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'Oh, what does dyslexia do?': a qualitative investigation of ableist microaggressions towards Australian dyslexic children in primary school

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ABSTRACT

Children with dyslexia are at greater risk than their peers of developing mental health conditions. While it is understood that the school context has some influence over this relationship, little is currently understood about the role interpersonal interactions between dyslexic children and their peers or educators have on their well-being. This paper draws on semi-structured interviews with 10 Australian dyslexic children and describes the interpersonal interactions within the school setting that the children perceived as negative. Using qualitative content analysis, the study sought to identify which of Keller and Galgay's domains of microaggressions were encountered by the children. The study found that the children experienced a range of ableist microaggressions from both peers and educators. The findings contribute to the current understanding of microaggressions by revealing how young dyslexic children face multiple exposures to messages that demean their status due to their dyslexia.

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KEYWORDS

Dyslexia; ableism; microaggressions; school-based experiences

Points of interest

- Children with dyslexia are at greater risk of experiencing poor mental health outcomes such as low self-esteem and anxiety.
- Ableist microaggressions convey messages that dyslexic children are perceived as *less capable than* their peers.
- Both educators and peers enact microaggressions in the primary school context.
- The intersection of ableist microaggressions toward dyslexic student in the primary school context has not yet been described.

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- Dyslexic students experience a range of different forms of microaggressions.
- Exposure to microaggressions in the primary school setting has an emotional impact on dyslexic students.

Dyslexia is often characterised as a difficulty in learning to decode/encode print (Snowling and Hulme 2024), or as a learning difficulty that impacts an individual's ability to develop reading accuracy and fluency (Shaywitz, Shaywitz, and Shaywitz 2021). However, when viewed through a social relational model of disability (Haegele and Hodge 2016), dyslexia is understood to be both neurological in nature and influenced by environmental factors (Abetz 2022; Catts et al. 2024). The social relational model of disability posits that it is the coming together of the impairment (dyslexia) and the interactions with the context (a school setting where literacy skills are an expectation) that form the lived disability experience (Thomas 2004). Essentially, one would not happen without the other and it is the embodiment of the literacy impairment within the cultural context of schools that value neurotypical skills that can at times be disabling (Haslett and Smith 2019). As Pearl (2022) describes it 'bodies and books make reading: that's the system' Further, while dyslexia is primarily an academic difficulty, dyslexia can also impact a child's mental health as a secondary consequence of the condition (Wilmot, Pizzey, et al. 2023).

The social relational model of disability further recognises the emotional toll that may result from environmental and attitudinal barriers (Macdonald 2019). Dyslexic children, an estimated 10% of the population (Catts et al. 2024; Snowling and Hulme 2024), are at increased risk of internalising (e.g. anxiety) and externalising (e.g. aggression) mental health concerns (Wilmot, Pizzey, et al. 2023; Boyes et al. 2020), compared with typically reading peers. Despite what is known about the relationship between dyslexia and poorer mental health outcomes for dyslexic students (Nevill and Forsey 2022a; Soğancı and Kulesza 2023; Wilmot, Hasking, et al. 2023), the literature does not fully describe the interpersonal micro-interactions that might contribute to stress or poor mental health outcomes for dyslexic children. The concern is that without an understanding of the interpersonal interactions that contribute to the poor mental health, adequate support cannot be implemented to address the mental health concerns of dyslexic students.

This paper expands on the concepts of psycho and social-emotional disability (Cole and Lawless 2024; Reeve 2019) by positioning ableist microaggressions as a mechanism of affective disability, and the emotional labour caused by ableist interactions (Jammaers and Fleischmann 2024). To this end, the paper will report on the interpersonal micro-interactions experienced by 10 dyslexic children through the lens of ableist microaggressions. Ableist microaggressions are subtle and unconscious interpersonal micro-interactions that serve to communicate that the characteristics of disability and neurodivergence

are valued *less than* characteristics of able-bodied and neurotypical individuals (Keller and Galgay 2010; Sue and Spanierman 2020). Ableist microaggressions, as the enactment of affective disablism, perpetuate the culturally constructed norms, dichotomous comparisons and social power imbalance between these two groups (Campbell 2019; Murphy 2021). To date, the literature on ableist microaggressions in education settings has largely explored the experiences of secondary and tertiary students (Bell 2013; David, Petalio, and Crouch 2019; Shanna K. Kattari 2020; Minikel-Lacocque 2013; Reimer and Longmuir 2021) with an emphasis on racial microaggressions (Minikel-Lacocque 2013; Sue and Spanierman 2020; Torino et al. 2019).

As such, this paper offers insight into the impact of seemingly innocuous and unintentional ableist interactions for dyslexic primary aged children that constitute affective disablism (Jammaers and Fleischmann 2024). Without a deeper understanding of the extent of ableist microaggressions within the primary school context, the degree of day-to-day marginalisation, and the role microaggressions play in the mental health of dyslexic children will remain unknown. Further exploration is needed of the day-to-day interpersonal interactions that occur in the school setting between dyslexic students and others to understand how they contribute towards poor mental health outcomes. This study addresses the gap in the literature that has not as yet considered ableist microaggressions that occur in a primary school context towards dyslexic children.

Literature review

The experiences of dyslexic children

The ways in which environmental barriers in the school setting influence dyslexic individuals both during their time at school and into adulthood are well established in the literature. For example, Riddick's (2001) review of the social model of disability as it applied to dyslexic students emphasised the cultural constructs of, and attitudes towards, the value of spelling, reading and writing. They noted that these contextual expectations put dyslexic students at a disadvantage and placed additional burden on them to meet the expected norms. Further, Tanner, (2009) identified how when dyslexic adults reflected on their educational experiences, they perceived that the cultural norms were underpinned by 'exclusionary and oppressive ideology' (796). Within an educational setting these cultural constructs of literacy led to intrinsic feelings in the participants of personal failure and of being failed by the education system and society at large. A recent thought experiment by Collinson (2012) further illustrated how these *literacy norms* seek to dehumanise and objectify dyslexic children and to dichotomise good students who can read from bad students who can't. The social and attitudinal barrier of the valuing of literacy

skills, particularly in the educational setting exemplifies how contextual barriers are imposed on dyslexic children.

