to Marsh and Blackwell (2023), not only do outdoor environments contribute to improved wellbeing, but other non-classroom spaces have also gained value, particularly in the post-COVID era. These spaces provide essential opportunities for students to engage in activities that support their mental and physical health. This study has explored how young people viewed different areas in their school and what those different spaces are used for by young people.

### Policy Frameworks for SEND

Policy structures are crucial in shaping the learning environment for young people in the context of primary school education in the UK. The concept of 'differentiation' is prominently noted in the main Teacher Standards (DfE, 2021). Differentiation is grounded in creating separate, 'different' resources and instruction methods for particular young people in a classroom setting. However, newer initial teacher education (ITE) standards refer to 'adaptive' teaching, rather than 'differentiated' teaching. These ITE standards, as highlighted by Pope et al. (2021), expect teachers to employ adaptive teaching methods to support all learners, ensuring that each student's unique needs are met. This is

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aimed at young people's needs being met through universal provision rather than singling out individual students. This is also aimed at supporting young people to know how they best learn/work and to empower them towards independence (DfE and DfH, 2015).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that integrates adaptive teaching into its core, thereby minimising the need for additional changes or differentiation (Reid et al., 2013). Hamilton and Petty (2023) emphasise that "a UDL approach to curriculum design embeds flexibility and choice in order to make learning accessible to the widest possible range of students" (p. 6). This makes learning accessible, which in turn then empowers young people to work independently, and develop life-skills. UDL aligns with 'adaptive' teaching in that it is expected that young people's needs are anticipated and met before they are apparent and a barrier to learning, through a well-resourced, flexible approach.

In practical terms, UDL is implemented through policy frameworks, offering choice, flexibility, and empowerment in line with policy expectations. This approach aligns with the belief that when young people are provided with choices, they are empowered, leading to improved wellbeing. The evidence suggests that this empowerment through choice indeed contributes to better wellbeing among primary school students. This study explored how flexibility of provision and support in a school, and how this flexibility was then experienced by young people in their setting.

## Research Focus

This research is a scoping study which will inform further studies over the coming academic years. The challenges experienced by young people whose literacy attainment is not as strong as their peers are myriad, and as well as impacting on academic attainment, their wellbeing has been linked to challenges in literacy. This project focused on young people in years 3 and 4, some of whose literacy attainment was below age-related expectations (ARE) and some of whose literacy attainment met or exceeded ARE. Multi-method data collection strategies were employed with young people; focus groups and a school tour led by young people, as well as survey data were aimed to address the questions. In order to gain wider understanding the project also engaged the school Special Educational Needs and Disability Coordinator (SENDSCO), and the Head Teacher, who were both interviewed as part of the study to address the following questions:

- How do primary school pupils discuss and position their own well-being in relation to dyslexia and literacy difficulties?
- How do school staff and parents understand children's well-being as influencing or be influenced by dyslexia and literacy difficulties?
- What policies, provisions and practice are in place in school to support students' with dyslexia and literacy difficulties, and how is this support received by key educational stakeholders such as children, school staff and parents?

## Methodology

Here a brief overview of the project methodology is given. The ethical process is noted, school characteristics and participants are detailed as well as the methods used on the ground. Data collection tools are also explained.



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## Participants and School Site

In December 2023, ethical approval for the study was sought and granted by Liverpool John Moores University (UREC Ref: 23/EDN/039). The school, Burson Grove Primary (pseudonym) located in the Southwest of England, was selected through Dr Ross' professional networks. Full written consent was obtained from the Head Teacher, the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator (SENDCO), and the families of the children who were participating. Written, informed assent was also sought from the young people themselves, although one child chose not to participate. The school, which caters to children aged 4-11, has approximately 300 students on roll. It is rated as a 'Good' school and has around 20% of its students eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), compared to the national average of 24%.

The SENDCO, who also serves as the Assistant Head, was the primary point of contact for the study. Participants included the Head Teacher, the SENDCO, and 11 students from years 3 and 4. Among these students, there were four boys (one of whom declined to participate) and eight girls (one girl was absent for the second session).

## Multi-modal Data Collection

The method employed on the ground made use of various forms of data collection to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the school site, drawing from a variety of perspectives. This multi-method study incorporated a Mosaic approach to discussion groups for working with young people, as outlined by Clark (2017). There were two groups, with each group participating in two sessions, each lasting between 45 to 60 minutes, and included five and six students respectively.

