



CHILDHOOD PSYCHOSOCIAL EXPERIENCES AMONG INDIVIDUALS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL LANGUAGE DISORDER IN GREECE: AN INTERVIEW-BASED STUDY

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Abstract:

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by persistent difficulties in language comprehension and expression that cannot be explained by other biomedical conditions. While extensive research has examined the linguistic and academic challenges associated with DLD, less attention has been given to the psychosocial experiences that accompany language difficulties during childhood. Understanding these experiences is important, as social and emotional development is closely linked to communication abilities and educational participation. The present study explores the retrospective psychosocial experiences of individuals with DLD during their childhood years. The study employed a qualitative research design. Participants were six undergraduate engineering students aged between 19 and 24 studying at a university in Greece who had previously been identified as having DLD. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which focused on participants' memories of their school and home experiences, peer relationships, emotional difficulties, and perceived support during childhood and adolescence. Emerging themes revealed that during their childhood, participants experienced feelings of anxiety and frustration related to communication difficulties, particularly in classroom interactions and oral participation. They also reported experiences of social exclusion, misunderstandings with peers, and episodes of bullying during their school years. In addition, participants reflected on the strategies they developed to cope with these challenges, including avoidance of speaking, reliance on supportive peers or family members, and increased effort in academic tasks. Findings show the importance of early identification, supportive educational environments, and increased awareness among teachers regarding the broader social and emotional needs of students with language disorders.

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1. Background

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects approximately 7-8% of children in the general population (Norbury *et al.*, 2016). Children with DLD experience difficulties acquiring and using language despite typical hearing, intelligence, and access to learning opportunities. These difficulties can affect multiple components of language, including phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, and may appear in both expressive and receptive language abilities (Bishop *et al.*, 2017). Although the precise causes of DLD are still unknown, research increasingly points to a strong neurobiological and genetic contribution. Studies in neurodevelopment and behavioural genetics suggest that language difficulties associated with DLD are linked to underlying differences in brain development and language processing mechanisms (Laasonen *et al.*, 2018; Micai *et al.*, 2020). Longitudinal studies further suggest that the language difficulties associated with DLD frequently persist into adolescence and adulthood. Adults with a history of DLD may, in fact, continue to experience challenges in morphology, syntax, vocabulary, semantic processing, and pragmatic communication (McGregor *et al.*, 2020). In addition to oral language difficulties, many individuals with DLD encounter ongoing challenges in literacy. Studies with adolescents and young adults report lower levels of reading accuracy and weaker reading comprehension compared to peers without language difficulties. These literacy problems may persist into early adulthood and can influence academic participation and educational outcomes (Dubois *et al.*, 2020).

Although extensive research has examined the linguistic characteristics and academic outcomes associated with DLD, the majority of these works have focused on language deficits and literacy development. Less attention has been given to the lived experiences of individuals with DLD, particularly how language difficulties affected their everyday emotional, social, and educational experiences during childhood. In addition, many studies rely on parental or teacher perspectives, while the perspectives of individuals with DLD themselves remain relatively underexplored. The present study addresses this gap by exploring retrospective accounts of university students with DLD. More specifically, the study focused on how language difficulties influenced their school experiences, peer interactions, emotional responses and family relations. The leading questions of the current work are:

- How do university students with DLD reflect on their childhood school experiences?
- How did their language difficulties affect their social and emotional experiences during childhood?

2. Developmental Language Disorders

DLD is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects children's ability to understand and use language (Bishop *et al.*, 2017). Difficulties may occur across multiple domains of language, including vocabulary development, grammatical structure, phonological processing, and pragmatic communication (Bishop *et al.*, 2017). Children with DLD may therefore experience challenges both in expressing language and in comprehending spoken communication. Research also shows that language difficulties often persist into adolescence and adulthood, which indicates that DLD is not simply a temporary developmental delay but a long-term condition that can influence educational and social outcomes over time (St Clair *et al.*, 2011).

DLD is typically distinguished from temporary language delay by the atypical pattern of language development observed in affected children. While some children experience slower but otherwise typical language development, children with DLD often show persistent and qualitatively different patterns of language acquisition (Bishop *et al.*, 2017). The condition is generally understood as multifactorial as it involves genetic predispositions but also environmental influences. Diagnosis is usually conducted by speech-language pathologists through specialized language assessments (Bishop *et al.*, 2017). In many cases, language difficulties become noticeable during the preschool years, often before the age of five (Norbury *et al.*, 2016). However, a substantial number of children with language difficulties remain unidentified when they begin school (McGregor, 2020). Relevant findings also suggest that DLD is frequently underdiagnosed, which increases the likelihood that some children with significant language difficulties may pass through the education system without receiving appropriate support (McGregor, 2020). One reason for this under-identification is that language difficulties are not always visible without formal assessment (Bishop *et al.*, 2017). Children who struggle with language may instead be perceived as quiet, inattentive, disengaged, or lacking motivation. In addition, children whose difficulties affect receptive language may be less likely to be identified than those with more obvious expressive difficulties, such as speech sound errors (Bishop *et al.*, 2017). Because receptive language problems can be less visible in everyday interaction, they may be misinterpreted or overlooked by adults. Thus, recognizing the early signs of DLD and implementing systematic screening and assessment procedures is an important step toward improving identification and support for children with language difficulties (McGregor, 2020).

DLD can affect children's progress at school. Language skills play a central role in learning, and when children experience persistent difficulties understanding or using language, many school tasks become more difficult. Children with DLD are more likely to experience difficulties in reading, writing, and understanding classroom instruction. Even children whose early language difficulties mainly involve expressive language and whose speech may appear improved by the time they start school still face a higher risk

of later literacy problems (St Clair *et al.*, 2011). Studies exploring children over time have also shown that the difference in language abilities between children with DLD and their typically developing peers often remains stable or even becomes larger as children grow older, particularly as schoolwork becomes more linguistically demanding (Isoaho *et al.*, 2016). These challenges are especially visible in areas such as vocabulary development, understanding complex explanations, and literacy skills (Dockrell & Connelly, 2015; Graham *et al.*, 2020). Many classroom activities require students to process long verbal instructions, follow explanations, read complex texts, and express their ideas clearly in writing. For children with DLD, tasks that involve understanding complex sentences, using grammar accurately, or retrieving the right words may require much greater effort (Leonard, 2014).

