■ Coping with Academic Failure, A Study of Dutch Children with Dyslexia

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This paper reports the results of a study of strategies that Dutch children with dyslexia employ to cope with recurrent academic failure. All of the students in the study had developed strategies for protecting their self-esteem. Using Harter's theory of coping with discrepancies between performance and standards, we distinguish four strategies: (1) working hard and committing to standards, (2) lowering standards, (3) seeking support from significant others (i.e. parents and teachers), and (4) avoiding comparisons with significant others (i.e. peers). Although self-talk emerged as an important component of all four strategies, it was employed both adaptively (e.g. to preserve the students' belief in their own academic capacities) and maladaptively (e.g. to devalue the importance of learning). The students relied most strongly on support from their parents; teachers and peers were more likely to be seen as threats to self-esteem. Strategies of teachers and parents to encourage adaptive coping with recurrent academic failure are confirming the student's self-worth, explaining dyslexia, showing faith in the student's capacities, fostering adaptive self-talk, providing educational treatment, and preventing teasing and bullying. Besides that, teachers and parents should cooperate. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

Students with dyslexia must cope with recurrent academic failure, which can seriously impede their motivation and academic self-worth (Chapman & Turner, 1995; Harter, 1999; Humphrey, 2002; Linnenberg & Pintrich, 2002; Riddick, 1996; Singer, 2005). Interview studies have revealed that dyslexic

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children, youths, and adults often feel 'disappointed, frustrated, ashamed, fed up, sad, depressed, angry and embarrassed by their difficulties' (Riddick, 1996, p. 129). Many adults with dyslexia have bad memories of their school careers, because of the actions of teachers who were unaware of the existence of dyslexia (Gerber & Reiff, 1991; Hellendoorn & Ruijssenaars, 2000). Much has changed in this regard. In recent decades, a wealth of scientific information and insight has been produced and disseminated with regard to the specific learning problems of children with dyslexia (Vellutino, Fletcher, Snowling, & Scanlon, 2004). None-theless, recent studies also show that many dyslexic children still feel isolated, and as many as half report that they are regularly teased and bullied at school (Humphrey, 2002; Mishna, 2003; Riddick, 1996; Singer, 2005). Having problems at school, however, does not mean that all dyslexic students see themselves as failures or losers. All students adopt one or more specific ways of coping (either positively or negatively) with their academic motivation; such strategies are always aimed at protecting self-esteem (Hellendoorn & Ruijssenaars, 2000; Humphrey, 2002; Mishna, 2003; Riddick, 1996; Singer, 2005). The specific ways that students cope with failure are closely related to their motivation to persist. Andreassen, Knivsberg, and Niemi (2006) found that the student's motivation is a key factor in the success of educational treatment.

According to Pintrich (2003), there are multiple motivational pathways for energizing and directing behaviour in the face of academic failure. Some students may be sustained by their belief in their own self-efficacy, while others rely mainly on emotional and educational support from parents and teachers; yet other students hide their learning problems and give up. Pintrich remarks that research on the strategies that students use to regulate their own motivation and behaviour in the face of failure is rare. This paper addresses the question of how individuals cope with failure by discussing results from an interview study of 56 Dutch students with dyslexia. We studied the students' narratives about recurrent academic failure with regard to how they act in situations in which they are confronted with academic failure, their main goals and concerns, the emotions that are evoked and how they regulate them, and their main sources of support. We tried to reconstruct profiles of 'inner logic' that can help to explain idiosyncratic differences between students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Earlier studies have shown that recurrent academic failure, academic motivation, and negative self-attributions are closely inter-related (Durrant, 1993; Heyman, 1990; Klassen, 2002; La Greca & Stone, 1990; Linnenberg & Pintrich, 2002; Renick & Harter, 1989; Schunk, 1989; Settle & Milich, 1999). We therefore hypothesized that strategies for coping with recurrent failure are related to strategies for maintaining self-esteem. Harter's constructivist theory of the construction of the Self proved relevant in this respect.

Coping with the Discrepancy between Performance and Standards

A central theme in Harter's work is how children construct self-evaluations and protect their self-esteem in the face of failure. This theoretical framework builds

upon the founding works of modern psychology, which appeared in the early 20th century; more specifically, it builds upon William James' theories about self-esteem and the role of values and standards and Cooley's theories about the 'looking-glass-self' and the role of significant others. According to James (2001), individuals who fall short of their own standards and ideals experience low self-esteem. Inadequacy in domains that are deemed unimportant to the Self, however, should not adversely affect self-esteem. These theses have been confirmed in current research (Harter, 1999). From James' perspective, the main goal of students with dyslexia is to bridge the gap between their expected and actual performance and standards. Two main strategies for maintaining self-worth can be derived from James' theory:

1. Students can try to raise their actual level of competence to meet the standards.
2. Students can lower their academic standards to meet the level of their actual performance.