In the first session, the Stirling Wellbeing Scale (Liddle and Carter, 2010) was used to assess wellbeing, with discussions centred around what makes students feel good and the support they need when feeling 'wobbly'. The second session also employed the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 2012), using the scholastic and social competence subscales. During this session, students discussed spelling strategies in more detail and their experiences of the classroom. They also took Dr Ross and the SENDCO on a walk around the school, sharing special, positive places around the school. Young people's views of the spaces were discussed and how they used them was also explored. Elements of the tour were photographed and some discussions were audio recorded with Dr Ross filming the space (young people were not captured in video footage). Discussion groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim where possible (some speech was not fully discernible). Field notes were also taken by Dr Ross and used in analysis.

The school had also shared students' literacy attainment, so that analysis could be carried out to discern any associations between children's attainment, wellbeing and experiences of school.

A 'Friendly Adult' approach was adopted to minimise the power imbalance between researchers and students, as suggested by Christensen (2004), and to build rapport, following Bryman (2012). The flexibility inherent in ethnographic methods was crucial, allowing for on-the-spot decisions while maintaining close, careful regard for ethical and legal frameworks (BERA, 2018; Data Protection Act, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide flexibility and dynamism through engaged discussion, as recommended by Bryman (2012). These interviews were carried out with the Head

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Teacher via Zoom and with the SENDCO in person. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim where possible (some speech was not fully discernible).

## Analysis

A brief overview of data analysis processes is given here. How data was stored and managed is also detailed.

### Data Processing

All data was processed in line with the Data Protection Act (2018). Identifying features have been removed where possible and all participants have been given pseudonyms (the school is known as Burson Grove Primary School in this study), and young people's names have been changed to protect their identities. Data was stored separately from identifying information and on password protected devices.

### Analysis and Coding Strategies

As both qualitative and quantitative data was captured, it was processed differently then used as a triangulation point. The strategies employed for analysis are detailed here. As part of data analysis and coding, discussion of arising themes took place between the team members, to ensure rigour in the analysis process and to challenge where concepts were not wholly clear.

### Qualitative

Qualitative data comprised transcriptions from focus groups with young people, transcriptions from interview with the Head Teacher and the school SENDCO, as well as field notes take by Dr Ross during the sessions and the interviews. Photographs of the school site and short videos were also made, with great care taken to ensure that no children were in the pictures/videos and that there were no discernible, identifying features of the school.

Once interviews and discussion groups had been transcribed initially, Dr Ross re-listened to them and checked the transcriptions. She then used QDA Data Miner Lite to undertake open coding on a third reading of the transcriptions. Dr Ross then re-read the transcripts twice to refine the coding framework and explore themes in the data. Those themes were then drawn out and discussed with the project team, who had also read the transcripts and listened to the recordings. Findings were triangulated and any differences of views relating to codes were discussed. Field notes were also coded alongside interviews and discussion groups.

Images and videos were watched and discussions transcribed. The transcriptions were analysed as above. The images and videos were then linked to transcriptions and used to inform thematic analysis and provide richer understanding of young people's experiences of space. Following thematic analysis, 'spelling' presented itself as a nexus for young people's stress; this is used below to contextualise some of the other findings from the study and to exemplify UDL approaches to teaching and learning.

### Quantitative

Survey data was collated into Microsoft Excel. Data was cleaned and fully anonymised. Analysis was undertaken, initially to discern whether there was any association between students' reading attainment and writing attainment. Subsequently, associations between their attainment in reading and writing, and the wellbeing scales was explored using Microsoft Excel. Bar graphs, line graphs and

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R<sup>2</sup> correlations were recorded. The quantitative data were then triangulated with qualitative finding to explore commonalities.

## Findings- School and Young People

In this section, young people's experiences and responses to literacy in school are discussed. These are linked to both qualitative data, drawn from discussion groups, school tours and also young people's responses to the survey element of assessment. Interview data from the Head Teacher and the SENDCO is also woven into discussion of findings here. The case of spelling is presented initially to frame and exemplify young people's interactions and relationships with literacy more broadly; spelling was a nexus of young people's anxiety in this setting and was the most prominent theme in discussions. We then zoom out to explore young people's relationships with writing more broadly, where their feelings and emotion-management strategies are discussed. Connections between young people's writing outcomes, and how they link to their broader outlook are discussed and the uses of spaces in the school are also explored.