DLD often occurs together with other developmental conditions, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Andreou *et al.*, 2020; Bishop *et al.*, 2017). When language difficulties are combined with challenges in attention, behavior, or social communication, students may experience additional barriers in the classroom. Thus, in addition to academic challenges, children with DLD may also experience social and emotional difficulties. Communication problems can make it harder for children to participate in conversations, explain their ideas, or resolve misunderstandings with peers (Conti-Ramsden *et al.*, 2013). Because of these difficulties, children with DLD may sometimes experience lower self-confidence, anxiety, or feelings of frustration (St Clair *et al.*, 2011). Research also suggests that they may be more vulnerable to peer difficulties, including social exclusion or bullying (St Clair *et al.*, 2011).

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants were six male university students (P1-P6) aged between 19 and 24 years old who were enrolled in engineering programs at a public university in Greece. All participants reported a history consistent with DLD and described experiencing language-related difficulties during childhood. Despite these challenges during childhood, all participants had successfully progressed to higher education and were currently enrolled in demanding university programs. The study therefore focused on their retrospective reflections on childhood experiences with language difficulties, particularly in school and family contexts. Participants were recruited within the university context. The first author was the students' tutor in an academic course at the time of the study. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that their decision to participate or decline would have no impact on their academic evaluation.

3.2 Research procedure

Potential participants were informed about the purpose of the research through an invitation distributed within the university course context. Students who identified as

having a history of language difficulties consistent with DLD were invited to participate. Because one of the researchers was also the students' tutor, particular care was taken to emphasize that participation was entirely voluntary and unrelated to course assessment. Students were assured that their decision to participate or decline would have no impact on their academic evaluation. Students who expressed interest in participating received detailed information about the study and provided informed consent before data collection began. Individual interview appointments were then scheduled at a time convenient for the participants.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a quiet setting at the university. At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded of the aims of the study and reassured about confidentiality. The interviews encouraged participants to reflect on their childhood experiences with language difficulties, particularly in relation to school, peer relationships, emotional experiences, and family life. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions when participants raised important experiences or examples. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate capture of the data. Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim to prepare the data for analysis. Identifying information was removed from transcripts, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym (P1-P6) to ensure confidentiality.

3.3 Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected because it allows researchers to identify and interpret patterns of meaning across qualitative data while remaining sensitive to participants' individual experiences. The analysis followed several stages. First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. During this stage, initial notes were taken regarding recurring ideas, experiences, and patterns described by participants. Second, an initial coding process was conducted in which segments of text relevant to the research questions were assigned descriptive codes. These codes captured key aspects of participants' experiences, such as communication difficulties in the classroom, anxiety during school interactions, social misunderstandings, withdrawal from peer interactions, and family-related experiences. In the third stage, related codes were grouped together into broader categories in order to identify potential themes. Through an iterative process of reviewing and refining these categories, several overarching themes emerged across participants' accounts. Finally, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately reflected the patterns present in the dataset and were supported by participants' narratives. The final themes captured key aspects of participants' retrospective childhood experiences with DLD, including school-related anxiety, overthinking and rumination, social frustration, social withdrawal, emotional regulation difficulties, and family dynamics. Throughout the analysis process,

the researcher repeatedly returned to the original transcripts to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the participants' accounts.

4. Findings

Data analysis generated two main themes relating to participants' childhood experiences: School struggles and Home struggles. Within these themes, several subthemes were identified that describe how language difficulties shaped participants' academic, social, and family experiences.

4.1 School struggles

Participants described school as a setting where their language difficulties became particularly noticeable. Many recalled struggling to follow instructions, keep up with fast conversations, and respond quickly in class. These situations often created stress, misunderstandings, and feelings of embarrassment. Over time, these experiences affected both their academic participation and their social relationships with peers. Participants also described emotional consequences such as anxiety, withdrawal, and reduced confidence. Seven subthemes emerged within this theme: communication-related anxiety in school, anticipatory worry and rumination, protective social withdrawal, intense emotional reactions, peer marginalization and bullying, concealing communication difficulties, and erosion of self-confidence.

4.1.1 Anxiety at school

When participants talked about their childhood, many described school as a place where communication often felt stressful. They explained that understanding teachers' instructions, answering questions in class, or following conversations with friends could be difficult and sometimes embarrassing. Several students said they were often worried they had misunderstood something or might say the wrong thing. One student described how speaking in class created anxiety because he was never completely sure he had understood the teacher's question:

"I remember feeling really nervous when teachers asked questions in class. Sometimes I thought I understood, but when I started thinking about what to answer, I suddenly wasn't sure anymore. I was always worried that I had misunderstood the question...A few times, I answered something completely different from what the teacher meant, and everyone started laughing. After that, I became much quieter in class. I preferred not to raise my hand because I didn't want to feel that kind of embarrassment again." (P1)

Another participant explained that conversations with classmates could also be difficult because discussions moved quickly and jokes were sometimes hard to follow:

“With friends, it could be confusing because people talk fast and they jump from one topic to another. You know, sometimes someone made a joke, and everyone laughed, but I didn’t understand why. By the time I figured it out, the conversation had already moved on. I remember feeling uncomfortable because I thought people might think I was strange or slow. So sometimes I just stayed quiet or smiled even if I didn’t fully understand what was going on.” (P2)

Some participants said they often needed more time to understand teachers’ explanations. However, they felt uncomfortable asking teachers to repeat instructions:

“Teachers would explain something and everyone else seemed to understand immediately, meanwhile I was still trying to process what they had said... Sometimes I wanted to ask again, but I felt embarrassed, like the teacher might think I wasn’t paying attention. So I often just watched what the other students were doing and tried to copy them... Inside, I felt stressed because I wasn’t sure if I was doing the right thing.” (P3)