Jamesian strategies help students to face the truth about their poor performance without endangering their general self-esteem. As Harter (1999) notes, however, the Jamesian strategies are limited in their utility for enhancing self-esteem. There are natural limits to the extent to which students can increase their actual competence. Moreover, it is extremely difficult for schoolchildren to discount the importance of academic domains that are highly valued by their parents, teachers, and peers. Schoolchildren need the support of their parents and teachers if they are to continue believing in their own academic self-efficacy in the face of recurrent failure (Heyman, 1990). Cooley's looking-glass-self-model is relevant in this respect (Cooley, 1902).

Cooley's theory of the origins of self-worth has also been clearly documented in many recent studies with regard to the link between individuals' perceptions of approval from others and their sense of worth as individuals (Harter, 1999). Students who receive the lowest levels of social regard and support report the lowest levels of self-worth, and those who receive the most support hold the Self in the highest regard. From the looking-glass perspective, the main goal of schoolchildren with dyslexia is to gain positive evaluations from significant others. As with the Jamesian theories, two main strategies can be derived from Cooley's perspective:

1. Students can try to hide their poor performance in order to prevent negative evaluations by peers, teachers, or parents.
2. Students can seek positive confirmation from their parents, teachers, or peers with regard to their (global) self-worth or self-worth in other domains.

Recent Studies on the Role of Social Support

According to Harter (1999), the Jamesian and looking-glass-self-models are complementary. Recent studies show that personal standards, which are the focus of Jamesian theories, are rooted in social relationships, which are the focus of the looking-glass-self-model (Day & Tappan, 1996; Miltenburg & Singer, 2000). Studies suggest that warm and reliable relationships between children and parents foster the development of personal standards and positive self-evaluations (e.g. 'I am worthwhile; I am a good child') that transcend family

relationships (see review by Feiring & Taska, 1996). From the age of seven years, children start to differentiate between domains of self-worth and self-perception, and between their self-worth in specific academic domains and their global self-worth. For example, good math performance (e.g. performing better than most of their peers) can be used to counterbalance poor reading performance (e.g. being in lowest level of the class). Parents play a crucial role in the development of global self-worth. The daily experience of being warmly regarded can help students to appropriate their parents' distinction between global self-worth and poor performance in specific academic domains. Such students are able to internalize firm personal standards with regard to being a good person, and these standards protect them against negative feelings that can arise from academic problems in specific areas (Day & Tappan, 1996).

In contrast, conditional support from parents is associated with low levels of self-worth (Harter, Marold, Whitesell, & Cobbs, 1996). Children may feel that parental support is forthcoming only if they meet unrealistically high parental standards. Studies by Harter and colleagues show that a lack of parental emotional support is not easily compensated by other special adults (e.g. an involved teacher), especially if the student already feels incompetent in important domains (Talmi & Harter in Harter, 1999). Other studies, however, highlight the positive influence of support from teachers (Humphrey, 2003).

From the age of eight years, children increasingly utilize comparison with peers as a barometer of their own skills and attributes (see review by Frey & Ruble, 1990). Peers acquire the function of the 'generalized other'. On the one hand, this is related to advances in cognitive development: in middle childhood, children acquire the ability to make simultaneous comparisons between representations of the Self and others (Pomerantz, Ruble, Frey, & Greulich, 1995). Negative self-evaluations become organized as higher-order *traits* rather than mere behaviours. On the other hand, age stratification in school stimulates greater attention to individual differences between peers. Teachers and parents make use of social-comparison information, and students are well aware of these educational practices (Eccles & Midley, 1989; Singer, 2005). The very ability to compare the Self with peers and the existence of school-assessment practices combine to make students with dyslexia vulnerable to representations of low self-efficacy in particular academic domains. This vulnerability is exacerbated by the increased chance that students with dyslexia will be victimized by peers at school (Humphrey, 2002; Mishna, 2003; Riddick, 1996; Singer, 2005).