### The Case of Spelling

The findings from the study indicate that young people in primary school in the UK often perceive spelling as a source of stress and stigma. This was voiced by in a discussion group by one of the young people, who stated, "I lie about stuff because I don't want them to know the actual truth" (child group 1, session 1). This exemplifies young people's responses to their struggles with spelling; the discussion related to comparison of spellings between children in class.

The use of different spelling groups, whether displayed on boards or provided on sheets, was seen as beneficial. Children valued the existence of these groups, linking them to their overall well-being. As one explained, "Because some people like find it hard to spell the tricky words that some people find it easy to spell so they get given words that they... can actually spell and learn how to spell," (child from group 2, session 2). Another child from the same group noted, "Maybe they... feel relieved if they were struggling. They might have wanted to go down to a different group." These comments suggest that confidence in learning was an underlying theme in the children's responses.

Both teachers and children appreciated the use of targeted spellings. However, while children valued having a choice and engaging in dialogue about their spellings, they did not feel fully empowered. One child remarked, "The teachers have look at your work and... see that you're having trouble with it, they might move you down the group maybe... we don't know because it doesn't happen that much." This indicates a lack of transparency and consistency in how spelling groups are managed. Although there is a move towards anonymity in groupings, this is still a work in progress and varies depending on individual teachers. The school policy is evolving in this direction but has not yet fully achieved it.

To normalise the act of checking spellings and to prevent young people from feeling singled out, spelling and word mats have been introduced. This approach aims to make the process of verifying spellings a routine part of learning.

In line with the findings of Tarrasch et al. (2016), young people reported feeling shame if they perceived their spellings, and other work, as easier than that of their peers. This comparison with

others and the associated stigma aligns with Goffman's (1963) concept of stigmatising characteristics. The stress and pressure related to spelling challenges experienced by young people also reflect findings from other studies linking literacy challenges with spelling difficulties (Colvin et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2023; Webster et al., 2022). Further research is needed to explore how spelling challenges are connected to writing difficulties and to develop strategies for fostering a positive outlook among young learners.

### Writing- Learners' Experiences

Young people experienced writing with some trepidation. Lewis felt that their teachers were not always honest with them about their writing. The SENDCO suggested that confusion as to which element of his work was being praised was tricky for him. A key element of the Lewis' response was their diligence and clear desire to complete work to a high standard, as shown below. Both the Head Teacher and SENDCO were cognisant of different learners' strengths and areas of challenge and were keen to ensure that their needs were met through adaptation of tasks rather than through singling out children by giving them separate tasks. This aligns with the broader structures in policy relating to lesson delivery, where adaptive teaching is implemented (Pope *et al.*, 2021). The school links their recent updated pedagogy to work by Sobel and Alston, (2021), which links to UDL such that the needs of young people are anticipated through resourcing, planning and awareness of professionals. Writing and spelling remain however, an area of substantial stress for young people.

### Young people and their writing

#### SENCO Interview

Dr Ross: ... one particular kid was talking about his handwriting. And he, he said that he got a bit frustrated that his teacher, 'not telling the truth about my handwriting'...

SENCO: Yeah. But I've talked staff about that since then said you've got to be really specific with your praise... maybe they meant well done on the effort. But ... he heard that as well done on the on the neat handwriting.

