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The Perceptions Parents of Dyslexic Children Have on Barriers to Meaningful Parent–School Partnerships in Australia

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ABSTRACT
The relationship between schools and parents has evolved over recent years and is now recognized as a valuable and bi-directional partnership in the educative process. This partnership is of particular significance for parents with a dyslexic child, playing a vital role in ensuring success within the school and beyond. Using a unique conceptual lens of parental allyship, this paper reports on an investigation that employed semi-structured interviews to investigate the experiences of ten Australian parents of dyslexic children and the actions they undertook to meet their child's needs within the school. Using qualitative content analysis, we explored the nature and impact of these experiences on both the parents and the parent–school partnership. Findings indicate that parents develop a level of expertise in their allyship to their child and this expertise is not always welcomed by the school. In addition, parents perceived interpersonal and systemic barriers that hindered both the parent–school partnership and the support provided to their dyslexic child. The paper contributes unique insights into the perspectives of parents on how parent–school policy is enacted at a school level, and raises consideration for a greater focus on parent–school partnerships for the future educational success of dyslexic children.

Introduction

Across educational contexts, international and national policies inform and guide best practice for successful collaboration between parents and schools for the purpose of achieving positive educational success. Over the last three decades globally, these policies and guidelines have shifted their terminology from parental involvement (including activities such as volunteering in the classroom and school-initiated communication (Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2016)), to engagement (the active participation of the parent in enhancing their child's academic performance and well-being (Fox & Olsen, 2014; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014)). However, more recently, research in Australia, England, and the United States has referred to partnerships (Graham et al., 2021; Haines et al., 2022), with greater emphasis on involving and engaging parents, and equalizing the parent–school power balance (Kambouri et al., 2021; Oyarzún et al., 2022). Current policy rhetoric and literature use the term partnerships to denote activities based on mutual trust respect between schools and parents. There is also an increased emphasis on the shared responsibility for the decision making that supports the education of the child (Graham et al., 2021).

For parents of dyslexic children, these actions may include: discussing disability discrimination legislation with teachers (Nevill & Forsey, 2022b); addressing perceived systemic inequities (Delany, 2017; Leitão et al., 2017; Levi, 2017); and actions undertaken outside of the school to complement the

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child's learning (Barker & Harris, 2020) such as delivering reading interventions at home (Delany, 2017). In the context of this paper, these parental actions are referred to as parental allyship, defined as the additional responsibilities that parents of dyslexic children take on, beyond that which is expected of parents of non-dyslexic children in supporting their child's education (Gray & Gayles, 2018). Parental allyship is the act of parents working from their position of power and privilege to reduce systematic and interpersonal barriers their disabled children face (Radke et al., 2020).

Policy devolution has impacted parental allyship by shifting institutional responsibility for education, to individuals in parenting roles (Nevill & Forsey, 2022b; Oyarzún et al., 2022). This has impacted parental allyship by commodifying parents who serve as a resource for the school to maximize their child's learning (Vincent, 2017) with the obligation resting on the parents to act as intermediaries in their child's learning (Nevill & Forsey, 2022b; Oyarzún et al., 2022). Consequently, parents of disabled children who act strongly in allyship roles often have nuanced, or expert knowledge of educational support strategies (Burke et al., 2022). Despite this, parents of dyslexic children are seldom seen as experts, or as equal partners in decision making related to their child's education (Earey, 2013; Griffiths et al., 2004; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011), despite the messaging espoused within current PSP policy.

The issue, in part, is that extant research exploring PSP policy and efficacy has generally considered the parent–school partnership from the perspectives of parents with able-bodied and neurotypical children (Burke et al., 2022; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Leitão et al., 2017; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022; Vincent, 2017). Equally, current research on Australian parents of dyslexic children has broadly explored the experiences of identifying difficulties in reading, obtaining a diagnosis and interactions with their child's school (Delany, 2017; Leitão et al., 2017; Levi, 2017). Research exploring the phenomenon of school partnerships with parents of a neurodiverse child, such as parents of dyslexic children, is limited and, therefore, needed in order to better understand the nuances of these school-based interactions (Leitão et al., 2017).

This paper reports on research that sought to deepen the understanding of the experiences of parents of primary-aged dyslexic children within the school context by exploring the experiences of dyslexic children and their parents in the educational environment. Drawing on an innovative framework that positions parental allyship of a primary experience that sits adjacent to their child's disability identity, the paper reports on the findings from semi-structured interviews, conducted online with ten Australian parents and their dyslexic children about their experiences, attitudes, and actions that influence and are a result of, their interactions with their child's school.

Forming part of the first author's doctoral studies, this paper position parental allyship to dyslexic children as a type of disability experience (any experience that is the result of a disability or disabling event) that sits adjacent to the disability identity of the child they are allied to. In this paper, we review the literature on PSP policy in Australia, while considering the allyship actions parents take in the school setting. We specifically examine the perspectives of parents of dyslexic children in Australia, and how they take on additional responsibilities, to support their child in the school context. We conclude by discussing the implications for enacting PSP policy and lessening the policy–practice divide, as well as providing guidance for future research.

Literature review

Importance of parent–school partnerships

A number of key policy documents, applicable to all state, Catholic and independent educational contexts, guide parent–school partnerships (PSP) in Australia, and emphasize both the importance of PSPs and guide the partnership actions of teachers. The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020), for example, evidences a commitment from all levels of Australian government to the core principles and values of partnerships. The Declaration outlined the aspiration of developing stronger partnerships between families and schools for the purpose of improving academic and well-being outcomes, a sentiment reinforced more recently in the Australian Guideline on Parent and Family Engagement (Barker & Harris, 2020).