There is growing evidence that interpersonal interactions, as the embodiment of attitudinal barriers, may contribute to the well-being of dyslexic students. A study by Boyes et al. (2020) of the casefiles ($n=1235$) of dyslexic school children showed that poor peer relationships are indirectly associated with both internalising (low self-esteem) and externalising (emotional regulation) mental health concerns. Their findings indicated that addressing interpersonal interactions may help to foster positive mental health in dyslexic children. A review by Soganci and Kulesza (2023) of studies conducted between 2010 and 2022 exploring the psychological processes of dyslexic secondary school students revealed that the difficulties dyslexic children face cannot be solely attributed to the cognitive processes associated with learning. Further, the authors highlighted that dyslexic students face negative interpersonal interactions such as bullying, and prejudices. Though this study reveals a complex relationship between academic achievement and psychological processes associated with dyslexia and mental health, the review did not identify the interpersonal interactions that contribute to the mental health of dyslexic children.

Recently there has been some consideration given to inter-personal interactions with peers and educators that may contribute to the negative experiences dyslexic children have in the school setting. In a scoping review of the literature ($n=98$) investigating the mental health of dyslexic students, Wilmot, Hasking, et al. (2023) considered the factors that might influence the relationship between dyslexia and mental health. The authors found that the literature acknowledged that interpersonal interactions with educators and peers influenced the school-based experiences of dyslexic children. In their study of 17 Australian dyslexic children aged 9–14 Wilmot, Pizzey, et al. (2023) reported that the children in their study were exposed to teasing by peers due to their learning difficulties. Further, teachers engaged in practices, such as making a dyslexic child read aloud, that elicited strong negative emotions. Wilmot, Pizzey, et al. (2023) concluded that there are nuances in the relationships that children have with their parents, friends and teachers that contribute to the mental health of dyslexic children. Additionally, a study of 13 Australian dyslexic children aged 10–17 and their parents by Leitão et al. (2017) uncovered interpersonal interactions such as bullying from peers, or being labelled as a disengaged or disruptive student by teachers as impacting on dyslexic children's mental health. The children in the study described how the attitudes and personality of educators influenced their experiences and identity as a dyslexic child. While these studies exposed some of the interpersonal interactions that dyslexic children in the primary school setting viewed as negative, the interactions were not viewed through the lens of microaggressions.

Ableism, disablism and dyslexia

Ableism is the valuing of neurotypical and able-bodied capabilities over those of neurodivergent and disabled individuals (. For example, in their seminal work on ableism in education Hehir (2002) defined ableism as the 'devaluing of disability' (1) and exemplified how this is done when skills such as independently spelling are viewed more favourably than using a spellchecker. Building on constructs of ableism, Collinson (2012) conceptualised that the experience of discrimination towards dyslexic individuals occurred through the social assertion that those with *typical* literacy skills are of greater value than those without. Ableism directed towards dyslexic individuals is described as *lexism* by Collinson (2022, 2023) and seen as a sociological process in that it results from the transactions between the dyslexic individual and their environment or context. The term *lexism* highlights how ableist practices are embodied, particularly within education settings.

The interactions between structural and social constructions of ableism that result in an emotional labour for a disabled individual have been described as forms of disablism in the literature in various ways. For example, Thomas (2004) described psycho-social disablism as the layering of interpersonal interactions between individuals and 'hurtful' communications that privilege one social group over another, such as ableist microaggressions. In their duo-ethnography Cole and Lawless (2024) highlighted that social-emotional disablism explains the exchange of emotions and indirect impact that stem from structural and social interactions or communications underpinned by ableist worldviews. Finally, Jammaers and Fleischmann (2024) described ableist microaggressions as the practice of disablism through the reproduction of ableist ideas. Further, they explained how microaggressions exclude disabled individuals as a form of affective disablism, recognising the emotional toll of ableist ideology. Thus, ableist microaggressions are a mechanism that perpetuates both disablism constructions of barriers to being (Reeve, 2019, 2015), and limitations in engagement (Cole and Lawless 2024) and result in an affective response in disabled individuals.

There is existing literature that has explored the relationship between dyslexia and ableism/disablism in education settings. The embedding of literacy as a cultural value in education contexts was supported by Murphy (2021) who explored the experiences of dyslexic students in a tertiary setting and identified that educational systems and policies, as well as educator attitudes, may reproduce ableism whereby dyslexia can be viewed as a deficit. Further, they found that repeated exposure to challenges in the educational setting can lead to internalised ableism where the dyslexic individual learns to devalue themselves because of their dyslexia. Similarly, Nieminen and Pesonen (2022) described how dyslexic students in tertiary settings may face ableism through the interactions they have with educators and teaching practices.

They concluded that ableism expressed through interpersonal interactions may lead to students feeling unsafe and unable to access the learning, reflective the presence of affective disablism in education settings. While these studies provide evidence of ableism towards dyslexic students, they were limited to tertiary settings, leaving scope to explore the primary school context.

Overview of microaggressions

One type of interpersonal interaction that can negatively impact on the recipient are microaggressions. Microaggressions are subtle and often unconscious interactions that convey a message that one party is valued less than others because of a particular attribute or social membership (Sue and Spanierman 2020; Torino et al. 2019). Ableist microaggressions occur when the message sent is that an individual with a disability, in this case dyslexia, is viewed as less capable than a typically developing peer (Kattari 2020; Reimer and Longmuir 2021). In their work on ableist microaggressions Keller and Galgay (2010) conceptualised eight types of interactions that conveyed messages that a disabled person is valued less than an able-bodied or neurotypical person: denial of disability identity, denial of disability experience, denial of privacy, imposed helplessness, secondary gain, spread effect, infantilisation, patronisation, second-class citizenship and de-sexualisation. Additionally, auxiliary domains of spiritual intervention and exoticisation were identified in Keller and Galgay's original taxonomy of ableist microaggressions.