#### Head Teacher Interview

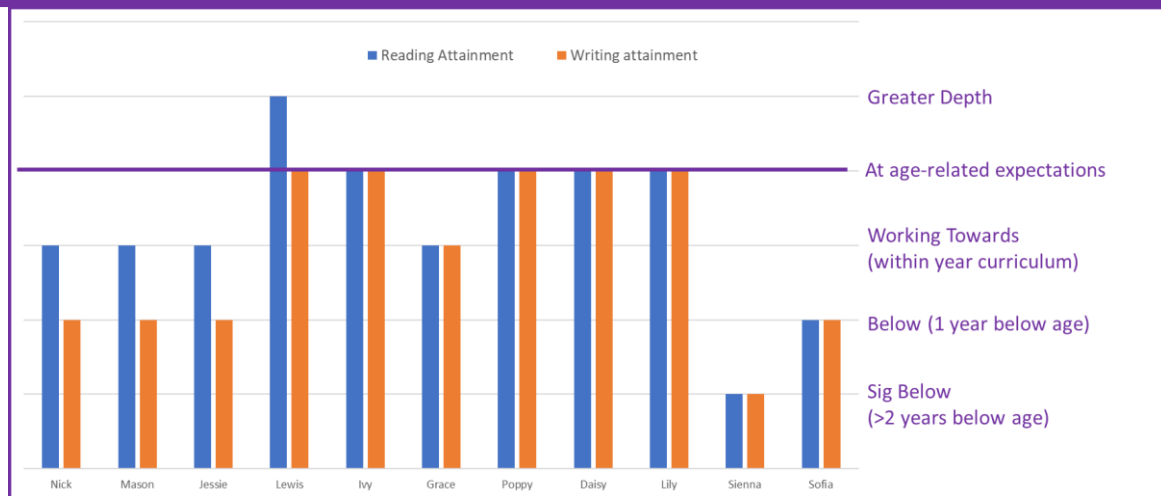
"I was covering PPA on Wednesday when they're writing sentences and I'd just pick out three words from the whole sentence that we talked about, and everybody write a sentence about those words, not necessarily what was their spelling."

#### Young people's views

Lewis group 1, session 1: I find the English writing and stuff quite hard. you want to like write quickly and do your break. But you also want to impress the teacher and do good handwriting as well. But it's really hard to do both at the same time

### Writing and Positive Outlook

At present, writing has not been a specific are of focus for the school, and young people's responses to tasks are not always positive. The writing attainment of young people in the group is shown below.



In this study, where young people's writing attainment was stronger, their overall outlook was more positive. The inverse is subsequently of interest to this study in: where young people have lower attainment in writing, their outlook was not as positive (see graph below). Although the sample size here is small and the association is not strong, ( $R^2 = 0.47$ ), there is an connection between young people's writing attainment and their 'positive outlook', drawn from the Stirling Wellbeing Scales (Liddle and Carter, 2010).

Interview data and the views of young people in this study demonstrates the connections between stress, wellbeing, and writing. These findings resonate with the research conducted by Gibby-Leversuch et al. (2019) and Marks et al. (2023), which also identified similar links. One participant noted in this study, "When I feel stressed, it's harder to concentrate on writing," highlighting the direct impact of stress on writing performance.

The data in this study suggest that spelling difficulties can be associated with anxiety and stress, which in turn can negatively affect academic attainment and broader outcomes. One young person remarked, "I don't feel good about myself when I struggle with writing," illustrating the potential impact of writing difficulties on self-perception and outlook. This aligns with the findings of Alexander-Passe (2023), who noted that "spelling challenges often lead to increased anxiety, which can hinder overall academic performance." This links to young people's outlook being negatively impacted by poorer outcomes in their written work; where they are less successful, wellbeing is affected. That weaker writing skills are linked to a more negative outlook, consistent with the research by Marks et al. (2023), Colvin et al. (2021), and Sun et al. (2023). However, it is important to note that these findings are very tentative and warrant further investigation.

#### Wellbeing and Outlook: Literacy and Spaces

Young people valued being able to spend time in spaces other than their classroom. They enjoyed being outside and tours of the school with Dr Ross and both groups of learners took a turn outside. Children felt freer and were able to de-stress outside, spending time with their peers and relaxing. The wish to go outside when feeling uneasy in lessons was also noted (see below). Young people commented that they can do everything outside; failure was not something on their radar. Other students noted that letting energy out, when outside was beneficial. Young people were particularly keen to share the Forest School space and described the activities they undertook fondly. Other non-

classroom spaces shown and discussed were the ELSA (Emotional Learning Support Assistant) space, where young people were able to access various therapeutic and para-therapeutic activities. Young people also valued in-class spaces which were not linked to learning; affirmation stations and regulation stations, where they could sit and reset if they were feeling overwhelmed in class were important to young people in this study (as well as staff) as a means of staying in class, and managing their emotions.

### Wellbeing/outlook- literacy and Spaces

#### Outside matters!

"Sometimes... when I'm learning... English mostly I feel terrible and I want to go outside" – child in group 1, session 1.