Hypotheses

Our study is based on Harter's theory of the construction of the Self and, in a related vein, on insights from the work of James and Cooley into coping with recurrent failure to meet standards. We formulated the following hypotheses concerning students' coping strategies.

First, in situations of recurrent academic failure, we expect that students will have the primary goal of protecting their self-esteem. *Second*, we expect to be able to differentiate between four main strategies that students use to maintain their self-esteem. Based on the Jamesian approach, we expect to observe two opposing strategies with regard to standards.

1. Activities oriented toward improving performance and meeting standards (commitment to standards).
2. Activities oriented toward putting academic failure into perspective (lowering of standards).

On the basis of Cooley's looking-glass-self-approach, we also expect to observe two opposite strategies for maintaining positive confirmation of self-worth by significant others.

3. Activities oriented towards hiding academic failure in order to avoid peer comparison and negative comparison with standards (i.e. avoidance of evaluations by peers, parents, and teachers).
4. Activities oriented towards gaining positive support and confirming (general) self-worth (i.e. seeking support from teachers, parents, and peers).

Third, we expect to find two different profiles of students. The first profile describes students who rely mainly on activities that are oriented towards improving their own performance and meeting standards (Strategy 1), and the second describes students who rely mainly on activities that are oriented towards hiding the discrepancy between their academic performance and the standards (Strategy 3).

METHOD

Participants

Our sample consisted of 60 Dutch students between the ages of nine and 12. All of the students were attending mainstream schools at the time of the study, and their IQ scores were normal or above normal, according to school reports. All had received formal diagnoses of primary dyslexia from certified psychologists or remedial educational specialists, according to criteria that are consistent with those in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th edition (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The Manual's central criterion is a large discrepancy between the actual and expected levels of achievement in reading and spelling, given the child's age and intelligence (Wenar & Kerig, 2000). The children in our sample had been diagnosed as dyslexic at least one year prior to the interview. Thirty per cent had been diagnosed between one and two years prior to the study, 33% had been diagnosed between two and three years before the study, and 37% had been diagnosed more than three years prior to the study.

   The students were recruited by educational guidance services and by private clinics specializing in providing remedial help to students with dyslexia. Most of the students in our study (91%) had received one or more forms of extra remedial help. Outside of the school context, 73% received extra training from their parents between one and seven days each week, and 47% attended private clinics for remedial teaching. At school, 59% received extra help from their teachers between one and five days a week, and 41% received assistance from remedial teachers. On average, the parents provided more help each week than the professionals did. At the time of the interviews, 63% of the children were still experiencing serious problems with reading and spelling, according to standardized Dutch norms for children in need of remedial help (see Table 1). These children had scored in the lowest 25% on the Dutch test for decoding skills, standardized according to grade norms (Visser, 1997). These students had serious

Table 1. Characteristics of the subjects in frequencies (percentages), $N = 60$

		Girls, $N = 24$	Boys, $N = 36$	Total, $N = 60$
Socio-economic status	Low	3 (13)	8 (22)	11 (18)
	Medium	13 (54)	14 (39)	27 (45)
	High	8 (33)	14 (39)	22 (37)
Cultural background	Native Dutch	2 (8)	2 (6)	4 (7)
Family background	Two-parent family	23 (96)	32 (89)	55 (92)
Age	9–10 years	15 (63)	13 (36)	28 (47)
	11–12 years	9 (38)	23 (64)	32 (53)
Diagnosis of dyslexia	1–2 years ago	13 (53)	10 (28)	23 (38)
	2–3 years ago	6 (25)	13 (36)	19 (32)
	>3 years ago	5 (21)	13 (36)	18 (30)
Children with serious reading problems at the time of interview		18 (69)	22 (58)	40 (63)
Frequency of extra help at home, school, and/or a clinic	0–1 per week	5 (21)	9 (25)	14 (24)
	2–5 per week	7 (29)	15 (42)	22 (36)
	6–12 per week	12 (50)	12 (33)	24 (37)
CBCL (parents)	Clinical score(s)	3 (12)	6 (16)	9 (15)
TRF (teachers)	Clinical score(s)	1 (4)	3 (8)	4 (6)

problems with the level of reading comprehension that is expected for students of their grade levels. The 37% of the students who did not have serious problems had mastered decoding skills in Dutch, but still had mild problems with reading and spelling, and serious problems with learning English as a second language (English-language training begins in the sixth grade in Dutch schools), according to the educational guidance services and private clinics that had recruited them.