While these documents speak to PSP in a general sense, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2021) set out specific responsibilities for teachers to work in partnership with parents of disabled children, including dyslexic students. Both standard 3.7, which seeks to engage parents in the education process, and 7.3, which requires teachers to be responsive in all communications with parents/carers about their children's learning and wellbeing, necessitate that teachers engage with parents to ensure that all children receive a high-quality education. Further to these Teacher Standards, the Disability Standards for Education (DSE), Section 3.5 mandates that teachers need to consult with parents regarding any reasonable adjustments that are made for a disabled child (Australian Government Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020). These documents appear to welcome parents of dyslexic children to undertake actions and behaviors that would involve them in meaningful dialogue and decision making with their children's educators.

While PSP policy in Australia seeks to positively influence outcomes for all children (Barker & Harris, 2020), there has been little inquiry into the impact that the enactment of policy and guidelines has on specific disability groups, such as dyslexics, and further to this point, their parents. A recent review of the current Australian policies and practices that impact children with dyslexia by Maxwell (2019) identified initiatives such as improved initial teacher education and formal recognition for *dyslexia friendly schools*, yet did not consider PSPs and the policy that influences them. More recently, the Review of the National School Reform Agreement (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2022) considered the progress on national education reform efforts to improve student outcomes in Australia. While this document reflects the collaboration and efforts of the Federal, state and territory governments, it does not specifically address PSP, the needs of dyslexic students, or the contributions of parents to the successful outcomes of students. The absence of a detailed review of the impacts of PSP for dyslexic students and their parents is noteworthy in the face of long-established policies highlighting the responsibilities parents play in their children's education (Australian Department of Education Employment Workplace Relations, 2008; Barker & Harris, 2020; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

While the goals of Australian policy are noble in their intentions, there is a discord between these aspirations and the way policy is enacted at an individual school level (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022), and thus between individual educators and parents of children with disabilities. Further criticisms of PSP included how in Australian initial teacher training programs there is little time spent on either dyslexia-related content (Leitão et al., 2017; Levi, 2017; Maxwell, 2019; Nevill & Forsey, 2022b), or parent engagement and partnerships (Saltmarsh et al., 2015). Further, it has been suggested that the parameters for what constitutes appropriate parental behavior, conducive to productive PSP, is far too narrow, and places restrictive boundaries on parents who display too much interest in their children's education (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022; Vincent, 2017). In addition, the Australian Review of the National School Reform Agreement (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2022) highlighted that teachers feel overwhelmed by the requirements to manage students' complex needs in partnership with parents while concurrently calling for the strengthening of these partnerships to improve student well-being. There is a clear disconnect between the aspirations of PSP policy and the enactment of these obligations at the school level.

Parental allyship and parent–school partnerships

Research has shown that within the school context, it is common that parents of disabled children will undertake additional actions to support their child's educational progress beyond that expected of a typical parent (Al Otaiba & Petscher, 2020; Burke et al., 2022). In their study of parental support in the special education setting, Trainor (2010) determined that parents act intuitively, as disability experts, as strategists and as agents for systemic change while relying on access to information and connections between people in order to address educational inequity. Although parents undertake to address the barriers their children face, they are often faced with barriers of their own, such as difficult communication with educators (Rossetti et al., 2021). Interestingly, a dissatisfaction in education supports has been linked to increased parental action within the school context and higher engagement in parental actions has been linked to more adversarial and negative relationships with their child's school (Burke & Hodapp, 2016), creating a cyclical process of action and effect.

In an American study looking at the nature of parental allyship in the early years specifically, Schraml-Block and Ostrosky (2022) found that allyship required acquired knowledge and actions taken to benefit their child. In a similar exploratory study about how parents accessed and developed knowledge of special education processes, Huscroft D'Angelo et al. (2022) found that 90% of the parents reported seeking information on how to be a better ally to their child, however, less than half of the participants reported having knowledge of how to manage disagreements with the school. Further to this, the authors expressed intrigue at the finding that parents who have more knowledge of service provision had lower levels of satisfaction with services. Huscroft D'Angelo et al. (2022) study, however, specifically looked at parental involvement in the Individual Education Plan process in the United States, a process which is guided by different policy and legislation to that in Australia. The study reported in this paper thus contributes further to these previous works through its investigation of parental-school allyship actions in Australian primary schools.

Parental allyship for Australian parents of dyslexic children

Dyslexia is a neurodevelopmental disorder that results in difficulties in literacy acquisition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Snowling, 2019) that affects between 5–15% of children and adults (Nevill & Forsey, 2022a; Shaywitz et al., 2021; Wagner et al., 2020). Dyslexic children are often exposed to negative teacher attitudes such as a belief that they are lazy or unintelligent (Hornstra et al., 2010; Livingston et al., 2018). They are also more likely than their neurotypical peers to display internalized and externalized behaviors (Boyes et al., 2019) and are at greater risk of poorer academic and mental health outcomes due to the difficulties associated with the diagnosis (Shaywitz et al., 2021). Due to the challenge in the school setting brought about by dyslexia, parents will often seek to remediate the difficulties their child encounters by seeking to work with their child's educators, however these interactions are often problematic or fraught with their own challenges (Griffiths et al., 2004; Ross, 2020; Wilmot et al., 2023a). The term *dyslexic child/ren* has been used in the paper, adopting identity first language in line with the United Nations Convention of the Right of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) and calls from disability groups and individuals to use identity first language (Andrews et al., 2019; Brown, 2016).