Participants also described constantly paying close attention during conversations because they were afraid of missing something important:

“I remember always being very alert when people were talking. I was trying to follow every word because I was worried I would miss something and then the whole conversation wouldn’t make sense... Even simple things like group work in class could feel stressful because everyone was talking and things were happening quickly. I had to concentrate very hard just to keep up..I still get this feeling at times.” (P4)

Looking back, several participants felt that this constant effort to follow conversations made school emotionally tiring:

“At the time, I didn’t really understand why school felt so exhausting. Now I realize it was because I was always trying so hard to understand everything people were saying. Other students could just listen and respond, but for me it felt like I had to work twice as hard just to follow a normal conversation.” (P2)

4.1.2 Overthinking

Many participants described how, during childhood, they spent a great deal of time worrying about situations that had already happened or about situations that might happen in the future. Several students explained that misunderstandings in school often stayed in their minds for a long time. They remembered thinking repeatedly about what teachers or classmates might have meant and whether they had responded correctly. P1 explained that he often worried about whether he had understood instructions properly, especially in classroom situations where teachers expected quick responses:

"When I was younger, I worried a lot about whether I had understood what the teacher wanted from me. Sometimes, the teacher explained something, and everyone else immediately started working, but I was still trying to figure out what the task actually was. I remember sitting there thinking, 'Did I miss something? Did I misunderstand?'...And then afterwards I kept thinking about it for hours, even when I went home, watching something on TV or playing a game on the tablet, I was still replaying the moment in my head, wondering if the teacher thought I wasn't paying attention or if I had done the task wrong... I remember myself as a child full of guilt." (P1)

Another participant described how negative experiences in the classroom sometimes led to constant anticipation of similar problems in the future:

"There were times when teachers got frustrated with me because they thought I wasn't listening. But usually I was listening, I just didn't fully understand what they meant. After a few experiences like that, I became very anxious in lessons. Before class even started, I was already thinking about what might go wrong. I worried that the teacher might ask me something and I wouldn't understand the question properly. It felt like I was always preparing myself for the possibility of getting something wrong." (P2)

Some students explained that misunderstandings or embarrassing moments in school stayed with them for a long time and were difficult to forget:

"If something awkward happened in class, like if I answered something wrong or misunderstood the question, I would think about it again and again afterwards...I remember lying in bed at night replaying the situation in my head, thinking about what I should have said instead...Even small things could stay in my mind for days. At the time, I felt like everyone else probably forgot about it, but for me, it was very hard to stop thinking about it." (P3)

Participants also described worrying in advance about future communication situations. P4 said that he constantly imagined possible misunderstandings before they even happened:

"I remember always thinking ahead about situations where I might have to speak...For example, if I knew we had to present something in class or answer questions, I would already start worrying days before. I kept thinking 'what if I misunderstand the question?' or 'what if I say something wrong and everyone laughs?'...My mind was always trying to predict what could go wrong, and always the worst scenario." (P4)

For some participants, this constant worrying extended to everyday conversations with peers. They explained that following group conversations required a lot of mental effort, and this sometimes made them anxious about social interactions:

“Group conversations were difficult because people talked quickly and interrupted each other. I remember trying very hard to follow everything that was being said, but sometimes I lost track of the conversation. When that happened, I felt uncomfortable because I didn’t know when it was my turn to speak or what the topic even was anymore. Afterwards, I would think about the conversation and wonder if I had said something strange or if people noticed that I was confused.” (P2)

Several students said that because they did not receive a diagnosis during childhood, they often blamed themselves for these experiences:

“When I was a child, I didn’t understand why communication felt so difficult for me. I just thought that I wasn’t as capable as other students. That made me analyse everything very carefully. I was always asking myself if I had misunderstood something or if I had said something wrong. Looking back, I think that’s why I spent so much time overthinking situations.” (P3)

Participants also described how this constant effort to understand conversations and avoid mistakes could be emotionally exhausting:

“School was tiring in a way that was difficult to explain at the time. Other students seemed relaxed when they talked or answered questions, but for me, every conversation required a lot of concentration. I was always listening very carefully, trying not to miss anything. That constant effort made me feel mentally exhausted, especially at the end of the day.” (P4)

Participants reported frustration during social interactions at school. They explained that communication difficulties sometimes led them to misunderstand what others meant or to react in ways that seemed unusual to their peers. These misunderstandings often create tension in everyday situations at school or during play with other children. Several participants explained that subtle aspects of communication, such as humour, sarcasm, or indirect comments, were particularly difficult to interpret. As a result, they sometimes reacted literally to statements that were intended as jokes:

“When I was younger, I didn’t always understand when someone was joking. A classmate might say something sarcastic, and everyone else would laugh, but I would take the comment seriously and respond to it literally. Then people would laugh even more because

my reaction didn't match the situation. I remember feeling confused and embarrassed because I didn't understand what had just happened." (P1)

Participants also described situations in which they misunderstood the intentions of others. At the time, it was not always clear whether someone was trying to help, teasing them, or criticising them:

"Sometimes a teacher or another student was actually trying to help me, but I interpreted it as criticism. For example, if someone corrected the way I explained something, I sometimes felt like they were pointing out that I had done something wrong. I would become defensive or upset because I thought they were making fun of me. Only later did I realise that they probably meant to help." (P2)

Several students described feeling slightly "out of sync" with their peers in social situations. Fast-moving conversations, particularly in groups, could be difficult to follow:

"In group situations, it was harder because people talked quickly and interrupted each other. Sometimes, by the time I understood what someone meant, the conversation had already moved on to something else. I would try to join the discussion, but my comment might not fit anymore. That made me feel like I was always slightly behind everyone else." (P3)

Group work at school was also described as challenging. Some participants explained that misunderstandings sometimes led classmates to become impatient:

"Group projects were stressful for me because everyone was discussing ideas at the same time. I needed a little more time to understand what people were suggesting. Sometimes other students would say things like 'we already explained that' or 'why don't you get it?' I remember feeling frustrated because I was trying very hard to follow the conversation, but it still felt confusing." (P4)