Our aim was to recruit a relatively homogeneous group of students with dyslexia who had no other major disabilities that could confound the results. The absence of other forms of developmental psychopathologies was confirmed by the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), which was completed by the children's parents, and by the Teacher's Report Form (TRF), which was completed by their teachers (Achenbach, 1991a,b). Of the children in our sample, 15% had received clinical scores on one of the behavioural domains of the CBCL, and 6% had received clinical scores on the TRF (see Table 1). According to the CBCL a clinical score means that the student has a behavioural disorder in a specific domain. The students in our sample received slightly fewer clinical scores than did the norm group of Dutch children (Verhulst, Koot, Akkerhuis, & Veerman, 1990).

Almost all of the students attended regular schools, in either rural or urban areas, and only a few were in the same class. All but one of the children came from native Dutch-speaking families of diverse socio-economic background (see Table 1). The fact that boys were over-represented in our sample (38 boys and 24 girls) reflects the higher prevalence of dyslexia among males (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Interview Method and Theory

In our study, we used an interview instrument that is especially designed for studying the 'inner logic' in children's behaviour. Inner logic refers to children's

motivations for acting in specific ways in specific situations: their goals, concerns, emotions, and skills for regulating their own emotions (Singer, 2005; Singer, Doornenbal, & Okma, 2004). In line with Harter's theory, the interview instrument is based on constructivist theory regarding cognitive-affective processes and structures (Fischer *et al.*, 1997; Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan, 1990; Frijda, 1986; Harter, 1999; Miltenburg & Singer, 2000). As shown in Figure 1, cognitive-affective processes begin as children notice changes in their outer or inner worlds (Denham, von Salisch, Olthof, Kochanoff, & Caverly, 2002; Frijda, 1986). In our study, the situational changes have to do with recurrent academic failure. Notable changes are appraised with regard to the relevance of their concern (primary appraisal); these changes can generate arousal and feelings of pleasure or aversion, and such automatic (i.e. involuntary) emotional behaviour as blushing and defensive reflexes. During secondary appraisal, children evaluate the context, along with their own concerns and behavioural options within the context. Higher psychological processes (e.g. representation, memory, problem solving, and planning) play an important role in this evaluation.

During their development, children construct structures that channel their observations and interpretations of the situation, evoking specific patterns of external and internal behaviour. Structures reflect generalized social experiences with significant others. On the basis of recurrent social experiences, we hypothesized the existence of two distinct groups of students. The first group includes students who have developed cognitive-affective structures that evoke activities that are oriented towards improving their own performance to meet the standards. The other group consists of students whose cognitive-affective structures evoke activities to hide their performance from significant others (e.g. peers and teachers) in the face of academic failure.
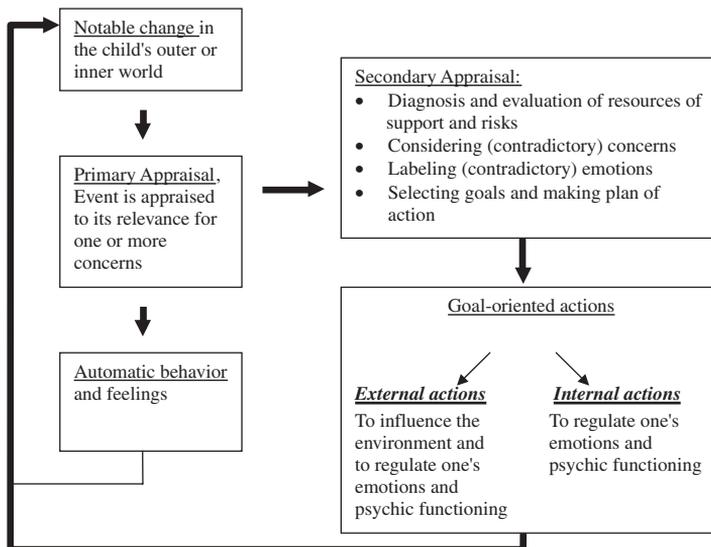

Figure 1. Diagram of cognitive-affective processes.