Harry group 1 school tour: "I find it like easier to go outside because then there's nothing that you have to do. And nothing that you can't do"

Molly group 1 school tour: "[you can] Let your energy [out]"

#### Other spaces and people matter!

"sometimes when I get stressed, it just feels like something is piling upside me and I just need to speak about it". – child in group 1, session 1.

Daisy group 1: "We've got the calm corner in the classroom and we can calm down in there."

#### Forest School (group 2 school tour):

Dr Ross: What happens in Forest School, folks?

Children: Some like on Wednesday some classes for like overseas. We come in, we like do activity activities and like on the last day we do s'mores."

Library: (group 2 school tour)

Dr Ross: The SENCO has just told me and they can come in here and talk about what they're working on and talk about if there's anything wobbly

For young people in this study, having access to regulation and affirmation stations within classrooms has been found to be beneficial and empowering. This adaptive provision allows students to manage their emotions and affirm their identities, fostering a sense of control and self-efficacy (Hamilton and Petty, 2023; Pope et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the young people expressed a strong appreciation for their time spent in the Forest School. They valued the opportunity to engage with nature, which aligns with the findings of Marsh and Blackwell (2023). This outdoor educational setting provided a unique environment that was both enjoyable and enriching for the students. As well as enjoying Forest School, young people valued the sense of success, empowerment, and ownership they experienced from being outside. This sense of achievement and autonomy was particularly significant, as it contributed to their overall well-being and development (Hamilton and Petty, 2023).

In this study, the importance of choice was highlighted not only in terms of physical space but also in how young people completed their work. The ability to choose where and how to work was vital for their engagement and motivation, supporting the findings of Xiang et al. (2023) and Gibby-Leversuch et al. (2019). This flexibility in learning environments and methods was crucial in meeting the diverse needs of young learners. Although this study focuses on one school in a small setting, there is scope for further study to explore a diverse range of settings.

### Findings- Policies and Systems

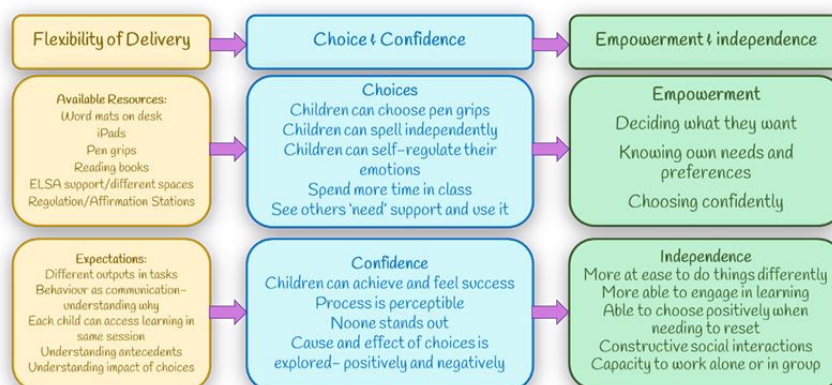
In this section, teachers' views of how young people are supported at Burson Grove Primary School are discussed. These views are linked to wider policy and UDL. The wider systems are discussed and the implications of policies and systems are outlined in the context of Burson Grove.

## Teachers- support, choice and behaviours

The ethos of support for young people with SEND in Burson Grove has been significantly influenced by the principles outlined in “The Inclusive Classroom: A New Approach to Differentiation” by Daniel Sobel and Sarah Alston. This book has inspired practical changes within classrooms and has led to a shift in ethos spearheaded by the school’s Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator (SENDCO). The focus on inclusive practices has aimed to encourage those working in the school to adopt strategies that cater to the diverse needs of all students, such that every child feels valued and supported.

Progress in primary education is now viewed through the lens of individual achievements. Generally those achievements are quantified by systemic frameworks. However, not all progress is quantifiable within these frameworks. As the SENDCO commented, “it’s about them having their own small steps of learning... whatever small thing it is.” This perspective highlights the importance of recognising and celebrating the unique progress of each student, no matter how small, thereby fostering a positive and encouraging learning environment.