While parents of dyslexic children, are often moved to take on the role of ally in the school context, there has been little exploration of the mechanisms and outcomes of these parental actions in the Australian context for dyslexic children (Burke et al., 2022). Two Australian studies have provided important findings on how the role of parental support evolves due to the inadequacies they experience in the educational context. An Australian study by Delany (2017), for example, reported that mothers described the experience of partnership as ”long, difficult journey to empowerment” (p. 104). These mothers explained that their sense of self and personal identity changed because of the allyship role they reluctantly took on to compensate for what they saw as a failing system. Parents in Nevill et al. (2022) Australian study went so far as to suggest that some teachers did not have an understanding of the needs of dyslexic children or the relevant policies that should guide their engagement with the parent. They also revealed that parents' intention to be both ally to their child and partner with the teacher in their child's education was not always well received. Despite the comprehensive contributions that these two studies make to the landscape of dyslexia studies in Australia, further consideration of how PSP occurs in practice, and is experienced by parents of dyslexic children, is needed.

Consistent in the studies on Australian parents of dyslexic children is a theme that interactions with their child's school can be fraught with difficulties and that the role of the parent is directly impacted by those difficulties. Focussing on the experiences of Victorian parents of dyslexic children, Levi (2017) found that parental allyship stemmed from feelings of injustice and inequity relating to their child's experiences in the school setting. As with other studies (see Delany, 2017), the parents in Levi's (2017) study spoke of their role in *fighting* the education system. Interestingly, this fight was not directed at individual teachers but at the system more broadly. Similarly, Leitão et al. (2017) concluded that the role of the parent has changed as parents are forced to respond to the failings of the school environment. Further to this, Nevill and Forsey (2022b) ascribed this role shift to the devolution of policy, which requires Australian parents of disabled children to take on more responsibilities associated with the education of their children. While these studies provide insight into the experiences and perceptions of Australian parents of dyslexic children, they do not take into consideration how these experiences relate to PSP and the allyship activities of parents.

Conceptual framework

This paper uses a conceptual lens on parental allyship developed as part of the first author's Doctoral studies (Leslie, 2024). It is underpinned by the conceptualization that disability experiences are something that occurs for the person who holds the disability identity (in-group members), and for those who seek to support them (out-group members). The conceptual lens proposes that out-group members, in this case parents, who do not hold the disability identity yet still have experiences because of the disability, are having experiences that sit adjacent to that of their child. This distinction is significant as it acknowledges that the experiences of the person without a disability are never the same as the experiences of the person with the disability (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Wasserman et al., 2011); however, as an out-group member they can still be impacted by events and interactions related to the disability (Radke et al., 2020).

Although advocacy can be defined as the structured act of speaking on behalf of oneself, or on behalf of another person or group, to help address unmet needs (Leslie et al., 2024), this definition does not acknowledge the cultural appropriateness that can occur when non-group members speak *on behalf of* in-group members (Mosley & Biernat, 2021). Clearly delineating between the disability experience for a disabled person, and a person acting as a disability ally, ensures that those with a disability have their own voice heard without out-group members conflating their disability-related experiences as being the same (Razzante & Orbe, 2018). The conceptual lens developed for this study creates this delineation by utilizing the specific terms advocacy and allyship, to influence the way disability experience is viewed (Leslie et al., 2024). As shown in Figure 1 (Conceptual framework of advocacy and allyship), while often framed as a form of advocacy in the literature, the role of parents is more akin to allyship, due to the parents' membership in a dominant social group of adulthood.

Although self-advocacy is often defined as actions taken by an individual to benefit the social group to which they belong (Gray & Gayles, 2018), allyship considers the nuanced impact of membership in a dominant social group being utilized to support a non-dominant social group (Radke et al., 2020). This is the case for parents, members of the dominant social group, seeking to support their dyslexic child, and members of a non-dominant social group (Leslie et al., 2024). Making this distinction is an important one, as allyship gives greater recognition to the complexities of the interactions between social groups (Pratto et al., 2006; Razzante & Orbe, 2018). Drawing on this conceptual lens, this paper reports on the out-group member experiences and perspectives of parents of dyslexic children that relate to their child's disability, while honoring the children's experiences are their own.

Methods

This paper reports on the perspectives of Australian parents of dyslexic children regarding the interactions they had in the educational setting their child attended. A qualitative approach to the project was embraced in order to respond to the research question *What are the barriers to*

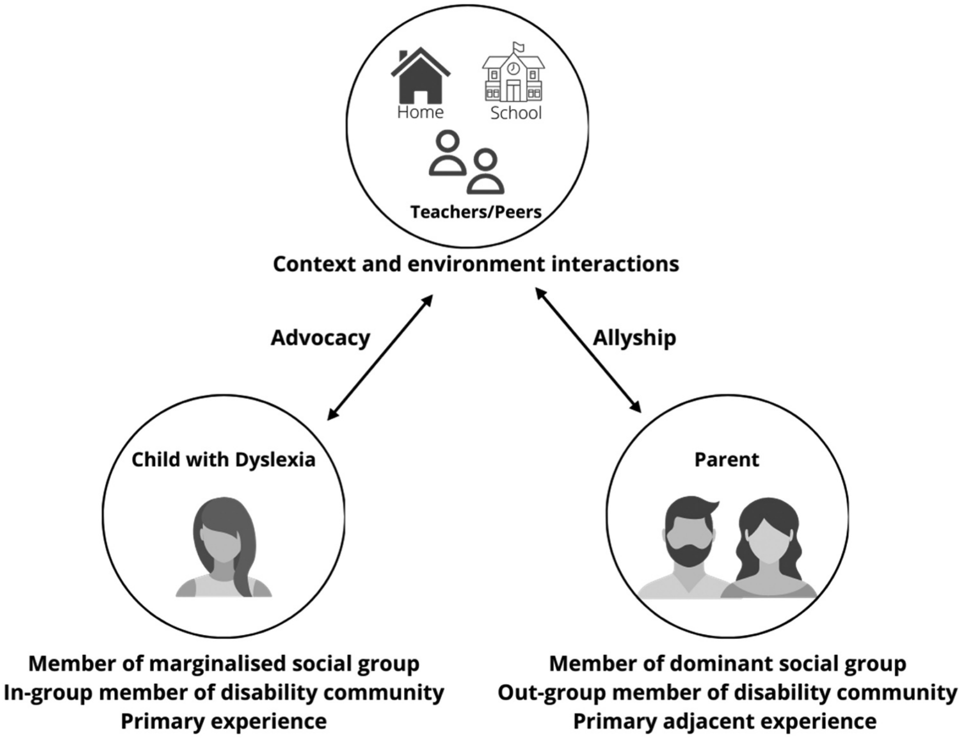

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of advocacy and allyship.