The work of Keller and Galgay has instigated substantial qualitative and quantitative research into microaggressions (Bell 2013; Kattari 2019; Qi et al. 2023; Reimer and Longmuir 2021; Lett, Tamaian, and Klest 2020) and has led to the recognition of ableist microaggressions, the practice of conveying unconscious attitudes and values that seek to demean disabled individuals, as a form of affective disablism (Jammaers and Fleischmann 2024). In their overview of the concept of microaggressions, Freeman and Schroer (2020) emphasise that while much has been written about racial, gender, sexuality and socio-economic microaggressions, Keller and Galgay's work on ableist microaggressions remains the seminal work that has guided all research in this space. Further, Freeman and Schroer (2020) called it problematic that more had not been done to research and understand the phenomenon of ableist microaggressions.

Microaggressions in the education context

There is evidence recognising that microaggressions occur towards students in tertiary (Minikel-Lacocque 2013; Woodford et al. 2017; Ogunyemi et al. 2020; Lett, Tamaian, and Klest 2020), secondary (Banks, Ciccirelli, and Pavon 2022; Reimer and Longmuir 2021) and primary (Qi et al. 2023; Beaulieu 2016) education settings. For example, Banks, Ciccirelli, and Pavon (2022) explored

microaggressions experienced by adolescents holding minority race and sexual orientation identities. The authors concluded that microaggressions were perpetrated by educators and peers and were noticeable and offensive to adolescents from marginalised identities. Though this study considered the role that intersectionality plays in microaggressions, it was not within the scope of the study to consider ableist microaggressions in a primary school context. Likewise, Reimer and Longmuir (2021) described the microaggressions that were experienced by secondary students who identified as neurodivergent in Australia. Their study revealed that students felt they needed to leave mainstream school settings and enrol in specialised educational programs in order to limit their exposure to microaggressions from peers and educators. Both of these studies contributed to the broader understanding of microaggressions in the education context, however, they did not address ableist microaggressions in the primary context.

There is limited research that has considered ableist microaggressions in the primary context, however the literature to date has explored other types of microaggressions. For example, Gabay (2022) interviewed two school psychologists and three school social workers about their views and experiences with microaggressions in primary school settings. While responding to the sparse research on microaggressions in the primary context, Gabay's (2022) study revealed religious, racial, cultural, and financial microaggressions, but not ableist microaggressions. Additionally, while the perspectives of school psychologists and social workers were included, the perspectives of children were not. In another study that explored the primary context, Beaulieu (2016) critiqued a recording of a third-grade teacher undertaking an English lesson that had been used in a cultural awareness program. The author found that there was evidence of unconscious bias against Hispanic male students and neglect of female students. Beaulieu (2016) was able to show how even an experienced and well-meaning teacher still perpetrated unconscious racial and gender microaggressions in the primary context. As with Gabay's (2022) study, Beaulieu's (2016) paper did not consider the presence of ableist microaggressions, leaving room for further investigation of under documented intersection of ableist microaggressions towards dyslexic children in the primary school context.

The literature reveals that dyslexic students are likely to encounter difficulties in the school setting that are not solely attributable to their diagnosis and are instead related to learning (Soganci and Kulesza 2023) and the difficulties dyslexic children face can have serious mental health implications (Boyes et al. 2020). Further, interpersonal interactions with peers and educators can be fraught with challenges (Leitão et al. 2017; Wilmot, Hasking, et al. 2023; Wilmot, Pizzey, et al. 2023). Interpersonal interactions that convey messages that a disabled individual is perceived as *less than* others are ableist

microaggressions (Keller and Galgay 2010; Lett, Tamaian, and Klest 2020). Though there is literature on ableist microaggressions in secondary education settings (Banks, Cicciarelli, and Pavon 2022; Reimer and Longmuir 2021) and describing how dyslexic students in tertiary settings experience ableism (Murphy 2021; Nieminen and Pesonen 2022), as yet, the literature has not explored ableist microaggressions at the unique intersection of dyslexia in primary school settings and how the subtle and unconscious messages communicated through interpersonal interactions impact dyslexic children.

Research design

This paper is reporting on the findings from a project investigating the experiences of dyslexic primary-aged children within the school context. The project sought to answer the question *What interpersonal and systemic interactions are perceived as negative by dyslexic children in the primary school context?* Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 10 children to capture their recollections of negative experiences in the primary school setting. Drawing on the social relational model of disability that posits dyslexic children can be disabled by the interactions between themselves and social or cultural barriers in the educational setting (Pearl 2022; Thomas 2004), the study recognises that the cultural inequities and attitudinal barriers that are experienced in conjunction with dyslexia can be disabling (Macdonald 2019). As such, this study aims to explore the environmental and attitudinal factors that can be disabling to those with dyslexia. By doing so, the study seeks to further understand the barriers that limit dyslexic children receiving fair and equitable access to education within the school setting (Hall 2019). This study was granted ethics approval by The University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number H22REA102).