Interview Procedure

The interview consisted of discussing a situation in which the child is confronted with academic failure. The interview opened by discussing a fictitious situation in which 'Rob' (when interviewing a boy) or 'Sandra' (when interviewing a girl) is the only boy or girl in the class with dyslexia. 'The other day, Sandra had a spelling test. She had worked very hard to prepare herself and had practiced spelling difficult words every night. Do you know what happened? She did very poorly on her test, and the teacher told her that she had made many mistakes. How do you think Sandra reacted?' We then asked the children whether they had ever experienced such situations in real life. If they responded positively, we invited them to tell a story about such a situation. We subsequently asked a series of concrete questions based on our theoretical framework of cognitive-affective processes to help the children explain their motivations and behaviour. The questions were as follows:

- What did you do? (actions)
- What did you try to accomplish? (goals)
- What made these goals important to you? (concerns)
- What did you feel? (emotions)
- What made you feel that way? (concerns)
- Did you express your feelings? What did you do with your feelings inside? (emotional regulation)
- Did you talk about it with your teacher or parents?

At the end of the interview, we asked more general questions about the feelings that the students had towards their parents with regard to having dyslexia, the types of support they would like to have, and the advice that they would give to parents, teachers, and other children with dyslexia.

We used the following props to obtain and hold the children's attention and to engage them in the interview: a thermometer with which to rate the severity of the situation (red = 'very bad,' orange = 'bad,' or yellow = 'not too bad'); emotion faces; and a 'stop' sign to indicate that they did not wish to answer a question or wanted to stop the interview (Garbarino & Scott, 1989; La Greca, 1990; Miltenburg *et al.*, 1996).

Analyses

After all the interviews had been completely transcribed, we constructed a categorization system for actions, goals, concerns, and emotions. Applying our theoretical framework, we categorized the answers in strategies for coping with academic failure. With regard to the *external actions*, this resulted in four categories:

— Learning activities and extra work on academic tasks (Strategy 1).
— Actions oriented towards hiding academic problems and or negative emotions (Strategy 3).
— Actions oriented towards gaining academic support and confirmation of self-worth from an adult (e.g. teacher or parents) (Strategy 4).
— Turning to peers for academic and emotional support (Strategy 4).

Some responses were coded in two categories, as when children told us that they were happy that their parents helped them with extra homework (Strategies 1 and 4). The category of peer support was miscellaneous. Peers offered a mixture of academic and emotional support. Two of the children, however, used clowning and disruptive behaviour to seek support from their peers. The open expression of emotions (e.g. anger, frustration, and sadness) was seldom mentioned and therefore not included in our categorization system.

On the basis of our theoretical framework, we expected the students to use internal actions to put the standards into perspective. The ways in which they did this, however, proved quite diverse. We distinguished three different forms of putting standards into perspective, each of which is likely to have a different effect on the perseverance of students in overcoming their academic problems (Beck, 1995). Finally, the children also mentioned actions oriented towards regulating emotions that they did not wanted to express. This resulted in the following *categories of internal actions.*

— Putting the standards into perspective (Strategy 2) by (1) differentiating between self-evaluations in specific academic domains (being dumb in spelling and reading) and global self-worth (e.g. being smart); (2) discounting the performance of peers (e.g. all children make bad grades); (3) normalizing dyslexia in family (e.g. reference to a relative who also has dyslexia).
— Distracting themselves by thinking of or doing something else.
— Expressing sadness or anger in private.

The *goals and concerns* we distinguished were as follows.

— Not feeling bad, and feeling good about the Self (the hypothesized goal of all strategies).
— Making better grades (Strategy 1).
— Avoiding teasing and comparison with peers (Strategy 3).

In some cases (e.g. 'I hide my bad grades from my peers'), it was difficult to distinguish between actions and goals. In these cases, we coded the student's answer in both the action category and the goal category. The actions of students were often related to several goals or concerns (e.g. 'I try to hide my bad grades, because that makes me feel ashamed, and then I cannot concentrate on my work.').

Emotions were categorized according to expressed or hidden emotions (e.g. anger, sadness, guilt, shame, anxiety, confusion, faking feeling good, neutral, stupid, smart, happy, proud). The actions that the children took to regulate their emotions were coded according to the action categorization system (see above).

After the data were coded, they were transposed into a numerical system for statistical analysis. We used Cohen's Kappa (Wickens, 1989) to determine inter-rater reliability for the main variables. The test results are satisfying for acts (0.71), goals and concerns (0.78), and emotions (0.93).

RESULTS

Fifty-six students recounted real-life experiences; four students did not want to talk about it or could not remember a story. The students told stories about

entrance tests, dictations, reading aloud in class, tests in math, or history assignments that depended on reading skills. In their stories, the students stressed the great efforts they had made. They also expressed regret about the costs that they had paid in vain, including studying every evening and, even more painfully, missing the pleasure of playing with their peers after school because of extra homework.