successful realization of parent–school partnership policy experienced by parents of dyslexic children when interacting with their child's school? and to provide a rich description of the experiences of the participants and their interactions within the school context. A case study design allowed the authors to understand the lived experiences of the participants in a sincere and meaningful way (Beck, 2021). Semi-structured interviews (conducted online) were employed to seek the insights and perspectives of ten parents with dyslexic children. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (QCA). Further details on these methods are now addressed.

Researcher positionality

The first author brought to the paper personal experience as both the parent of a dyslexic child and as a school guidance counselor working with dyslexic children and their families. This has influenced a critical disability research paradigm and a recognition of the inherent power imbalances that exist in educational settings (Holmes, 2020). Additionally, the first author was able to use their position as an insider of the dyslexic parent-community to help limit misinterpretation of the participant's descriptions of their experiences (Griffith, 1998). Similarly, as a collective, the authors of this paper all have experience in leadership positions in education settings as well as extensive research with families of young children. As such, we adopted an axiological lens of social justice and equity of educational access for all learners across all educational contexts (Goodley et al., 2019). Reflexivity allowed all authors to consider their own biases and subjective experience as educators and parents, and to address this prior to undertaking data collection (Johnson et al., 2020; Peterson, 2019).

Participants

Parent–child dyads were recruited via a social media support group for Australian dyslexics, their families, and educators. A total of 10 dyads ($n = 10$ parents and $n = 10$ children) were interviewed. As the perspectives and experiences relating to primary school settings were sought the criteria for inclusion in the study were that the child was between 8 and 12 years old, had a formal or imputed diagnosis of dyslexia, and that the parent and child both had interactions with educators that they were characterized as negative within the previous 12 months. Confirmation of the diagnosis was made via verbal confirmation from the parents.

From the initial recruitment, 48 responses were received. Of these, 30 met the criteria and 10 agreed to take part in the research project. As shown in Table 1, participants across five Australian states and territories were represented in the data set, as well as a range of school contexts, including state, Catholic and independent. Finally, while there were almost equal number of male and female child participants ($n = 6$ and $n = 4$), all of the parent participants were female ($n = 10$). This is not unsurprising, given the gendered nature of the allyship role within the education setting, where mothers have tended to take on the bulk of the actions and behaviors that support their child's educational journey (Griffiths et al., 2004; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Runswick-Cole & Ryan, 2019). For the purpose of this paper, only the data collected from parents will be presented and discussed.

Table 1. Parent participant demographics.

Participant*	Age	Gender	State	School context
Bronte	51	F	Qld	Independent
Catherine	48	F	Vic	State
Jane	47	F	ACT	Independent
Grace	51	F	Qld	Catholic
Helen	41	F	Qld	State
Zillah	42	F	SA	State
Blanche	46	F	NSW	State
Frances	40	F	Qld	Catholic
Nelly	38	F	SA	State
Eliza	45	F	Vic	State

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom, that allowed for the recording of both audio and visual input (Zoom Video Communications Inc, 2016). The flexible format of semi-structured interviews allowed for a reduction in power differences between the interviewer and the parent (Enochsson, 2011) and afforded the parents the time to consider their own interpretations of their experiences as they described them to the interviewer (Husband, 2020). Participants participated in two sessions; the first was a rapport-building session (lasting approximately 15 min) that also sought demographic data and confirmed informed consent (Leslie et al., 2023). The second session was the formal interview where questions such as ”Can you tell me about your conversations with a school staff-member when you first felt concerned about your child's progress at school?” and ”How do you feel about your role as a supporter to your child?” were asked. The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix A. The formal interviews lasted between 17 and 51 min and the first author as an interviewer was mindful of the emotions the questions elicited during the interview. This study was granted ethics approval by The University of Southern Queensland Research Ethics Committee (Approval number ETH2022–0085).

Qualitative content analysis

Selected for its transparent approach to analysis (Kaefer et al., 2015), qualitative content analysis (QCA) allowed for both inductive and deductive analysis of the data (Armat et al., 2018; McKibben et al., 2020; Schreier, 2019). The deductive codes of primary adjacent experiences, vicarious experiences, allyship, and parent–school partnerships were identified as the key issues emerging from the literature review within the doctoral thesis. As such, they were incorporated into the conceptual framework that underpinned the PhD project to describe the nature of parental experience that occurs in the educational setting as adjacent to the disability identity of their child (Leslie, 2024). Once definitions of each code were created, anchor samples, explicit examples from the first transcripts analyzed, were used to determine encoding rules that ensured the consistency and reliability of coding throughout all transcripts (Schreier, 2012). After all transcripts had been coded deductively, they were then reviewed inductively allowing for new insights and codes to emerge (Mayring, 2014). Inductive codes of positive experiences and impact emerged from the data and were also included.

Findings related to perceptions of parent–school partnerships

This section outlines the findings that emerged from the parents' data within this study. Firstly, parents perceived that there was a lack of educator expertise around dyslexia and appropriate interventions in the school setting. This led the parents to develop their own expertise, however this was not always well received by schools. Secondly, parents developed specific attitudes toward the parent–school partnerships based upon their experiences and often saw the relationship as a combative one. Finally, parents perceived negative impacts on themselves, and their children were the result of poor PSP with their child's school. These findings are now further explored.