Participants and recruitment

Participants were recruited from social media dyslexia support groups across four states and territories in Australia and all schooling contexts (state, Catholic, independent) were represented in the sample ($n=10$). Child perspectives were sought to gain insight into the first-hand experiences the children in the primary school context as they interact with educators regarding the dyslexia diagnosis and necessary support interventions. The sample criteria required that children be aged between 8 and 12 years, have a confirmed dyslexia diagnosis and that they had experiences in the school context that they would characterise as negative within the last 12 months. Capturing the children's voices at the time they were experiencing the primary school setting was a deliberate choice to enable the children's recollections to be of

recent events and thus less influenced by the passage of time. Table 1 presents an overview of participant demographics.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted *via* the video conferencing platform Zoom, and all participants undertook the interview in various rooms within their home, such as bedrooms, dining rooms and kitchens. The children were able to choose if their parent stayed with them during their interview or remained in an adjacent room of the home. The interview protocol included generic questions about their school experiences such as ‘what is a school day like for you?’, ‘what’s it like having dyslexia when you’re at school?’ and ‘tell me more about what happens when you’re working on a task’, however the children were asked to respond in relation to their negative experiences at school. Due to the likelihood of the interviews eliciting an emotional response, a conscious approach to building rapport during the interviews was necessary in order to ensure that the potential vulnerability of the children was minimised. To ensure consideration was given to the sensitive nature of the interview topic and interviewing children online, the CHE Framework (Connectivity, Humanness, Empathy) was employed (Leslie et al. 2024). Participants were asked to engage in two sessions; the first session was a 15min rapport building session, and the second session was the formal interview. The second session was transcribed using Panopto with the transcripts and recordings reviewed and corrections made.

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) was utilised to allow for a descriptive and interpretative analysis of the transcripts (Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas 2013). Additionally, Mayring’s (2014) QCA procedural model was followed as a means by which a systematic and structured approach to coding was possible (Schreier 2019). The first step of analysis was to identify meaning units (words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs) that encompassed the phenomenon being explored, namely interactions between the participants and the school context. The second step involved the reduction of data by removing irrelevant words, yet ensuring the core meaning was not lost. This enabled a level

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Child*	Age	Gender	State	School context
Darcy	10	M	Qld	Lutheran
Liz	11	F	Vic	State
Charles	10	M	ACT	Independent
Lydia	11	F	Qld	State
William	12	M	Qld	Catholic
Marianne	10	F	SA	State
George	11	M	NSW	State
Elinor	12	F	Qld	Catholic
Rob	9	M	SA	State
Brandon	10	M	Vic	State

*Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of the participants.

of abstraction of the data to be achieved (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz 2017). From here, deductive coding of the condensed meaning units was undertaken based on Keller and Galgay (2010) domains of microaggressions, as shown in Table 2 *Deductive Coding Criteria and Anchor Samples—Microaggressions towards Dyslexic Children*.

Next, a second review of the data was carried out to determine if any inductive coding emerged. Extending on Keller and Galgay (2010) domains of microaggressions excerpts that illustrated the denial of educational supports for dyslexic children were identified. Once both deductive and inductive coding had been completed for four transcripts, anchor samples were created whereby examples of codes across four transcripts were compared. For some codes, such as *secondary gain*, anchor samples were not determined until later transcripts as the code was not used in the earlier transcripts. Code definitions and criteria were created to ensure consistency in the application of the codes across all the transcripts (Schreier 2019). Tables 2–3 demonstrate the anchor samples taken from the transcripts as well as the definitions and criteria determined for each code.

Limitations

A number of limitations were present within this study. Firstly, the project sought to explore the negative experiences that children and the presences of microaggressions were evidenced in the recollections of the children. A more purposeful study where the interview protocol is structured around the domains of microaggressions might elicit more data on the phenomenon. Secondly, the sample size is small due to the scope of the study and thus the findings cannot be generalised to the broader dyslexic population. Future research should consider larger samples sizes to extend on the findings of this study.

Microaggressions as a primary experience for dyslexic children

The children in this study expressed that microaggressions were evident in a variety of interpersonal interactions. According to the children, microaggressions were perpetrated by peers ($n=7$), educators ($n=10$) and relief or substitute teachers ($n=6$). The data showed that the dyslexic children encountered microaggressions in all but three of Keller and Galgay (2010) domains of microaggressions (denial of identity, spiritual intervention and desexualisation). For the domain of *denial of experience*, there were three subcategories that were specific to the experience of being a dyslexic child (i) not trying or working hard enough, (ii) misunderstanding of dyslexia, (iii) dyslexia not being a visible disability. The domains of *denial of privacy*, *helplessness*, *secondary gain*, *spread effect*, *infantising* and *patronising* occurred to varying

Table 2. Deductive coding criteria and anchor samples—microaggressions towards dyslexic children.

	Definition—derived from Keller and Galgay (2010)	Anchor Sample	Criteria
Denial of identity	There is no part of your life that is normal or like mine. The only thing I see when I look at you is your disability.	None present.	No criteria created.
Denial of experience	Your thoughts and feelings are probably not real and are certainly not important to me.	Liz: Teachers say I need to put more effort in, or I haven't done enough. Charles: A teacher aide would rub out my work when she didn't like it. The TA thought I didn't do good work.	The child discusses a time when their experience of dyslexia was minimised, dismissed or denied by another.
Denial of privacy	You are not allowed to maintain disability information privately.	Lydia: There was a time when our teacher was reading out our results and I felt weird that all of my results were being shared. I was really upset.	The child discusses a time when their diagnosis, grades or use of educational supports was discussed by others in a way that makes them uncomfortable.
Helplessness	You can't do anything by yourself because you have a disability.	Liz: 'I was doing maths, she just immediately was trying to help me. And I know that she trying to help, but then I actually feel that I can't do it on my own.'	The child discusses a time when another person sought praise, recognition or a tangible benefit from interacting with them.
Secondary Gain	I need to benefit from your disability in some way.	Elinor A lot of the times the kids would try and be like, 'Can I write on my laptop?' And he'd be like, 'No, you can't. Then they'd just get annoyed and be like 'Why not?'	The child discusses a time when another person provided assistance when it was not requested or required.
Spread Effect	I assume all areas of your life are impacted by your disability.	William: Other students have said 'Just get smarter.'	The child discusses a time when another person assumed that dyslexia impacted areas of their life unrelated to dyslexia.
Patronising/Infantising	You are not really capable. I know better than you how to do this. Your abilities are that of a child (not as developed as they should be). You are so special for living with that.	Liz I was given colouring in when everyone else did maths. My friends who also have dyslexia were given the same task. Lydia: This girl in my class was teasing me because I was allowed to use a calculator for math to check my answers. Lydia: A few people have said 'Oh my gosh, you're amazing. Good job.' I'm just like, 'Thank you.'	The child discusses a time when a presumption of incompetence was communicated to them. The child discusses a time when someone communicated an attitude of superiority or that the child was inspirational because of their dyslexia.
Second class citizen	PWDs are disgusting and should be avoided. Those people expect too much and are so difficult to work with. They have no patience. Your rights to equality are not important to me. You cannot be a sexual being or have a sexual identity because of your disability.	Liz: I was given colouring in when everyone else did maths.	The child discusses a time when they were not treated in the same way as their peers or that less was expected of them.
Desexualisation	Your disability makes you unusual, rare or alien.	None present.	No criteria created.
Exoticisation	I can pray for you and make your disability a better experience.	Lydia: 'It [dyslexia] is a disease. It's a different colour. Are you going to die soon? Are you contagious?'	The child discusses a time when they were made to feel vastly different to their peers because of real or mythical traits associated with dyslexia.
Spiritual Intervention		None present.	No criteria created.