The emphasis on choice and dialogue has also become a cornerstone Burson Grove. Young people are now supported to record their learning in various ways and engage with their education in a manner that suits their individual needs. This approach aims to accommodate different learning styles but also to empower students to take ownership of their educational journey, which has been noted as vital in meeting needs adaptively within higher education (Hamilton and Petty, 2023) and also in other settings (Reid et al., 2013). Choice and dialogue as also linked to young people better understanding themselves, and subsequently knowing what will best support their learning; understanding oneself has been identified as a crucial aspect of student development (Riddick, 2000; Ross, 2022). Through appropriate diagnosis, where applicable, and the management of emotions, students are encouraged to engage in positive interactions. This holistic approach helps young learners develop a better understanding of their strengths and challenges, promoting emotional well-being and resilience. Having adaptive resources and lesson delivery strategies aides choice and empowerment of young people which was noted in interviews. The principles and mechanisms described by the teachers in the school have been modelled in the diagram, with the overarching principles on the first line and the practical operationalisation of the methods shown in the resources available/expectations in the second and third lines.



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The principle of personalisation without singling out is paramount in creating an inclusive classroom environment in line with UDL (Reid, et al, 2013). By supporting children to feel included without the stigma often associated with special educational needs, educators can foster a sense of belonging and community. This approach ensures that all students receive the support they need while maintaining their dignity and self-esteem.

#### Systems in Place- do they work?

On paper, policy and practice in primary schools in the UK appear to align well. The Early Career Teacher (ECT) Framework, for instance, emphasises the importance of adaptability in schools (Pope et al., 2021). This framework encourages new teachers to be flexible and responsive to the diverse needs of their students, fostering an environment where all children can thrive. UDL is based on principles of flexibility and choice, allowing educators to design learning experiences that cater to the varied ways in which students engage with content and demonstrate their understanding (Hamilton and Petty, 2023; Reid et al., 2013).

At Burson Grove School, the aim is to create inclusive classrooms, a goal that is spearheaded by the SENDCO. She runs training and provides guidance which aim to provide teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to implement inclusive practices effectively. However, despite these positive frameworks and intentions, several challenges remain. Access to diagnoses and assessments (formal or informal) for understanding students' needs is often limited, which can negatively impact their wellbeing during this waiting period. Without timely assessments, students may not receive the support they need, leading to increased stress and anxiety.

Additionally, there is a notable lack of training for teachers, which can hinder their ability to implement inclusive practices effectively both in Burson Grove and more broadly at regional and national level. This issue is compounded by stretched staffing resources, making it difficult for schools to provide the necessary support for all students. Limited resources in the classroom further exacerbate these challenges, restricting the availability of materials and tools that can aid in differentiated instruction. The structure of the curriculum can also make it difficult for children and their families to see tangible progress. This lack of visible progress can be discouraging and may affect students' motivation and engagement with their learning.

There is an ongoing debate about whether UDL is adequately funded. Some argue that the policy may be a covert way to cut funding, raising concerns about the sustainability and effectiveness of UDL implementation in schools. Ensuring that UDL is properly funded is crucial for maintaining its integrity and achieving its goals of inclusivity and adaptability in education. Further work and research into this is necessary to gain better understanding of the situation on the ground, relative to policy

#### Implications- in Burson Grove Primary School and beyond

Burson Grove has been very efficient in utilising its available space, with a clear focus on ensuring that young people stay within the classroom environment; this is improving according to the SENDCO. This aligns with the broader concept of creating inclusive classrooms, as discussed previously, where the physical environment plays a crucial role in supporting student engagement and learning.



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The importance of outdoor areas to support young people's wellbeing cannot be overstated. However, Burson Grove has a relatively large and green site, with mature woodland. This is not the case for every school; many schools have limited access to green areas. Young people's responses to and interactions with green/outdoor and non-classroom spaces highlight the need for schools to have adequate resources that allow for flexibility in their use of space, ensuring that all students have access to conducive learning environments both indoors and outdoors.

It is also essential for educators to receive appropriate training that enables them to adapt and develop their teaching methods effectively, dynamically as they work with their students. This need for professional development is critical in this, as part of fostering an adaptable and inclusive educational environment, as previously mentioned in the context of the Early Career Teacher (ECT) Framework (Pope *et al.*, 2021) and UDL (Reid *et al.*, 2013).

However, while Burson Grove is individually able to adapt their structures internally and within their multi-academy trust, wider formal progress measures are not as adaptable. Curricular objectives and the associated monitoring processes are not sufficiently adaptable to capture diverse forms of achievement and recognise progress through various metrics. This inflexibility can hinder the ability of schools to fully support the individual progress of each student, as discussed earlier in relation to the importance of recognising unique learning journeys and achievements. Ensuring that curricular targets are flexible enough to allow for different types of progress is essential for fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment but this level of change is outside the jurisdiction of an individual school, resting at national policy level. It is not a change that Burson Grove can make; rather it is a (lack of) change that Burson Grove is subject to.