Lack of expertise within schools

Half of the participants ($n = 5$) perceived that in some case teachers, and the administrators within the school more broadly, had a limited understanding of dyslexia. For example, Catherinefound that "the school kept saying there's no such thing as dyslexia" when she shared her younger daughter's dyslexia diagnosis. This was despite Catherine's older child also being diagnosed with dyslexia and attending the same school. It was suggested that training for teachers, both within the school and in initial teacher education programs, may not provide suitable information about ways to support dyslexic children. For example, Catherine believed that training was required to support teachers to identify dyslexic children, while Blanche felt that it was important that schools prioritized training to ensure ongoing knowledge for their teachers. Blanche shared,

> . . . it's been a very big struggle because I had to learn everything because they didn't actually know what they were doing themselves. Every step of the way, everything's a little too late, which is super frustrating because this is not new. I'm not the first. It's been going on for years and years and years before I've got to the system. So I, I actually trusted that the teachers would know . . . I don't mind doing the research, but it just would be nice if the schools already knew it.

As well as training on how to identify dyslexic children, all participants ($n = 10$) wanted teachers to be able to prepare appropriate reasonable adjustments. Zillah reported that '[teachers] would say, "I don't know how to support her. I don't know what to do to help her."' Nelly described how she'd "request accommodations and every time I got told no." Similarly, Jane concluded that teachers may be unaware of the impact of dyslexia, and therefore not understand the importance of needing modifications to access education. She reported that her son's "pastoral teacher (similar to a well-being or home room teacher) was big on 'I don't understand why all these parents want all these accommodations.'" These participants felt concerned that their child's teachers were unaware of how to implement modifications in the classroom for dyslexic children.

While participants reported that some teachers did not have training to assist dyslexic children in the classroom, Catherine reported that teachers differed in their attitude toward learning. She shared that some teachers showed a desire to learn, stating, ”I’ve had past teachers who have said ’I know nothing about dyslexia’ and then done training. They know how prevalent it is, but don’t always pick up on signs or refer for testing.” Conversely, Catherine also identified that there were teachers who were not open to learning more, surmising, ”there’s a type of teacher who needs to appear like they know all the answers, like an expert, and they’re the ones that get defensive.” For Catherine, teachers differed in their willingness to be trained specifically around dyslexia. Teachers’ willingness to attend training, and seek advice from external experts, was seen by participants as important to ensuring successful educational outcomes and PSP in schools.

Implementation of recommendations and reasonable adjustments

While external professionals, such as tutors and therapists (psychologists and speech-language pathologists) were employed by many of the families to support their dyslexic children outside of school, and provided recommendations for modifications in the classroom, participants ($n = 4$) commented that teachers did not always implement the knowledge and resources shared by external professionals within the classroom. Jane explained, ”[the teacher] refused to speak to the speech therapist because they were making recommendations for accommodations.” Four parents felt that some teachers were unable or unwilling to form partnerships with external providers, with Jane explaining that in one instance, their child’s teacher had refused to contact their child’s therapist explaining that ”I'm not going to do that. I don’t have time for that.” Work intensification for teachers was considered by the parents as impacting on the teachers’ ability to implement adjustments, with some recognizing that teachers may struggle to find time.

Institutional barriers were seen by parents to impact shared decision making around reasonable adjustments, which included systemic barriers at state and Federal levels. Grace, Frances, and Catherine shared that they had been told by teachers and administrators that dyslexia was not recognized as a disability, and, therefore, adjustments could not be made. For Grace, this meant that reasonable adjustments were not implemented, and when she asked about them, she reported, “I got thrown at me continually ’it’s not on the certified list of disabilities.’”

Testing was another area of concern for the participants, as they were unsure adjustments were in place to ensure equitable testing of knowledge. Blanche expressed frustration around the lack of adjustments for her dyslexic child in The Australian *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy* (*NAPLAN*). She explained, ”I was complaining about the NAPLAN … I was saying he should have had a scribe … And they said that was not on and he didn’t need a scribe. They really pride themselves on applying the rules really strictly. It was pretty mean.” Frances was in a similar situation when the recommendation from her child’s therapist to use a scribe was not implemented in exams. She stated, ”The reason why they said he couldn’t have a scribe is because they don’t provide him a scribe in class. Right. But the educational psychologist said that would help.” From the perspective of the parents, refusing adjustments was unjustified and demonstrated a limited understanding of how to support a dyslexic student.

Reliance on expertise within families

Many of the participants ($n = 8$) shared that they had developed expertise that informed their allyship, gained through a personal learning journey necessitated by their proximity to their child’s disability identity. This knowledge and expertise were seen to have positive outcomes for dyslexic children in the school setting. Grace, for instance, stated ”I’m proud of what he’s achieved and what we’ve done together. I’m pretty certain he wouldn’t be where he is now without it.” Grace valued the knowledge and expertise she had developed through, and for, her role as an ally. Other participants in this study shared examples in which they felt their expertise was not considered of value by the school.

Participants ($n = 5$) gave examples of times when they had tried to share information with the school in order to help influence decision making. Participants explained that they had tried several ways to share information. Zillah, recalled her attempts, stating, “I’ve gone in so many times and politely said things and even backed it up with evidence and resources to help them understand. I’m still not getting some of the things [adjustments].” Jane appeared resigned to the fact that information she gave the teacher and other staff seemed to be discarded, as in her mind, she was “sure it goes straight in the bin.”