Table 3. Inductive coding criteria and anchor samples—microaggressions towards dyslexic children.

	Definition	Anchor Sample	Criteria
Denial of supports	Your disability does not require you to receive anything that other students do not get.	Lydia: It's a bit annoying when your teachers don't understand what you're going through and say 'No' and 'You're not allowed to have that.' Lydia: I often use speech to text, and another boy asked if we could use speech to text, and she (the teacher) said 'No. We're writing today. Get out your books. We're all doing the same thing.' It's really not helpful.	The child or parent discusses a time when education supports were not provided because the educator perceived that the dyslexic child did not need them, or required the dyslexic child to work under the same conditions as their peers.

degrees across the sample. Within the findings it emerged that an extension of the domain of *second-class citizenship* was evident in the *denial of supports*. Further, Keller and Galgay (2010) auxiliary domain of exoticisation was evident in the way children were made to feel unusual, rare or alien. Finally, the findings revealed that exposure to microaggressions had a noticeable impact on the dyslexic children.

Denial of experience

Keller and Galgay (2010) second domain of *denial of experience* includes when the disability related experiences of a disabled person are minimised, invalidated or refuted. The children in this study described having their experiences as a dyslexic person denied in three different ways. Firstly, most of the children ($n=9$) felt that their efforts towards schoolwork were not recognised and minimised. For the children, it felt as though their experience of undertaking classwork, and persisting despite their literacy difficulties were denied. This was articulated by Marianne who explained that for her, completing the work 'was harder and [other students] had got lots more done and I was busy making sure it made sense while they were busy getting it done.' Similarly, Liz felt that their experiences and difficulties weren't acknowledged recalling how 'all the time they [teachers] say I'm not trying hard enough or I need to try harder.' For the children in this study, it was difficult to have their educators recognise how their dyslexia influenced the way they produced classwork. Being told to work faster or harder meant that the way the children experienced a task as a dyslexic student was denied by the educator.

The second way that the children ($n=5$) experienced the microaggression of denial of experiences was when the message that dyslexia is not a noteworthy diagnosis, or that it does not influence day-to-day living, was communicated to them. This was apparent when Charles was told that 'I should already understand the work' though they had requested assistance. This left Charles feeling as though their teacher did not understand that being a

dyslexic child meant that they experience difficulties in accessing the class work and therefore require assistance. For Lydia, her experiences as a dyslexic child were minimised when the principal told her 'everyone's different' which left her feeling 'really awkward'. A similar interaction was had by Marianne who shared that 'some people think that it's just a thing that's pretty normal and it's just like nothing's there'. She further explained that 'sometimes people go, "Oh, what does dyslexia do?" I say, "Oh, it makes it hard to do reading, writing, spelling" Then they might go, "Oh yeah, reading, writing is hard already" And they just don't get it'. Both Charles and Marianne felt their experiences as a dyslexic child, and the difficulties they encountered because of their diagnosis, were invalidated by those around them.

The final way in which denial of experience was conveyed was by communicating that as dyslexia is not a *visible* disability, that is there are no obvious outward physical or behavioural signs that would indicate that a child is dyslexic. These interactions left the children feeling that the experiences of a dyslexic child are not as significant as those of a child who has a visible disability. For example, Marianne perceived that the difficulties she experienced in the class were not acknowledged, however 'there's a girl with a learning disability and another with diabetes and it's known and the teacher gets told that. But no one knows about me because mine isn't obvious'. This sentiment was shared by George who described how 'there's this kid who has ADHD [Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder] and he has helpers to come into the class. No one really has time to help me'. Both Marianne and George perceived that the difficulties they experienced as dyslexic children were refuted when compared to the difficulties that students with other conditions experienced. This was a direct result of dyslexia not being obviously visible to educators.

Denial of privacy

The third domain that emerged from the data was that of *denial of privacy*. Denial of privacy involves the disclosure of personal information that involves a subtle or overt request for information about an individual's disability, or the disclosure of information without the consent of the disabled individual (Keller and Galgay 2010). Some ($n=4$) children had interactions with teachers, relief teachers and peers who either shared or elicited personal details about the child. For example, Lydia described two interactions where this occurred. Firstly, Lydia recalled 'when our teacher was reading out our results and I felt weird that all my results were being shared. I was really upset'. Further, they shared that 'I've had that happen a lot when teachers leave notes and relief teachers call them out. 'Oh, it looks like I'm supposed to help this person out'. And it's kind of awkward'. On both occasions Lydia had an emotional response to the disclosure of private information. Disclosing information in front of the

class was an experience shared by Elinor who described how a teacher 'would never really talk to me privately about stuff like that. He would just call me out in front of the class'. Disclosing information, whether directly or indirectly was an interaction these two children felt negatively impacted on them.