In some cases, repeated misunderstandings led to arguments or tension with peers:

"There were moments when I reacted strongly because I misunderstood what someone meant...A friend might say something that I thought was rude, so I responded angrily. Later, someone would explain that they were actually joking or trying to help...Situations like that happened quite often, and it made friendships more complicated." (P2)

Participants also described feeling excluded when peers lost patience with communication difficulties:

“Sometimes other children didn’t want to include me in games or group activities because I asked them to repeat things or I didn’t understand the rules straight away. I remember feeling like I slowed everyone down. After a while, I started avoiding certain situations because I didn’t want people to get annoyed with me.” (P1)

For several participants, these experiences gradually led to social withdrawal. Rather than risk further misunderstandings, they often preferred to remain quiet or observe rather than actively participate:

“After a while, I became quieter in groups. If I wasn’t completely sure what people were talking about, I preferred not to say anything. It felt safer to just listen rather than risk saying something that didn’t make sense. I think other people sometimes thought I was shy, but actually I was just trying to avoid making mistakes.” (P3)

Looking back, participants recognized that these social difficulties were often connected to the effort required to interpret language and social cues in real time:

“At the time, I just felt frustrated because I didn’t understand why conversations seemed easier for everyone else. Now I realise that I was working much harder than other children just to follow what people were saying and what they meant.” (P4)

4.1.3 Isolating

Participants described withdrawing from social or classroom interactions as a way of protecting themselves from situations where communication felt difficult or stressful. Rather than actively choosing isolation, many explained that becoming quiet, distant, or unapproachable sometimes helped them avoid situations where they might misunderstand others or struggle to respond. One participant explained that staying quiet in the classroom became a way of hiding communication difficulties:

“At school, I often stayed very quiet in class, I am still doing it here...Teachers probably thought I was shy or just not interested, but actually it was a way of protecting myself...If I didn’t speak, no one would notice that I was struggling to understand everything that was being said. I felt safer when I could sit quietly and observe rather than risk answering something incorrectly.” (P1)

Another participant described deliberately creating distance from classmates in order to avoid expectations to participate in conversations:

“Sometimes I acted a bit distant or serious when I arrived at school. I think it was a way of making people think I didn’t want to talk. If people thought I was unfriendly or quiet, then they wouldn’t expect me to join conversations or answer lots of questions. Looking

back, I realise it was probably a way of protecting myself from situations where I might struggle to communicate.” (P2)

Several participants also described solitary play as creating a kind of protective space during childhood. Being alone reduced the pressure to follow fast conversations or respond immediately:

“When I was by myself, I felt much calmer. I had a very active imagination, and I could spend a long time creating stories or games on my own. In those moments, I didn’t have to worry about understanding what other people meant or about saying something wrong...I guess being alone felt safe, not anxiety for saying something wrong, no anxiety of whether the others will understand or humiliate me.” (P3)

At the same time, some participants explained that solitary play was not always a deliberate preference. In some cases, it developed because interacting with other children felt difficult or unpredictable:

“I wouldn’t say that I always wanted to be alone...Sometimes I would watch other children playing together, and I wished I could join them easily... But conversations moved quickly, and I often felt unsure about what to say or how to enter the group, so it was often easier to stay on my own.” (P6)

Some participants explained that social interaction felt easier when they were with children who communicated at a similar level or pace. Some recalled feeling more comfortable with younger children or with peers who also experienced learning or communication difficulties:

“I remember I often found it easier to talk with younger children because the conversations were simpler and slower. With children my own age, I sometimes felt pressure to respond quickly or to understand jokes and sarcasm. With younger children, I felt more relaxed because there was less expectation. I used to hang out with two of my cousins who were younger than me on purpose.” (P3)

4.1.4 Emotional struggles

Participants described childhood experiences in which emotions could become intense very quickly, particularly in situations which involved communication misunderstandings. Several students explained that confusion in conversations with teachers or peers often triggered strong emotional reactions such as frustration, embarrassment, or anger. At the time, they sometimes struggled to understand why these emotions appeared so suddenly. One participant described how misunderstandings in class could quickly lead to frustration.

“When I was younger, if I didn’t understand something in class, I could become very frustrated quite quickly... It wasn’t only about the task itself; it was the feeling that everyone else seemed to understand what was happening, and I didn’t. Sometimes I tried to hide it, but inside I felt very tense. Small things could make me react strongly because I already felt overwhelmed.” (P1)

Several participants explained that emotional reactions were often linked to misunderstandings in social situations. When they interpreted a situation incorrectly, the emotional response could appear before they had time to reflect on what had actually happened:

“Sometimes I reacted emotionally because I misunderstood what someone meant. For example, I might think that a classmate was making fun of me or criticizing me. I would feel upset or angry very quickly. I remember a couple of intense incidents in high school that actually got me in trouble... Later, I sometimes realized that they hadn’t meant it in that way, but in that moment the feeling was already very strong.” (P2)

Participants also described feeling emotionally overwhelmed after long school days that required constant attention to language and social cues:

“School was mentally exhausting for me because I had to concentrate so hard on what people were saying. By the end of the day, I often felt tired and irritable. Even small problems could make me upset because I felt like my brain had already worked too hard all day... We also have so many private lessons here and extracurricular activities, plus my mother used to drag me to all these specialists, it was exhausting.” (P5)

Participants frequently described childhood experiences in which emotions could shift quickly and intensely, particularly in situations which involved social misunderstandings. Several students explained that when they felt confused about what was happening in conversations with teachers or peers, this uncertainty often led to frustration, embarrassment, or anxiety. These reactions were sometimes difficult to control at the time, especially when participants felt they were being judged or misunderstood. P1 described how confusion in the classroom could quickly turn into emotional distress:

“When I was younger, if I didn’t understand something in class, the feeling could build up very quickly. At first, I would just feel confused, but then if the teacher moved on or if other students started working and I was still trying to understand the instructions, I would feel stressed and frustrated. Sometimes I became angry without really knowing why. It wasn’t that I wanted to react like that, but it felt like everything happened very quickly in my head.” (P1)

Another participant described how emotional reactions were often connected to misunderstandings in social interactions. In many cases, the emotional response occurred before there was time to reflect on the situation:

“Sometimes I reacted strongly because I thought someone was laughing at me or criticising me. I might feel hurt or embarrassed very quickly. Later, I would realise that maybe I misunderstood what they meant, but in that moment, the emotion felt very real. As a child, it was difficult to slow down and think about the situation more calmly.” (P2)

Participants also described how repeated misunderstandings sometimes created a feeling of emotional instability during school days. Some explained that they moved rapidly between different emotions depending on what was happening around them:

“At school, I remember feeling like my emotions could change very quickly. If something went well, I felt happy and relieved, but if I misunderstood something or someone corrected me in front of the class, I could suddenly feel upset or angry...It sometimes felt like I didn't have much control over those reactions.” (P3)

Several participants explained that emotional reactions were also connected to the effort required to follow conversations and interpret social cues. Maintaining this level of concentration throughout the school day could become exhausting:

“The whole day required a lot of effort because I was constantly trying to understand what people meant. I had to concentrate very hard just to follow conversations or instructions. By the end of the day, I often felt completely exhausted, and when you're that tired, it's easier to become irritated or upset about small things.” (P4)

Looking back as adults, participants recognized that these emotional reactions were often linked to the cognitive effort required to process language and social information in real time.

4.1.5 Marginalization and bullying

Some students described how language-related difficulties made them particularly visible to peers, especially when they were asked to read aloud or answer questions quickly. These situations sometimes exposed their communication difficulties to classmates, which in several cases became a source of teasing. Participants recalled feeling anxious when teachers asked students to read aloud in class. Several described these moments as situations where their language processing difficulties became publicly visible. As a result, some students reported experiencing laughter, mocking comments, or subtle forms of exclusion from peers. P1 explained:

“There was a particular teacher who insisted me to read aloud. She thought I was doing it on purpose, maybe, I don’t know. I felt horrible, I already knew something would go wrong. I hated it... I would lose my place or mispronounce words, and some classmates would start whispering or laughing. After a while, I just tried to avoid eye contact with the teacher so I wouldn’t be asked.”

For most participants, bullying was not always overt but instead appeared in the form of persistent teasing, imitation of speech patterns, or exclusion from social groups. Students described situations where peers mocked the way they spoke, particularly when they struggled to retrieve words or needed more time to express their ideas. P4 reflected on how these experiences affected his willingness to participate in classroom activities:

“Sometimes I knew the answer, but I didn’t want to speak because I was afraid I would get stuck trying to explain it. When that happened before, some students copied the way I spoke or repeated the sentence to make fun of it.” (P4)

Participants also described being labelled by peers as “slow,” “confused,” or “not paying attention,” labels that often emerged from misunderstandings of their language difficulties. These labels sometimes influenced their social position within the classroom, contributing to feelings of isolation. P3 recalled:

“People thought I didn’t understand things or that I was just slow. But usually, I understood, I just needed more time to explain what I meant.”

In some cases, bullying occurred during collaborative tasks such as group projects. Participants reported that classmates occasionally excluded them from decision-making processes or assigned them minor roles because they were perceived as less capable of contributing to discussions. P2 said:

“During group work, sometimes they would say ‘you just write the title’ or something small like that. I think they thought I would slow them down if I had to explain my ideas.”

These experiences had emotional consequences that extended beyond the classroom. Some participants described feeling embarrassed, anxious, or reluctant to participate in school activities that involved speaking in front of peers. P6 described how these experiences shaped his school participation:

“I started trying to stay invisible in class. If you don’t speak, nobody notices the mistakes.”

4.1.6 Hiding difficulties

Many participants described developing strategies during childhood to avoid situations where their communication difficulties might become visible. One common strategy involved becoming very quiet in the classroom in order to reduce expectations to participate:

"In class, I often stayed quiet because I felt safer and calmer... If I didn't speak, then nobody would notice that I was struggling to understand everything... Some teachers probably thought I was shy, or lazy, but really I was trying to protect myself from situations where I might misunderstand something." (P2)

Another participant described deliberately appearing distant or uninterested as a way of avoiding interaction:

"Sometimes I tried to look serious or a bit unapproachable when I arrived at school. I think it was a kind of defence. If people thought I didn't want to talk, they wouldn't expect me to join conversations or answer questions. That way I could avoid situations where I might say something wrong." (P1)

Participants explained that these strategies were not always conscious decisions but gradually developed through repeated experiences of misunderstanding or embarrassment:

"After a few situations where I answered something incorrectly and people laughed, I became more careful. I realized that if I stayed quiet, those situations were less likely to happen. So over time, I just became the quiet student in the class." (P3)

Some students also described solitary play as a protective space during childhood. Being alone reduced the pressure to follow complex conversations or respond quickly:

"When I was alone, I felt much calmer. I had a strong imagination, and I could spend hours creating stories or games in my head. Being alone meant I didn't have to worry about understanding conversations or explaining things clearly." (P4)

However, participants explained that solitary activities were not always a preferred choice. In many cases, they emerged because social interaction felt more demanding:

"It's not that I always wanted to be alone. Sometimes I watched other children playing together and wished I could join easily. But conversations moved fast, and there were lots

of things happening at once. It felt easier to stay on my own rather than constantly trying to keep up.” (P2)

Some participants also described observing other children from a distance, attempting to understand social behavior:

“Sometimes I would sit nearby and watch other children talking... Even if I didn’t understand every word, I could observe their body language and the way they reacted to each other. But sometimes that made me overthink things because I started wondering if people were judging me.” (P3)

Interestingly, several participants explained that social interaction sometimes felt easier with younger children or with peers who had similar communication difficulties:

“I often preferred playing with younger children because the conversations were simpler and slower. With children my own age, there was more pressure to understand jokes or respond quickly. With younger children, I felt more relaxed.” (P1)