Some parents felt frustrated ($n = 3$) that their expertise was, in their eyes, dismissed. For example, Bronte explained, ”It frustrates me when I share information and free PD [professional development] and the teachers won’t do it.” In some cases, participants such as Zillah, felt that their knowledge of how to address their child’s issues exceeded that of their child’s teacher. To illustrate, Zillah stated, ”When I’ve talked to her individual teachers, they’ve talked about the colored papers and glasses and for her. I met with the teacher thinking, ’Oh, no, and how do I tell her that that’s not right?.” This situation was frustrating for parents and created a significant tension as they felt uncomfortable with how to respectfully inform the teacher that their approach was not appropriate to their child’s needs. Blanche provided an example,

> They give you access to Reading Eggs (a literacy intervention program) and that’s not the best one for dyslexia. They’re wasting that my time, their time, money. You know, I downloaded a whole bunch of Nessy resources (evidenced based apps and a website for literacy intervention) on his computer. They didn’t use them, and those Nessy ones actually were good.

Blanche had researched and developed an expertise in identifying evidence-based intervention programs, only for inferior products to be provided by the school, resulting in ineffective instruction for her child and, equally frustratingly, limited recognition of the parent’s knowledge.

Meetings were deemed by participants ($n = 9$) as a way of providing information to teachers about the child’s needs, setting goals, or discussing modifications required to access the curriculum. In a number of cases, however, parents felt that, even if they were offered the opportunity to meet with staff, that the meeting was directed by the school rather than an opportunity for partnership and shared discussion about how to best support their dyslexic child. Grace was in the situation, “where Learning Support has sent us an invite and said, ‘it [the meeting] will be 10.30 next Tuesday. If you can’t make it, we will write the individual support plan without you.’” This situation unsurprisingly made Grace feel that the school did not necessarily value her input into the support plan. Similarly, Eliza felt that the teachers or schools had decided on goals for her child’s learning without the family’s input. She explained that she had attended, ”a lot of the meetings, had lots of talk about setting goals for him to get to a certain PM [a leveled reading program] level or a certain Lexar level, which we really pushed against because we knew that is not what’s best for him and it’s not what’s in the recommendations.” Eliza was eventually able to add her expert opinion, but it required substantial energy and allyship to be heard.

While the devolution of policy puts some responsibility to educate their child onto the parents (Nevill & Forsey, 2022b), this shift in role to pseudo-educator is not always one welcomed by the participants, such as Bronte who said that expecting that parents to have the expertise meant “on one hand the school is giving, but on the other they take away. They put the responsibility on me.” This shows that while the parents might have the expertise, they do not necessarily wish to be perceived as holding a position of knowledge or power above their child’s teacher (Levi, 2017). This also appeared to be the case for Bronte, who felt that they were made to become experts or educators, rather than hold the typical parent role, indicated when Bronte shared ”I’ve become not mum anymore, tutor as well. I continually help him.” Nelly shared that many responsibilities had been placed on the family to support the education needs of their dyslexic child, however they wanted the school to take responsibility. Nelly stated,

> We’ve had all of those conversations. He’s seen psychologist. He’s seen speechies. He’s seen OTs [occupational therapists]. He’s had his hearing checked. He’s had his eyes checked. We’ve covered everything. It is now your job to educate him . . . but I don’t know how to do that because that’s your job.

Bronte recognized that her involvement was important to ensure her child's academic success; "I don't think the school will go to the lengths that I do to support Darcy to do his writing." A similar sentiment was shared by Grace, who felt there was no other option than to become an expert, stating "I had no choice . . . I would have preferred if it had been done by the school." This comment indicates that even though family members have the expertise, they may not necessarily want to hold a level of expertise above that of the school.

Overall, the participants expressed that they had unique information about dyslexic children through their lived experiences, however the expertise was either not valued within the school, or conversely there was an expectation that the parent would take on the role of expert in the educational context.

Parent attitudes towards PSP

The barriers that parents experienced in trying to establish and maintain positive PSP influenced their attitudes toward the ongoing PSP. The parents in this study frequently referred to the relationships as a type of conflict, and that they felt as though they were *fighting* the school and their child's educators. Grace similarly reported, "I've had to fight. We haven't received any help." For Blanche, conflict with teachers was difficult; "I hate fighting. I hate conflict. It's totally against my nature to have to fight for what you need. It's really frustrating."

The participants were divided on their ability to engage in this kind of battle with the school systems. Some participants, like Eliza, felt ready and able "you just have to put that aside and not care whether they like you or not and just go in and fight.' Others, such as Grace, found the fight exhausting "in the last year I used my energy to help William rather than fight the system. The principal's not going to change and after fighting for so many years it is exhausting." Some participants did not attempt to fights, as Zillah explained:

the relationship is good because I'm not very strong. I didn't like going in. I tried my very best to go in and fight the battles and tell them what I think. I've gone in and given lots of suggestions and I'll go in at the beginning of the year they know how to support her, but there's still things that I'm not happy with.

The perceived impact of negative PSP

Participants in this study indicated that acting in an allyship role meant that parents are undertaking actions that go beyond what is expected of them in a traditional PSP. Blanche said, "I know it is more than the average parent goes through." The impact of this additional workload on the parents in this study was twofold. Firstly, some participants ($n = 3$) indicated that they were concurrently perceived of by teachers and other parents as pushy or difficult a consequence of engaging in allyship that was not always, in their opinion, well-received or welcomed. Grace expressed that, "I think most of the teachers go running when they see me," while Bronte believed she was "labeled as 'that' parent by the school and other parents." For Jane, it was difficult as she desired the friendship and understanding of other parents but felt they did not understand. She stated, "part of the difficulty as a parent of child with dyslexia is that you have friends who . . . don't have a child with a disability. They make you feel bad because they've never had the same issues." Parents perceived that their allyship impacted relationships within the school with teachers and other parents in ways that were not experienced by parents of non-dyslexic children.