It also emerged that the disclosure of personal information, and thus the denial of privacy, was a delicate balance. When Brandon disclosed how their needs were made public when the teacher 'only made me do a few pages, not all the pages. It was in front of some other kids, and I felt a bit embarrassed' it revealed how when a teacher tried to provide a reasonable educational adjustment to support Brandon, it inadvertently denied him his privacy. This need for balance was also highlighted by Marianne who shared that 'relief/substitute teachers don't get told I have dyslexia. I would like it if they did. They would know that I have these extra things that help me'. These examples show how privacy can be difficult to manage in the education setting, and that the individual student should be consulted about how they would like their privacy managed.

Helplessness

The third domain of microaggression, *helplessness*, where an individual assumes that a disabled individual needs assistance due to low expectations of them (Keller and Galgay 2010), was describe by some of the children ($n=3$). Liz recalled the sense of presumed helplessness coming from a peer on two occasions. In the first instance Liz was completing a maths task when 'my peer immediately tried to help me. And I know she was trying to help, but I feel like I can do it myself'. Liz expressed an understanding of the good intentions of her peer, however the interaction was not a positive one for them. In the second instance Liz recalled a peer correcting her spelling 'by snatching my book and re-writing it. It makes me feel like she thinks I can't do it on my own when I can'. On this occasion Liz did not interpret any good intentions behind the help and the presumption of helplessness itself was unhelpful.

Further interactions ($n=2$) that created a sense of helplessness came from educators. When talking about the use of assistive technology, William explained that their teacher 'showed [me] some technology called Reader View and the microphone, but I'd already found it out. It was a bit too late'. The presumption of helplessness in this instance was not around the ability to complete the task, but around the ability of William to use technology to support themselves. Similarly, in their interaction with an educator, Lydia recalled that 'it was really awkward because they [the teacher] were like, "Honey, do you need a breathing break?" I was like "No I'm fine"'. Lydia was frustrated as a result of being made to feel helpless 'sometimes I just want to do the work like everyone else. Sometimes I also want to give it a try on my own as well before I ask for help'. Here Lydia described how they desired

some autonomy and agency over when they were to receive help, rather than have the presumption that help was automatically needed.

Secondary gain

The next domain of microaggression is that of *secondary gain*. This occurs when someone interacts with the disabled person in order to gain some benefit for themselves (Keller and Galgay 2010). Interestingly, this microaggression only emerged for one child, Elinor. When interacting with teachers, whether classroom or relief, peers would try to obtain a benefit indirectly. Elinor shared how

when we had relief teachers and I'd just [use my laptop], they'd get angry at me and be like, "Why do you do it on your iPad?" "Oh I'm usually allowed to write on it because it helps me write and all that" And then all the kids would also pretend that they needed to write on their laptop or iPad. I get annoyed because they're just taking advantage of it. And then the teacher would say, "Well, none of you are writing on your iPad then."

Elinor was able to articulate the complexity of this situation and how the actions of her peers in seeking secondary gain from her need for assistive technology resulted in her losing access to a reasonable educational adjustment. This particular interaction could also be categorised as a denial of privacy, as the relief teacher requested disclosure of Elinor's educational adjustments related to her dyslexia, further complicating the interaction.

Spread effect

The next domain of microaggression, *spread effect*, refers to interactions where an individual assumes that limitations caused by a disability lead to limitations in other aspects of life (Keller and Galgay 2010). For some of the children in this study ($n=4$) this meant that educators and peers made assumptions that having dyslexia impacted their attention (Liz), mathematical skills (Lydia), intelligence (William), and trustworthiness (George). The misattribution of trustworthiness was evident in an interaction where George was the only student using a laptop in class and 'someone said it was cheating'. The microaggression of spread effect is of particular note for the way it reveals the misconceptions around the diagnosis of dyslexia and the potential this has for the children's self-esteem and self-concept.

Patronising

Patronising is considered a microaggression when there is insincere admiration for the disabled person (Keller and Galgay 2010). Only one child reported interactions that could be categorised as patronising. Lydia described

interactions where 'a few people have said "Oh my gosh, you're amazing. Good job." I'm just like, "Thank you"'. In this instance Lydia did not feel as though the praise was genuine, nor was it warranted for completing tasks despite being dyslexic. The interaction communicated to Lydia that she was amazing for overcoming the awfulness of being dyslexic, while also implying that the person communicating believed they were superior for not having to overcome the *hardship* of being a dyslexic child.

Infantising

The microaggression of infantising occurs when the disabled individual is treated like a child, or as though they are less capable than would be expected for their age or development (Keller and Galgay 2010). The findings of this study showed that some ($n=4$) of the children in this study had experienced infantising from peers and educators. Concerningly, Liz recalled an interaction where they were 'given colouring in when everyone else did maths'. In addition to this, even though Liz could demonstrate competence at a higher level, they remained infantised. Liz described how 'I'm in the one star group and the teacher won't move me up. I've been in that group the whole year. Even when I do the 3 star work, the teacher won't move me up'.

Infantising also occurred when the work completed by the student was deemed below expectations. As Charles recalled, the 'teacher aide would rub out my work when she didn't like it'. This interaction left Charles feeling 'really annoyed about how she just got rid of my work'. Elinor described a comparable interaction with a teacher sharing 'When I'd spell something wrong, he'd say, "That's not how you spell it," and then he'd write in on there'. While the actions of the teacher aide (Charles) and teacher (Elinor) can be viewed as typical actions of educators in a classroom, the message received by the students was that they were not capable, and the educator knew better.