## Evaluation of Study

In this section, an overview of challenges encountered in the development of this study is given. As with any project, there were challenges encountered which led to changes to the implementation of the project and data collection procedures. These are discussed here alongside ways in which these challenges were addressed.

### Planned Work and Changes Made

While much of this project has gone well, there have been some elements of challenge. During the Spring term of 2024, the main project contact changed jobs and was to be seconded out to another school within the multi-academy trust. This has meant that since April 2024, she has not been based in the field-site school and her capacity to engage with the project process was limited. There has subsequently been a knock-on effect on elements of the project. These challenges and their effects are detailed below. Written consent from families to work with their children during this study was not forthcoming due to job changes with staff and the subsequent challenges in maintaining contact with the school, without it becoming burdensome for those participating in the study. Sadly, consent was not obtained from families to develop case studies. As such, subsequent work with them and teachers/TAs did not take place. However, rich data from interviews and discussion groups was collected. In addition to the data from those groups, visual data of the school site was collected. Although engagement with artefacts and children's objects of value had been anticipated, visual footage of the school site and photographic images of the school alongside real-time discussion had not been wholly anticipated; the school tours with young people provided a dynamic understanding

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of their interactions with their settings which would not have been possible through working with objects. It is important to note that great care was taken with this element of the study to ensure that no visual image of young people participating was taken; consent had not been granted for photographs of young people and protecting their identities was vital as part of the study protocol.

As such, although we did not collect all the data anticipated, varied and rich data was collected. This means that it is possible to triangulate and to make connections across data, so there remains a robust body of data from which we can address the research aims.

### Updated Tools, Outputs and Ways Forwards

To enhance the robustness of the data collected in future studies linked to this investigation, it is essential to increase the sample sizes and scale the study to include a diverse range of schools. This should encompass variations across rural and urban settings, as well as different socio-economic groups. Such diversity will ensure that the findings are more representative and comprehensive.

More in-depth interviews are necessary. Initially, we aimed to engage with a broader group of parents, carers, and staff members. However, this was hindered when the SENCo changed jobs partway through the project. Increasing the number of participating schools in future studies would help mitigate such disruptions and provide a more stable base for data collection. Working with a diverse range of schools and carrying out in-depth interviews with individuals from those settings will give insight into a varied range of lived-experiences. As part of this, it is crucial to incorporate input from teachers, teaching assistants (TAs), families, and young people as the study progresses. Their perspectives will offer valuable insights and contribute to a more holistic understanding of the issues being researched.

On a pragmatic note, the format of the Self-Concept Scales (Harter, 2012) needs to be updated to ensure the implementation of a 4-point scale. Young people completed proformas such that the designed 4-point scale could be treated as a 5-point scale. As such insight from this element of study was not as decisive as it would have been, had the scales been completed as expected. This adjustment will improve the accuracy and reliability of the self-assessment data collected.

The outputs of the study had initially anticipated that young people's artefacts would form part of the evidence body. However, this has slightly been modified given the changes in the data collected. Young people's photos and the areas they valued were captured and compiled to form a booklet which will be used to help disseminate young people's views of their spaces, both in the school as part of INSET and also at conferences where the work is discussed. Videos of each group's tour of the school was also taken and these have been edited to form videos, which will also be shared as part of conference presentations and training materials for schools.

### What's next?

This section shared the next steps of the project. While data analysis for this scoping phase has been completed, as a team, we are keen to continue to develop the project and work on gaining deeper understanding of connections between literacy, dyslexia, wellbeing and practice to support young people in schools. Further study is required and the suggested foci for that study are shared here. We also share proposed avenues for dissemination of the research findings outside of academic publications, including via podcasts. Conferences have been an outlet for the research and are discussed here too. We aim to have submitted first drafts of papers by the end of the current

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academic year for journal publications and will have contacted other publications with a view to publishing findings as soon as possible.