Half of the participants in this study ($n = 5$) identified the emotional toll on themselves as allies, where interactions with their child's school evoked strong and distressing emotions. Zillah expressed, "I'm frustrated. I keep thinking, at this point, we've got one more year [of primary school]." While Zillah said she was frustrated, she also indicated that she had given up on fighting as she waited for her child to complete education in the school. Eliza found she "was getting quite emotional in meetings," though continued to push for the needs of her child. Grace, Bronte, and Frances became angry. Bronte shared that, “I get angry and upset, but I use coping strategies because anger doesn’t help [my child];” while for others, the emotions were overwhelming, as expressed by Frances ”I lost my fucking shit. I absolutely lost my shit.”

The highly emotive language used by these parents to describe their emotions is an indicator of the depth of emotional response and frustration they had in interactions with the school that they perceived to be negative. While it is not possible to guarantee that all school-based interactions will be positive, the intensity of these negative emotions felt by the parents in this study were the result of perceived failures in the PSPs whereby collaborative and consultative approaches were not employed.

Discussion

In this study, parental expertise, and thus allyship, was born from the need to address perceived instructional and systemic deficits in the educational setting. These difficulties could seem insurmountable for the children if not for the allyship actions of their parents (Nevill et al., 2022), whereby parents step up to take on additional responsibility and disability-related experiences as a direct result of their child’s dyslexia. As highlighted, many of the parents in this study escalated their allyship activity, increasing their parental responsibility, based on their perceptions that schools and educators did not exhibit knowledge of dyslexia or of appropriate intervention methods (Levi, 2017).

Parents becoming experts in their child’s dyslexia and specific needs is a familiar narrative in the literature (Delany, 2017; Earey, 2013; Levi, 2017; Nevill et al., 2022), and confirms Nevill and Forsey’s (2022b) assertion that policy devolution is forcing parents to become experts in their child’s disability to remediate systemic failings. Oyarzún et al. (2022) also raise the concern that parents are drawn into the responsibility to educate children as the government reduces their responsibility to do the same. This creates a particular inequity for parents of dyslexic children who are required to take on additional allyship responsibilities beyond that of parents of non-dyslexic children.

In negotiating the shifting of the role from parent to ally and expert, parents are faced with a number of interpersonal and systemic barriers. These barriers prevent the realization of policy aspirations and, in turn, prevent parents from being seen as equal contributors to decision making, leaving them feeling isolated and marginalized (Levi, 2017). Parents often feel the responsibility to ‘fill the gap’ in educational services, and thus are forced to become educational experts to ensure their child’s needs are met (Levi, 2017, p. 106). The knowledge and skills that parents develop in this journey to expert are valuable tools necessary for the allyship role (Nevill & Forsey, 2022a), and formed through their experiences adjacent to their child’s disability. Parents who try to share their expertise, or undertake allyship actions, experience social implications such as being labeled or treated differently to parents who do not act in allyship roles (Leitão et al., 2017).

Impact

While some allyship experiences can contribute to positive PSP, negative allyship experiences can lead to ”burn out” which in turn can lead to reduced allyship activities (M. Burke et al., 2022). For parents of dyslexic children, who often feel as though they are fighting or pushing in the relationship with their child’s school (Delany, 2017; Griffiths et al., 2004; Levi, 2017), it is likely that they will show greater anxiety or emotional distress than parents of non-dyslexic students (Al Otaiba & Petscher, 2020; Bonifacci et al., 2015; Delany, 2017; Livingston et al., 2018). As seen in the responses from the parents in this study, negative experiences, influenced by the actions of stakeholders, barriers inherent in the PSP, and latent attitudes, ultimately have an emotional impact on parents who were acting as allies to their dyslexic child through primary adjacent experiences with their child’s school.

Despite this, the parents in this study all spoke of continuing their allyship to their child, and persisting in undertaking actions that would continue to benefit their child’s academic and emotional development (Bonifacci et al., 2015). This is likely due to the financial and social resources available to these families, as families who do not have similar access may not have the capacity to withstand a strained or dysfunctional PSP (Nevill & Forsey, 2022a; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022; Schraml-Block & Ostrosky, 2022). Thus, financial and social resources are likely to have an influence on the primary adjacent experiences that parents have while acting in an allyship role.

Systemic or institutional considerations

Several of the parents' concerns point to the challenging context in which teachers are currently working and the impact this has on PSPs, similar to other Australian studies of the experiences of parental allyship to students with disabilities (Cain et al., 2021). The literature has previously reported on the lack of training that teachers receive in dyslexia-related instruction and interventions supports the notion that teachers are not adequately to support dyslexic students (Earey, 2013; Leitão et al., 2017; Maxwell, 2019; Nevill & Forsey, 2022b). Equally, Australian pre-service teachers receive little training on forming and maintaining positive PSP despite the emphasis evident in teacher professional standards (Barker & Harris, 2020).

In addition to these systemic factors influencing teacher knowledge and practice, workload intensification could be a contributing factor, with many teachers feeling as though there is increased pressure at a policy and government level to perform an increasing number of non-teaching tasks (Heffernan et al., 2022), of which PSP is included. A study by Collie and Mansfield (2022) identified addressing parental concerns as a source of stress for teachers, and another study by Carroll et al. (2021) identified both parent expectations and the needs of disabled children as workload stressors. Further consideration of PSP policy and how it is enacted at a school level has the potential to identify ways to make partnerships more efficient to reduce teacher workload and more effective so that parents feel parity in the decision-making process. Ultimately, strong PSP can lead to improved parent–teacher relationships, teacher morale, and improved academic and well-being outcomes for students (Emerson et al., 2012; Goodall, 2022; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Implications for research and practice

The relational aspects of PSP discussed in this paper have significant implications for both researchers and educators alike. This paper contributes to the broader discussion on the experiences of parents of dyslexic children by revealing how parents perceive that limited teacher training impacts on the quality of the parent–school partnership. This has implications for those guiding initial teacher education programs, where pre-service teachers can undertake courses on both dyslexia and evidence-based reading interventions and the necessary skills and strategies for working collaboratively with parents of disabled children.