Second-Class citizenship

Second-class citizenship is a microaggression whereby the message is conveyed that the disabled people are less worthy than able-bodied/neurotypical people through actions that questioned, ridiculed, made to feel invisible, and ignored the disabled individual (Ogunyemi et al. 2020). The findings of this study revealed times when some of the children ($n=4$) were ridiculed for being a dyslexic child. Lydia described how 'this girl in my class was teasing me because I was allowed to use a calculator for math to check my answers. This girl was rude'. Similarly, Brandon recalled interactions where peers had 'said things like "You can't spell" and stuff like that. It made me feel bad'. Brandon also received messages of second-class citizenship from a relief teacher who said 'Why is your handwriting is really messy?' and 'Your spelling is bad. If I was your teacher, I won't let you get away with this'. Brandon

shared how these interactions made him 'feel a bit bad'. In contrast, Marianne was made to feel like a second-class citizen when asked to leave the classroom to make use of her assistive technology, sharing how 'I can feel a bit excluded because she makes me go outside so I don't distract anyone. The science teacher just says straightaway, "Go outside"'. The ableist microaggressions experienced by these students conveyed the message that their needs were problematic or burdensome (Gahris 2023) or that they are less worthy and thus not included in the dominant group (Bell 2013).

Denial of supports

The most noteworthy finding from this study, was the emergence of the microaggression *denial of supports* as an expression of *second-class citizenship*. The denial of supports occurred when the children's right to equitable access to teaching and learning were deemed to be burdensome, unreasonable, or unjustified. This is a manifestation of ableism and is distinct within the school context. Significantly, most ($n=7$) of the children in this study experienced denial of supports within the primary school context.

There were two ways in which denial of supports occurred. Firstly, half of the children ($n=5$) were denied pedagogical support, as exemplified by Liz who shared how 'Mr S didn't listen or help, he just repeated the same thing again and again'. This interaction was similar to one had by Charles who recalled that they 'asked for help and didn't get it from the teacher. The teacher said I should already understand the work' and an interaction Marianne had where they approached their teacher for assistance saying 'I really don't understand. You've got to help me with this. They would say, "Work it out. I gave it to you to work it out"'. These interactions between the children and their teachers demonstrates how the children were denied support through further explanation or scaffolding of the task. What is most concerning about these interactions is that the children expressed how they were attempting to self-advocate and seek help, however their request for support was denied.

The second way in which some ($n=4$) of the children were denied support was through the denial of tangible support in the form of assistive technology. For example, Rob explained how a 'teacher said that I'm not allowed to use an iPad or talk to text because they wanted me to write [with pen and paper]'. This made the task 'harder' for Rob who felt 'frustrated' by the denial of assistive technology as a support. This was an experience shared by Lydia who described how teachers would simply 'say 'No' and 'You're not allowed to have that [assistive technology]'. One possible explanation for the denial of support was given by Marianne who shared that 'I don't get to use it [speech to text] as much in science as I don't think [the teacher] understands very well'. The findings of this study revealed that in the educational context, denial of support is an action that conveys the message to dyslexic students their needs are not significant

enough to warrant treatment that is different to an able-bodied or neurotypical child. Further, the message that their right to access teaching and learning through reasonable adjustments is bothersome and a burden to educators and peers. These messages are also a denial of the human right of accessible education that is inherently afforded to neurotypical peers (Keller and Galgay 2010).

Exoticisation

According to Keller and Galgay (2010) exoticisation is a microaggression where a disabled person is hypersexualised by another. While not appearing in subsequent literature on ableist microaggressions (Kattari 2020; Bell 2013; Qi et al. 2023; Siddiqua and Janus 2017), the findings of this study revealed a variation of exoticisation. In this study, some children ($n=3$) were made to feel exotic by possessing traits or characteristics that were unusual, rare or alien. This was expressed by Lydia when she recalled how after telling her peers that she was dyslexic, they had responded by saying 'It's a disease. It's a different colour. Are you going to die soon? Are you contagious? That's why you're so weird and wrong'. This interaction with peers led Lydia to feel that being dyslexic meant she had a rare and exotic disease and that this differentiated her from, and made her feel *less than*, her peers.

Similar to Lydia's experience, Elinor was made to feel unusual by her peers. She recalled an interaction where her Year 6 teacher put 'a pink filter on my iPad. And then kids would be on my iPad and be like, "Why is your iPad so weird?". This also occurred when she used pink paper as a reasonable adjustment and 'there'd be kids say "Why are you buying it like that? Why are you writing on that? That's so weird"'. The use of reasonable adjustments, designed to assist Elinor's learning resulted in her being exoticised for engaging in what was considered an unusual classroom practice. In contrast, for George, the exoticisation came from a teacher when they were advised 'I shouldn't just say, oh, "I have dyslexia" because people think [dyslexia means] you can't really read too well but you can read normally. She says I should say *severe* because I can't really read at all'. The advice from the teacher was for George to consider themselves exotic when comparing themselves to other dyslexic children.

Impact of macroaggressions on the dyslexic child

The findings of this study showed that for almost all ($n=9$) of the children there was an emotional impact from the repeated exposure to microaggressions in the school context. There were a range of emotions reported in the data including sadness (Darcy, Marianne, George, Elinor, Rob), anger (Liz, Elinor), feeling awkward (Lydia), and annoyance (Lydia, William) as well as frustration and anguish (William, Elinor, Rob). The children reported heightened emotions both after single interactions and as a result of multiple

interactions over time. For two children, Marianne and Elinor, exposure to microaggressions in the school context was so harmful that it made the children cry. There was a sense that dyslexia, and therefore the children themselves, were not well understood by others, and this contributed to the emotional impact. As Liz expressed 'I'm angry that teachers don't understand dyslexia. When I explain, they don't listen'. Equally, Lydia explained how it was 'annoying and you feel like your teachers just don't get you or they just don't know how you would feel if you were put in that situation'. The findings showed how when the children felt that they were *less than* their neurotypical peers by subtle or unconscious messages communicated to them by peers or educators, it impacted of the children's emotional state.