### Further Study

This study was carried out in one small school, located in a relatively affluent town (see above). The sample size was small and the demographics of the young people in the setting was largely unknown although the SENDCO did share some information; demographic/socio-economic data relating to participants individually was not sought. Further study would include larger sample sizes from a broader range of schools to gain greater insight into the varied experiences of different groups of people. This will enable robust conclusions to be drawn from quantitative, survey data.

The interviews were in depth but we were only able to reach the SENDCO and the Head Teacher in this project as detailed above. We feel that having insight from a broader range of professionals, practitioners and young people will give greater understanding to the outcomes from survey data. We would gain an understanding of the lived experiences of a wider range of young people which could help generate case studies and inform practice/policy recommendations alongside survey findings.

The survey tool format needs to be modified so that choices of response along the Likert scale are clearer, which will then provide more focussed insight into young people's experiences and responses to social, as well as academic situations.

### Dissemination of Findings

Findings were discussed at the TEAN conference in Manchester, in May 2024. The presentation was attended by a small and very engaged group who actively shared their views and shared enthusiasm for the importance of the project looking forwards.

### BERA 2024

This study will be presented at the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Conference in September 2024. This report is being written before the presentation has taken place. However, the authors of the report are happy to address any queries relating to the BERA presentation and feedback from the session.

The presentation will take the form of a brief exhibition, where videos of sites around Burson Grove School that were valued by young people. The videos contain young people's voices (transcribed to protect anonymity), and discussion with Dr Ross alongside a tour of the school guided by the young people from the two focus groups. The exhibition also shows photographs of other aspects of the school in a short brochure, containing quotations and overviews of interactions between Dr Ross and the young people. The exhibition is aimed at sharing the school environment with attendees and prompting discussion. The presentation then shares findings as detailed in this presentation. Discussion will be held in relation to the presented findings but future avenues for research will be discussed and the research team will actively seek others' views about this. Feedback from attendees in the sessions will also inform the development of journal articles for dissemination.

### Journal Articles

The research team has discussed potential avenues for publication of articles. Discussion of potential articles has been broad (we are waiting to formalise our proposed papers until we have had feedback from the BERA presentation) but at the end of August 2024, a 'pitching' session was



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proposed to take place towards the second half of September 2024, where each member of the research team shares proposals for articles based on the project. The articles will then be written for journals such as (but not limited to):

- Education 3-13 via ASPE
- British Journal of Special Education (BERA)
- Dyslexia
- Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research

#### Publication Outside of Academia

As this project has aimed to be both a rigorous academic project and a practical, pragmatic study with real-world applications, we feel as a project team that it is important to publish findings outside academic channels. For example, professional/trade journals are read by a large number of specialist practitioners. Articles in broader teaching publications makes the research findings accessible to other teachers and 'interested' parents/carers. We propose submitting articles for publishing via publications such as:

- Impact from the Chartered College (Dr Ross is a reviewer for Impact)
- The PATOSS Bulletin (Dr Ross has written for them previously)

We are also keen to share our findings via discussion and 'real time' interactions. As such we aim to engage with podcasts such as Reach into Research from ASPE.

#### Training in the School

Dr Ross will attend the school on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024 for a twilight session with members of staff. The research findings will be shared and Dr Ross will share proposed ideas for how to produce a useful, accessible and practical 'Good Practice Guide' for educators, which draws on the findings of this study. As and when needed, the project team is happy to discuss the detail of the training session and development of resources with ASPE.

### Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the "Dyslexia and Wobbly Wellbeing" study provides valuable insights into the intricate connections between literacy difficulties and the wellbeing of young primary school pupils. The research highlights that literacy-related anxiety, particularly around spelling and writing, is a prominent challenge that negatively affects both academic performance and emotional wellbeing. Students often experience stress and stigma when their literacy skills do not meet expectations, leading to a diminished self-concept.

The study also emphasises the importance of adaptive teaching approaches and flexible learning environments. By offering choice and fostering dialogue, schools can create a more inclusive environment that empowers students and supports their diverse needs. Outdoor and non-classroom spaces were particularly valued by students, offering them opportunities to relax and build confidence. While early identification of dyslexia remains a challenge due to limited resources, the findings suggest that early interventions and well-planned support strategies are crucial in mitigating the negative effects of literacy difficulties. The research calls for continued exploration of the links between literacy, dyslexia, and wellbeing, with the potential to inform both policy and practice, ensuring that young people receive the academic and emotional support they need to thrive.

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