In addition to this, the shared experiences of parents and their perspectives of school-based interactions can also inform educators of some of the barriers currently being experienced. The interpersonal and systemic barriers uncovered in this project, such as poor communication and denial of reasonable adjustments, provide insight into barriers that are currently hindering the enactment of PSP policy. The implications here are twofold: further research could provide insight into the experiences of other marginalized and minority groups and their perceptions of PSP while educators have the opportunity to reflect on how PSP is enacted at a school level. The incongruence between the desire of PSP policy to not only help children to achieve their best in the education setting, but also to forge meaningful relationships with families, is an aspiration that also has significant implications for parents and educators, with parent–school partnerships having an impact on teacher well-being (Carroll et al., 2021; Collie & Mansfield, 2022).

The experiences of the parents discussed in this paper can help to inform future research, including the potential for research to investigate the experiences of the parents of not only dyslexic students, but other minority and marginalized communities as well, in relation to their perceptions and experiences of PSP. Similarly, further research into PSP from the perspectives of educators will provide insight into other interpersonal and systemic barriers that are currently hindering their ability to enact PSP policy and practice. It will be particularly important to include the voice of educators in future research into the enactment of PSP to help inform and better understand all of the contextual influences and nuances that impact on parents and schools forming meaningful partnerships.

Insights from this study indicate that parents of dyslexic children can be a rich source of information and expertise that schools have access to and can harness (Barker & Harris, 2020). Given this, reframing parents to being viewed as valuable resource and asset, as well as productive contributors to shared and collaborative decision-making in their child's education not only makes sense but also reflects current policy. Further, the knowledge that a parent holds specific to their child's disability-related needs is an important resource for schools to consider when developing educational programs for the child (Huscroft D'Angelo et al., 2022). Opening a dialogue between parents and schools around productive ways of sharing resources and knowledge, while recognizing that parental expertise is not a challenge to teacher expertise (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011), will go a long way toward enhancing the PSP. While the role of ally is traditionally seen as belonging to parents (Levi, 2017), teachers can also take on this role and thus undertake actions similar to those of parents, whereby they seek and share knowledge and resources that support the learning and well-being of dyslexic children in the classroom.

Limitations

One limitation of the study was the lack of exploration of the intersectionality of the participants. Part of the selection criteria of the child participants required that they have no other diagnoses other than dyslexia. The authors made a deliberate choice to investigate dyslexia in isolation and as such, children with additional diagnoses such as ADHD or autism were excluded from the study. This ensured that the interactions they, and their parents, identified as negative within the school setting were related to dyslexia and not another contributing disability. Additionally, the ethnicity of participants was a part of the data collection. Any further intersectionality of the participants (sexuality, marital status, and socio-economic status) was not a consideration that could be considered in future research into the experiences of parents of dyslexic children as it would add a layer of depth and complexity that the research questions of this study were not investigating.

Additionally, the small sample size and the recruitment through social media were also limitations of the study. Though the sample size was similar to other studies on the experiences of dyslexic children and their parents (Delany, 2017; Earey, 2013; Leitão et al., 2017; Levi, 2017; Nevill & Forsey, 2022b; Wilmot et al., 2023b; Woodcock, 2020), small sample sizes can make generalization of the findings difficult. Further, recruitment via social media may have contributed to a less demographically diverse sample as those who are active online are predominantly from well-educated and Caucasian backgrounds (Benedict et al., 2019) who have a strong online presence (Leighton et al., 2021). Future studies could consider recruitment from other sources in order to ameliorate this limitation.

Conclusion

There is no doubting the advantages that can extend from productive PSP. Extant research has shown that positive PSPs are linked to better outcomes for students (Barker & Harris, 2020; Emerson et al., 2012; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Huscroft D'Angelo et al., 2022), and as such it is important to determine the factors that are making it difficult to achieve the aspirations of PSP policy for families of dyslexic children so that they can be mitigated and addressed. Greater attention and recognition is needed about the role and place of parental allyship as a critical step in improving access and outcomes in the educational context for children with disabilities (Rossetti et al., 2021). In addition, turning attention to the policy and practice divide could potentially help address the concerns that educators and parents have around being equal contributors to make that are guided by the attitudes, beliefs, and cultural values embedded in the policy and actions of education (Adams & Christenson, 2000).

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Data availability statement

In an effort to protect the privacy of the participants, data associated with this paper are not available due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

The following interview protocol is a drafted sample of questions that reflect some of the avenues of exploration used during the interviews.

Parent questions

- Do you have any questions for me before we start?
- What has it been like raising a child with dyslexia?
- What did you notice when they went to school?
- Can you tell me about your conversations with a school staff-member when you first felt concerned about your child's progress at school?
- Can you share an example of when you felt your interaction with your child's school was particularly concerning or perceived as negative?
- Can you share an example of when your child shared their struggles with you regarding . . . . . . What were those conversations like?
- How did you feel when. . .. happened/was said?
- How do you feel about your role as a supporter to your child?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?
- Do you have any questions for me before we finish?
- How do you feel the school has managed the sharing of your child's privacy?
- Has anyone ever mentioned any dyslexia myths?
- What has been the reaction when you. . .??
- Has your child ever shared an experience with you about their day, and you've been emotionally affected by their story?
- What was your emotional reaction to hearing about their experience?