4.1.7 Low Self-Confidence

As participants grew older, many described becoming increasingly aware that communication and academic tasks felt more difficult for them than for their peers. This awareness often influenced how they perceived their own abilities. Several participants recalled moments during childhood when they began to believe that they were less capable than other students, particularly when misunderstandings occurred in front of classmates or when they required more time to complete academic tasks. One participant described how classroom situations involving reading aloud created strong feelings of insecurity:

“Reading aloud in class was one of the moments where I felt most anxious. When it was my turn, I could feel my heart beating faster because I was worried I might mispronounce something or lose my place in the text. Sometimes I understood the meaning of the sentence, but struggled to say it smoothly. When other students read, everything sounded natural and quick, but for me, it required a lot more effort. After a few experiences like that, I started hoping that the teacher would skip my turn.” (P1)

Another participant explained that needing more time to process instructions sometimes led them to doubt their own abilities:

“There were many times when the teacher explained an exercise and everyone else started working straight away. I was still trying to understand what the task actually was. In

those moments, I felt very aware that I was slower than the others. I remember thinking that maybe I just wasn't as intelligent as the rest of the class." (P2)

Participants also described how repeated academic challenges sometimes created the impression that they needed to work significantly harder than their peers to achieve similar results:

"I spent a lot of time studying when I was at school. I would read the same material again and again and write summaries until I memorized everything. It sometimes took me hours to prepare for a test. What confused me was that some of my friends barely studied and still achieved higher marks. That made me question myself because I felt like I was trying very hard but still not performing as well." (P3)

Several participants recalled specific comments from classmates that contributed to their feelings of low confidence:

"There were moments when other students made comments about the way I spoke or about misunderstandings during class. One time, someone said something like 'don't ask him, he never gets it anyway'. I remember feeling embarrassed and wishing I could disappear. At that age you start believing what people say about you." (P4)

Some participants also described feeling hesitant to participate in classroom discussions because they feared that their responses might reveal misunderstandings:

"Even when I thought I knew the answer, I often didn't raise my hand because I was worried that I might have misunderstood the question. I remember thinking that it would be worse to answer incorrectly in front of everyone than to stay quiet. So I often chose not to participate, even when I had ideas I wanted to share." (P2)

Some participants explained that these experiences gradually influenced how they saw themselves academically:

"As a child, I often thought that something must be wrong with me because other students seemed to understand things more easily. When teachers explained something once, most students understood. I often needed to hear it several times or think about it longer. That made me believe that I was not as capable, that I was slow. It really is a horrible feeling. Sometimes I remember myself, and I really feel sorry for myself back then." (P1)

For some participants, these feelings continued into adolescence and adulthood, even after they became more aware of their language difficulties:

“Even now, I sometimes feel that lack of confidence. I know logically that I am capable and that I have succeeded academically, but there is still a small voice in my head that says maybe I’m not good enough. I think that feeling started during school because I often compared myself with other students.” (P3)

4.2 Home struggles

Beyond school, participants described how their language difficulties influenced everyday life at home. Several students recalled that challenges with homework, communication, and emotional stress often extended into family interactions. Although many participants said that their families were supportive, they also described moments of tension, worry, and emotional complexity within the household. These experiences affected how participants perceived their role within the family and how they understood their own difficulties. Three subthemes emerged within this broader theme: Parent guilt, Comparisons with siblings, and Financial pressures.

4.2.1 Feeling as a burden

Participants described how homework and studying frequently became a prolonged evening activity within the home. Tasks that might take other children a short amount of time often required repeated explanation, reading, and memorisation. Participants recalled their mothers sitting with them for extended periods, sometimes late into the night, helping them understand schoolwork or prepare for exams. Several students explained that, even as children, they were aware that this level of support required considerable patience and time from their parents. Observing this effort sometimes created feelings of responsibility or guilt:

“Homework was rarely something I could just do on my own. My mother usually sat with me at the table, and we went through everything step by step. Sometimes we spent two or three hours on something that probably took other children thirty minutes. I remember feeling bad because I could see how tired she was, but she still stayed there helping me...In many cases, we had fights, endless fights for hours and hours.” (P1)

Another participant described how studying often continued late into the evening, particularly during periods of exams or tests:

“When I had exams, my mother would sit with me for hours while I studied. She helped me organize the material, explain things again, and sometimes test me on what I had memorized...I remember nights when we were still sitting at the kitchen table very late. Even though she never complained, I could see that it was exhausting for her.” (P2)

Participants also described noticing moments when their parents appeared worried or disappointed about their academic progress. Even when parents did not express this directly, children sometimes interpreted their reactions in that way:

“Sometimes when I struggled with something again and again, I could see my mother becoming frustrated or worried. She tried to hide it, but as a child, you notice these things. I remember thinking that I was the reason she was stressed...My dad was a bit calmer; he wasn't around much in any case. My schoolwork was mum's job.” (P3)

Another participant recalled feeling particularly uncomfortable when school results did not reflect the effort invested at home:

“The hardest moments were when I studied for many hours with my mother and then still didn't perform very well on the test. I remember coming home and feeling embarrassed because she had spent so much time helping me. It felt like I had let her down because really, it was like we were going to school together.” (P4)

P1 explained that this dynamic created a strong sense of responsibility to succeed academically, partly as a way of justifying his parents' effort:

“I think one reason I worked so hard at school was that I didn't want my parents to feel that their time had been wasted...When someone spends hours, days, years helping you every evening, you feel like you have to prove that it was worth it.” (P1)

Participants also described noticing differences between themselves and siblings in relation to parental support. While siblings often completed homework independently, participants sometimes required more supervision:

“I was sort of the problem...My brother usually finishes his homework quickly and then goes to do something else. Meanwhile, my mother was still sitting with me, explaining things again. I remember thinking that I was creating extra work for her.” (P2)

P3 described moments when parental concern about their academic progress became visible in everyday conversations:

“There were times when my parents discussed my school performance at home, sometimes asking teachers for advice or trying to figure out how to help me improve...Even if they didn't say it directly, I felt like I was the center of that worry.” (P3)

4.2.2 Comparisons to siblings

Another recurring experience described by participants involved comparisons with siblings. Many participants recalled becoming aware, from an early age, that brothers or sisters seemed to complete school tasks more quickly or understand instructions with less effort. These differences were often noticed during shared study time at home and sometimes shaped how participants perceived their own abilities. One participant described how these differences became particularly visible during evening homework routines:

“My sister used to finish her homework quickly and then go and play with the tablet. Meanwhile, I was still sitting at the kitchen table trying to understand the instructions or reading the same paragraph again. My mother would still be sitting next to me, helping me, while my sister had already finished everything. Even if nobody said anything, I could see the difference, and it made me feel like I was slower.” (P4)

Another participant explained that siblings often appeared to study with much less effort, which sometimes created frustration:

“I remember that my brother didn't seem to need much time to study. He could read something once and understand it immediately. For me, it was very different. I needed to read things several times and sometimes write them down again so I could remember them. Watching him finish quickly while I was still working made me feel like something about me was not working the same way.” (P2)

Some participants recalled that family conversations about school performance sometimes unintentionally reinforced these comparisons:

“Sometimes my parents would say things like ‘your brother finished this very quickly’ or ‘your sister didn't find this difficult’. I don't think they meant it in a negative way. They were probably just surprised that something was harder for me. But as a child, I interpreted it as meaning that I wasn't doing as well as I should.” (P3)

P1 explained that these comparisons were internal rather than explicitly stated by parents. Simply observing how easily siblings completed tasks affected his own self-perception:

“Even if nobody said anything, I could see that things were easier for my siblings...They could read faster, understand instructions immediately and move on to the next task without needing help. Meanwhile, I often needed my mother to explain things again and again and again...That made me feel like something about me was different.” (P1)

P4 recalled feeling embarrassed during moments when parents helped them with homework while siblings worked independently:

“My parents always used to sit next to me, explaining something while my sister was already finished and doing something else...I remember feeling embarrassed because it made the difference very visible. I felt like I needed more help than everyone else and that I was tiring them.” (P4)

For P2, these experiences led to quiet self-comparisons:

“I didn’t really talk about it with anyone, but I felt horrible because both of my siblings didn’t seem to struggle in the same way...When they did homework, it looked easy...For me it required so much more time and effort. It was so frustrating, for almost all subjects...Even private tutors who used to come at home, like English, for example, I had the feeling they were fed up with me. I could tell they didn’t know what to tell my parents.” (P2)

Participants also recalled becoming aware, particularly during later childhood or adolescence, that their language difficulties required additional educational and professional support. Their parents organized tutoring, speech and language therapy, or other specialist interventions to help them keep up with school demands. Although participants recognised the value of this support, many described gradually becoming aware that these services involved financial costs and significant effort from their parents. One participant explained how this awareness developed over time:

“At some point, I realised that my parents were paying for extra tutoring to help me keep up with school. When you’re younger, you don’t really think about things like that; you just go to the lessons. But as I got older, I started understanding that it was expensive. I remember thinking that my parents were paying for something that my classmates didn’t need.” (P3)

Participants also described attending multiple forms of support, including speech therapy, private tutoring, or specialized educational sessions:

“When I was younger, I had speech therapy for quite a long time. Later, I also had extra tutoring to help me with school subjects. At the time I didn’t think much about it, but when I got older I realized that it meant my parents were organising and paying for many extra lessons outside school.” (P1)

For some participants, this support required families to reorganize schedules, travel to appointments, or devote large portions of time to supporting them academically:

"I remember that after school, we often had to go to different places for lessons or therapy sessions. My parents were constantly driving me to appointments or waiting while I had sessions. Looking back now, I realise that it must have been very tiring for them." (P4)

Some participants described noticing signs of parental exhaustion, particularly during periods when they were receiving multiple forms of support at the same time:

"There were evenings when my parents came home from work and still had to sit with me while I studied or take me to another lesson. I could see that they were tired, but they still tried to help. As a child, you start noticing that and you feel a bit responsible for it." (P2)

Participants also recalled moments where financial considerations became visible within family discussions:

"Sometimes I overheard conversations about whether to continue certain lessons or how to organise my support. My parents never said that it was a burden, but I realised that they were making decisions about money and time because of my difficulties." (P3)

Another participant described becoming particularly aware of these sacrifices during adolescence:

"When you're older, you start understanding how expensive these things can be. I realised that my parents were paying for specialists, tutoring and extra support so that I could keep up with school. That made me feel quite guilty because it felt like they were investing a lot in something that only I needed." (P4)

Participants often described mixed emotions in relation to this support. On the one hand, they felt grateful for the opportunities their parents provided; on the other hand, they sometimes experienced feelings of guilt or responsibility for the additional effort required:

"I was very grateful for the help my parents gave me, but at the same time I sometimes felt like I was asking too much from them...They had to organize extra lessons, spend evenings helping me study, invest time and money for specialists, therapies, and sometimes travel appointments...They never complained, but I could see that it required a lot of effort." (P2)

P1 also explained that this awareness influenced how hard he tried to succeed academically:

"I think one reason I pushed myself so much was that I knew how much my parents were doing to support me. When someone invests that much time and money in helping you, you feel like you have to make it worthwhile." (P1)

4.2.3 Financial strain

All participants stated they required additional educational and professional support. Their parents organized tutoring, speech and language therapy, or other specialist interventions to help them keep up with school demands. Although participants recognised the value of this support, many described gradually becoming aware that these services involved financial costs and significant effort from their parents. One participant explained how this awareness developed over time:

"At some point, I realised that my parents were paying for extra tutoring to help me keep up with school. When you're younger, you don't really think about things like that; you just go to the lessons. But as I got older, I started understanding that it was expensive. I remember thinking that my parents were paying for something that my classmates didn't need." (P3)

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For some participants, this support required families to reorganize schedules, travel to appointments, or devote large portions of time to supporting them academically:

"I remember that after school, we often had to go to different places for lessons or therapy sessions. My parents were constantly driving me to appointments or waiting while I had sessions. Looking back now, I realise that it must have been very tiring for them." (P5)

Some participants described noticing signs of parental exhaustion, particularly during periods when they were receiving multiple forms of support at the same time:

"There were evenings when my parents came home from work and still had to sit with me while I studied or take me to another lesson. I could see that they were tired, but they still tried to help. As a child, you start noticing that and you feel a bit responsible for it." (P2)

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“I was very grateful for the help my parents gave me, but at the same time, I sometimes felt like I was asking too much from them. They had to organise extra lessons, spend evenings helping me study, and sometimes travel to different appointments. Even though they never complained, I could see that it required a lot of effort.” (P2)

P1 also explained that this awareness influenced how hard he tried to succeed academically:

“I think one reason I pushed myself so much was that I knew how much my parents were doing to support me. When someone invests that much time and money in helping you, you feel like you have to make it worthwhile.” (P1)

5. Discussion and implications

The present study aimed to explore the childhood experiences of individuals with DLD through retrospective accounts of university students. One of the most prominent themes emerging from the findings was anxiety in school contexts. Participants described feeling uncertain about whether they had correctly understood teachers’ instructions and peer conversations. This uncertainty often created anxiety during classroom participation and social interaction. Previous findings also suggest children with DLD have higher levels of anxiety compared to their typically developing peers (Botting *et al.*, 2016; Forest *et al.*,

2020; St Clair *et al.*, 2011; Wadman *et al.*, 2011). The findings of the present study suggest that this anxiety may be closely related to the constant effort required to process language and interpret social communication in real time. As children, participants were unsure whether they had understood what others meant, and as a result, classroom participation and peer interactions were emotionally demanding.

Participants also described persistent overthinking and contemplation about communication situations. Many recalled repeatedly analyzing conversations with teachers or classmates and worrying about possible misunderstandings. These findings align with research suggesting that individuals with language difficulties may experience heightened self-monitoring and anxiety in communication contexts (Conti-Ramsden *et al.*, 2013; Forest *et al.*, 2020; St Clair *et al.*, 2011). In the present study, uncertainty appeared to play a central role in this process. Participants often described trying to anticipate potential misunderstandings before they occurred, suggesting that repeated communication difficulties may contribute to patterns of anticipatory worry. Another important finding relates to social frustration and peer difficulties. Participants reported feeling “out of sync” with their peers, particularly in fast-paced conversations or group activities. Misinterpreting humor, sarcasm, or indirect communication was described as a common source of misunderstanding. Previous findings have similarly shown that pragmatic language difficulties can affect peer relationships and increase the risk of social exclusion or bullying among children with DLD (Conti-Ramsden *et al.*, 2013; St Clair *et al.*, 2011). In the present study, participants described both subtle exclusion and overt teasing from peers, which shows how language-related misunderstandings may shape children’s social experiences in school.

Closely related to these social challenges was the theme of social withdrawal as a coping strategy. Some participants described becoming quieter in class or observing interactions from a distance in order to avoid situations where misunderstandings might occur. Although such strategies may reduce immediate stress, they may also limit opportunities for social participation and communication practice. Similar patterns of reduced participation in peer interactions have been documented in previous studies of children with language difficulties (Durkin & Conti-Ramsden, 2010).

Participants also described difficulties with emotional regulation, particularly in situations which involved misunderstanding or perceived criticism. Confusion in conversations or classroom tasks often triggered frustration, embarrassment, or anger. These emotional reactions may be linked to the cognitive effort required to process language and social information throughout the school day. When children must constantly monitor conversations, interpret meaning, and manage misunderstandings, emotional exhaustion may occur, which in turn increases vulnerability to emotional reactivity (Burnley *et al.*, 2023). The findings also highlight the importance of family dynamics in the experiences of children with DLD. Many participants recalled extensive parental involvement in their education, including long hours spent assisting with homework or arranging additional academic support. While participants generally

described this support positively, they often reported feeling guilty about the extra effort required from their parents. Similar experiences have been reported in studies in Greece which also investigated the broader family impact of developmental conditions where parents invest time, emotional energy and financial resources in order to support their children (Seiradakis, 2023;2024).

Participants also described comparisons with siblings, particularly during shared homework routines at home. Observing siblings complete school tasks more easily sometimes reinforced feelings of difference or reduced self-confidence. These experiences may contribute to the development of lower academic self-esteem, which has been documented in adolescents with language difficulties (Conti-Ramsden *et al.*, 2013). Finally, current findings show the long-term psychosocial consequences of childhood language difficulties. Even though participants have reached university-level education, several described continuing to experience lower confidence in communication situations. This finding supports longitudinal research suggesting that the effects of DLD may extend beyond childhood and influence self-perception and emotional well-being into adulthood (St Clair *et al.*, 2011).

The findings of this study have several implications for educational practice and support for students with DLD. First, the results highlight the importance of recognising that language difficulties can affect students' emotional well-being and classroom participation. Teachers should be aware that students who appear quiet, disengaged, or hesitant to participate may be experiencing difficulties processing language rather than lacking motivation or interest. Second, the findings suggest that classroom environments may benefit from clearer communication strategies. Providing explicit instructions, allowing additional processing time, and checking for understanding may reduce anxiety and confusion for students with language difficulties. Creating supportive classroom environments in which students feel comfortable asking for clarification may also help reduce the fear of misunderstanding. Third, the study highlights the importance of addressing the social and emotional aspects of DLD. Interventions should not focus exclusively on language development but should also support students' confidence in communication and their participation in peer interactions. Schools may benefit from implementing supportive strategies that promote inclusive communication practices and reduce stigma associated with language difficulties. Finally, the findings emphasize the role of families in supporting children with DLD. Parents often invest significant time and emotional effort in supporting their children's learning. Providing families with clearer information, guidance, and access to appropriate services may help reduce stress and improve support for children with language difficulties.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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