Actions

Most of the students (59%) reacted to negative evaluations of their performance by pretending that nothing serious had happened. 'I immediately put the test into my drawer and went on with my math'. (Jeroen, age 12). They tried to hide their feelings and did not want their peers to know that they were angry, sad, or puzzled or that they felt guilty, ashamed, or stupid (59%). Two-fifths of the students reported having taken up the challenge of improving their performance (41%). Three-fourths of the students sought support from adults, either parents (64%) or teachers (32%). One-fourth of the students had shared their disappointment with their peers. Most had sought emotional support, and three students had asked for and received support from their peers for improving their academic skills (Table 2).

Parents proved the most important source of support. Minke (age 9) described, 'At home, I tell my mom to get rid of it. Otherwise, I keep on thinking about it. Then we do something nice, going to the Gridpark [park in the city of Utrecht]'. Children told the interviewers that their parents reassure them that they are good learners and good children. Dimitri (age 10) told us, 'Then she [mother] says, 'You have done the best you could; you can't do anymore.' Then I feel peaceful again.' The children spontaneously told about their parents' efforts to reframe situations in a positive light.

From the outside, most students tried to appear unaffected by the blow; internally, however, they actively tried to recover their balance. Students reported feeling angry (27%), sad (24%), stupid (16%), confused (14%), or ashamed (13%), although they rarely expressed these emotions at school, and they hid them from their peers. The students thus had to use internal actions to regulate their

Table 2. External and internal actions in frequencies (%) $n = 56$

External actions		Internal actions	
Hiding failure and emotions from peers	33 (59)	Putting standards into perspective:	41 (73)
Working extra hard	23 (41)	Discounting the performance of peers	30 (54)
Turning to adult for support:	43 (77)	Differentiating specific and global self-esteem	21 (38)
to teacher	18 (32)	Normalizing dyslexia in family	19 (34)
to parents	36 (64)	Crying, worrying when they are alone	6 (11)
Turning to peers for support	14 (25)	Distraction	33 (59)

Note: Most children mentioned more then one action.

emotions. The most striking result is that most students reported relying on cognitive strategies to normalize and reframe their poor performance. Many children (54%) put their own performance into perspective by devaluing the work of their peers. For instance, Frank (age 11) told us, 'You get used to it. It's just a grade. Many children get bad grades now and then. On that test, everybody got a low grade. I often think, ''Nobody has a clue.''' Many students (38%) differentiated between their global self-worth and specific academic problems. Jan (age 12) reported consoling himself 'by concentrating on the subjects I am good in. That makes you feel better. I am not dumb.' Many children stressed the fact that they are normal children. As Anke (age 9) described, 'I just have to work harder on spelling and reading.' Mieke (age 11) repeatedly reminds herself of her normality by saying, 'I have always been like this. It [dyslexia] is a part of me. Without it, I would not be myself. I cannot help it. My mother can handle it. I feel normal, because my mother thinks it is normal.'

Several students reported voluntarily repeating the words of their parents (e.g. 'You have done your best,' or 'You will learn it, it only takes a little more time.') in order to reassure themselves. The presence of dyslexic parents or relatives appeared to be particularly helpful for the children we interviewed (34%). If people they love and admire have the same problem, children are able to see that they are also worthy of love and admiration. For example, Karin (age 9) recounted, 'My father is also dyslexic, and he always tells me, 'You look a lot like me.'

Goals and Concerns

Most goals and concerns (82%) belonged to the category of 'feeling good about the Self' or 'feeling good again and getting over the shock.' In the second place (57%) were goals and concerns related to avoiding teasing and negative comparisons with peers. In the third place (43%) were goals and concerns related to making better grades and to bridging the gap between performance and standards. Most students mentioned several goals and concerns belonging to multiple categories (Table 3).

Reconstruction of Profiles of Inner Logic in the Children's Narratives

We used the following procedure to reconstruct profiles of inner logic. We expected to find two opposing profiles of students: those who rely mainly on activities oriented towards meeting the standards (Strategy 1) and those who mainly seek to hide the discrepancy between their actual academic performance

Table 3. Goals and concerns in frequencies (%), $n = 56$

Goals and concerns	
To feel good	46 (82)
To avoid negative comparison with peers, not to be teased	32 (57)
To get better marks, to perform better	24 (43)

Note: Most children mentioned several goals and concerns.

and the standards (Strategy 3). We therefore started by selecting the students who met the criteria for one of two hypothesized groups.