Discussion

This study has described the classroom experiences of primary school aged dyslexic children and framed them as ableist microaggressions within a social relational model of disability. While this is a novel application of concept of microaggressions, the negative experiences the children shared are a familiar narrative in the literature (Delany 2017; Leitão et al. 2017; Leslie 2020; Levi 2017; Nevill and Forsey 2022b; Wilmot, Pizzey, et al. 2023). Further to this, the literature also already speaks to how the unconscious attitudes of teachers towards disabled students are known to influence how they behave towards them in the school context. For example, the relationship between teachers' implicit attitudes towards students and negative student outcomes (through teacher actions) was recently supported by a meta-analysis by Denessen et al. (2022). This study extends on this literature by revealing how ableist microaggressions can manifest through interpersonal interactions, and how these interactions can be ableist microaggressions.

Evident in the findings were examples of all of Keller and Galgay (2010) domains of ableist microaggressions except denial of identity and desexualisation. The domains of desexualisation as described by Keller and Galgay likely did not emerge due to the young age of the participants. An interesting finding was that some microaggressions spanned multiple categories, for example, a student could be denied their privacy with a public declaration of their diagnosis or support needs which would result in secondary gain when other students also wanted to use supports such as assistive technology. This in turn lead to the denial of the educational support because the teacher felt all students needed to be treated the same.

The findings also revealed that sometimes multiple domains were evident for one child, or there were multiple experiences of one domain of microaggressions. This may speak to an unintentional culture within a school whereby ableist attitudes, specifically lexism, are unconsciously embedded into everyday inter-personal interactions despite the best intentions of the educators

(Emmer, Dorn, and Mata 2024). The presence of microaggressions and positive explicit attitudes towards marginalised students are not mutually exclusive (Beaulieu 2016). Gahris (2023) highlighted how educators may lack quality professional development to foster awareness of ableist microaggressions and this could contribute to cultural constructs of, and attitudes towards, the value of spelling, reading and writing. For this reason, Keefe (2022) called for teacher preparation programs to educate pre-service teachers on the cultural and attitudinal ableism that exists within schools.

The most significant finding of this study is the denial of supports as a manifestation of second-class citizenship. This is an important revelation given the primary school context of the study. In Australia schools are mandated to provide reasonable education adjustments to all students with a diagnosed or imputed disability, including dyslexia (Australian Government 1992; Australian Human Rights Commission 2019). However, the support provisions outlined in policy are not enacted consistently in Australia for dyslexic children, and often parents are required to act as negotiators to ensure reasonable adjustments are in place (Nevill and Forsey 2022b). The difficulty in securing reasonable educational adjustments was evident in the experiences of many of the participants in this study.

Further, the findings of this paper support the conceptualisation of ableist microaggressions as a form of affective disablism. The emotional labour experienced by the children in having to respond to ableist microaggressions and to navigate their own understandings of their identity and self-concept was not a product of their dyslexia, it was the result of social interactions with others. This is reflective of Graby's (2015) assertion that the affective disablism experience is a reaction to being misunderstood and not meeting the ableist expectations of a neurotypical-normative society. Additionally it builds on (Sanmiquel-Molinero and Pujol-Tarrés, 2020) assertion that in affective disablism the othering that occurs serves to remind dyslexic students that they are the exception to the expectation of what a student should be.

Finally, the findings acknowledge that there may be an inherent difficulty in providing reasonable educational adjustments to dyslexic students in a way that preserves their dignity. While federal legislation and state policies mandate that all teachers provide educational adjustments to ensure dyslexic students can access the teaching and learning, the findings from this study show that sometimes this is done in a way that disempowers the students. Unconscious ableist understandings of disability, rather than a social relational understanding, inform academic standards, assessment, policy and funding (Marland 2023). As long as the emphasis remains on lexicist measures of achievement through standardised metrics (such as the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] and National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN]) efforts towards inclusive education will merely continue

to perpetuate ableist bias (Collins 2012; Marland 2023). Through greater awareness of ableist microaggressions, and the ways in which cultural attitudes towards literacy influence the educational context, teachers may be able to approach this delicate balance with more sensitivity and challenge the culturally ingrained ableism.

The findings of this study have provided a description of some of the real-time interactions with educators and peers that can be defined as ableist microaggressions within a social relational model of disability. Specific contribution is made through the identification of the domains of microaggressions experienced by dyslexic children in the primary school setting. Further, the data revealed that these ableist microaggressions contribute to a negative emotional state in dyslexic children. Currently the literature shows two crucial relationships. Firstly, that microaggressions are linked to poor mental health outcomes (Alexander-Passe 2008; Bajaj and Bhatia 2020; Novita 2016; Wilmot, Hasking, et al. 2023), and secondly that children with dyslexia are more likely than their neurotypical peers to experience poor mental health (Boyes et al. 2020; Hendren et al. 2018). Further investigation is warranted to better understand the role that microaggressions play in the mental health of dyslexic children at all stages of their education journey.

Conclusion

This paper contributes nuanced insight into the role that interpersonal interactions play in perpetuating ableist (or lexicist) microaggressions by illustrating how they may manifest in educational settings. Further, this study gives recognition to the social relational model of disability as experienced by children as they encounter cultural and attitudinal barriers imposed on top of their impairment. While individual interpersonal interactions that convey negative messages about dyslexia may seem innocuous, constant and consistent ableist messages that demean a dyslexic child may be problematic, and even detrimental (Torino et al. 2019) as they perpetuate the cultural constructs of, and attitudes towards, the value of spelling, reading and writing. Researchers and educators alike can benefit from the deeper consideration on the interpersonal interactions within the school context that dyslexic children perceive as negative. This study therefore contributes important findings to this field by describing the experiences of dyslexic primary school children as they encounter microaggressions in the primary school setting. These insights may be used to guide future research in this space in order to improve mental health outcomes for dyslexic children.

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Data availability statement

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

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