1. Students who tried to improve their performance (Strategy 1) and who did not try to hide their failure (Strategy 3).
2. Students who tried to hide their failure (Strategy 3) and did not try to improve their performance (Strategy 1).

Contrary to our expectations, two additional groups emerged from the analysis.

3. Students who used both Strategy 1 and Strategy 3.
4. Students who used neither Strategy 1 nor Strategy 3.

After selecting students who represented each of these four groups, we analysed the responses of each group according to goals, concerns, emotions, and internal actions that were oriented towards regulating emotions and gaining adult or peer support. We tried to construct profiles consisting of coherent patterns of concerns, goals, emotions, and emotional regulation related to the four groups (see Table 4). In this way, we tried to understand the logic that the children used in choosing specific strategies and to gain deeper insight into the motivational backgrounds of different groups of students.

Profile 1: Working Hard, Gaining Social Support, and Adaptive Self-talk
Twelve students (21% of all students) told us that they respond to recurrent academic failure by working hard to improve their performance and that they

Table 4. Profiles (external actions and goals) related with sources of support and internal actions, $n = 56$ (%)

	Better marks, $N = 12$	Avoidance of peer comparison, $N = 20$	Better marks and avoidance of peer comparison, $N = 11$	Feel good of Self, $N = 11$	Rest, $N = 2$
Resources of support					
Looking for support of adult	12 (100)*	10 (50)	9 (82)	11 (100)*	1 (50)
Teacher 18 (32)					
Parent 36 (64)					
Looking for support of peer(s)	4 (33)	2 (10)	2 (18)	5 (46)*	1 (50)
Internal actions					
Positive emotions	5 (42)	0	0	0	0
Differentiating specific domains of self-esteem	6 (50)	2 (10)	3 (27)	9 (82)***	1 (50)
Denouncing peer performance	4 (33)	10 (50)	5 (46)	10 (91)*	1 (50)
Normalizing: dyslexia in family	4 (33)	3 (15)	4 (36)	6 (55)	2 (100)
Distracting one's attention	2 (17)	18 (90)***	5 (46)	9 (82)	0 (0)
Expressing emotions in private	1 (8)	2 (10)	2 (18)	1 (9)	0 (0)

*$p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

did not try to hide their problems. Their main goals and concerns involved meeting the standards and feeling good about themselves. At school, they asked their teachers for help; at home, they shared their problems with their parents. All of these students received adult support. Some also received support from their peers at school. For instance, Peter (age 10) recalled, 'Yesterday, our teacher returned our spelling tests. First, Arthur looked at his exercise book; he had a 7. Then Daniel looked, and he had gotten a 7.5. Then I looked and saw that I had a 5 and that I had failed the test. Then the three of us looked at my mistakes. I had confused some words, and I had practiced these words with Arthur and Daniel. They are my best friends and always help me. I was happy that the other children [of his class] were not there.'

All of the students who fit this profile had developed internal strategies for feeling good about themselves. They put the discrepancy between their performance and the standards into perspective in an adaptive way. Half of these students differentiated between specific domains of self-esteem (e.g. 'Then I say to myself, 'You should be glad that you are not [physically] handicapped.' 'I don't think that it [dyslexia] will hinder me much, because they found out that I am highly gifted.'). They tell themselves that they are not stupid and reinforce the difference between being stupid in general and having dyslexia. Half of the students spontaneously cited phrases that their parents had used to reassure them (e.g. 'You can do it; it only takes some extra time and effort.'). Some accentuated small steps forward. For example, Laura (age 12) remarked, 'I work at a lower level than my peers. But I am proud that I have come so far. You just have to be yourself.'

Unlike the students that matched the other profiles, some of the students in this profile tried to cope with the situation by transforming their negative emotions (e.g. sadness, anger, and disappointment) into positive energy. For instance, Esther (age 12) said, 'I get a bit angry at myself, and then I think, 'Esther, you can do it. Just do it.' In contrast to students that fit the other profiles, some of these students (42%) mentioned experiencing pride, gladness, a feeling of being smart, or other positive emotions because they did not give up and in response to every small step forward.

Understanding and insight into the specific problems of dyslexia seem to play a very important role. The ability to put situations into perspective in an adaptive way often depends upon information that students have learned from their teachers or parents about dyslexia as a specific learning problem that can be overcome—at least to a certain extent—with hard work. Teachers, parents, and even some peers may understand what dyslexic students need and provide both emotional and educational support. Moreover, they may provide dyslexic students with short motivating sentences that they can repeat to themselves to boost their spirits when they feel bad.

Profile 2: Peer Avoidance, Hiding the Problem, and Seeking Distraction
The main goal for 20 of the students (36%) was to prevent negative comparison with their peers. These students try to hide their poor performance. They reported being afraid of teasing or bullying, and they felt inferior to their peers. When they find out that they have made a bad grade on a test, these students told us that they try to ignore the fact, pretend that they are unaffected, and try to hide

their emotions. For instance, Kees (age 12) remarked, 'I could not understand these words [English language class]; they were very odd. I just did not understand. I pretended nothing was wrong. And I put my workbook in my bag and started to talk with the children about something else. I was afraid that someone would ask about my grade and that they would think that I was stupid.' Kees did not go to his teacher for help, for fear that everybody else would have found out about his problem.

Only a few of the students that matched this profile mentioned that they had received support from their teachers, and half said that their parents supported them in coping with their academic problems. Some bitterly criticized their teachers for announcing their grades in class or for setting them up to fail in front of the whole class. Some also criticized their parents for not accepting their (the students') dyslexia. Freek (age 10) told us, 'Then he starts to drill me on my homework. And when I make a mistake, he starts to shout. That makes me very nervous and then I cannot think any more.'

Almost all of the students in this profile tried to regulate their negative emotions through distraction and involvement in other activities. Karel (age 11) reported being teased by his peers because of his dyslexia. 'Sometimes I keep on thinking about it [failure and being bullied]. But when we have crafts or drawing, I can make it go away [fear and feeling bad]. That takes my mind off it at once.' Just like the students from the first profile, these students try to put their performance into perspective. The students who match this profile, however, tend to use self-talk in a maladaptive way. Half of them place themselves in a more favourable light by stressing the poor academic performance of their peers. Some also make a distinction between their generally positive academic self-worth and the negative self-worth that they feel because of their dyslexia, albeit in a defeatist way. Meriam (age 10) reported, 'Then I say to myself, I am dyslexic; I cannot help it. I cannot be blamed.' These students had learned to soothe themselves by seeing themselves as helpless and blameless. Some children reported that they had given up. According to Roy (age 11), 'I don't study my exercises anymore. Because even when I write these words more than a thousand times, I only remember two or three letters.'

Profile 3: Hard Work and Peer Avoidance
Eleven students (20%) sought simultaneously to decrease the discrepancy between their performance and the standards and to minimize the chance of negative comparison with their peers. In many respects, these students formed an in-between group. They were more likely to report receiving adult support than were the students who matched Profile 2 (peer avoidance) and less likely than were those who fit Profile 1 (hard work). They were more likely to use the technique of differentiating specific domains of self-esteem than were the Profile 2 students, and less likely than Profile 1 students were. With regard to using distraction to regulate negative emotions, these students also fell between those of Profiles 1 and 2; they were more likely to employ this strategy than were Profile 1 students, and less likely than Profile 2 students were. These students were also less likely than Profile 2 students were and more likely than Profile 1 students were to use the technique of denouncing the performance of their peers.

Profile 4: Recovery of the Self

Eleven students (20%) did not try to perform better and cared little about negative comparisons with peers. They were exclusively focused on the Self and their feelings. According to Remco (age11), 'I want to feel good, and I don't want to feel stupid the whole day. I don't want to be sad when I go home.' All of the students who fit this profile reported relying on support from teachers and parents to recover from the blow and to feel better. They sought comfort and understanding. Five of these students also turned to their peers in their efforts to feel better. Rogier (age 12) told us, 'Even if they are not my friends, they help me. Every time that I make a mistake, they whisper, 'get rid of that 'd.' It has to be 't.' I have explained it [dyslexia] to them. I said that I am dyslexic, and then they asked what it was. I explained it to a few children; they told other children, and so the word got around. That is my idea.' Jane (age 10) made herself feel better by joking with her peers. 'I guessed that I wouldn't get any words right, and I thought that it was funny, because I didn't get any words right. I said to Wouter [peer],' Look, I guessed that I wouldn't get any of the words right, and I had no words without mistakes!'

All of the students who fit this profile put their poor performance into perspective. They differentiated between their global (good) self-worth and self-worth that was related to spelling and reading. For instance, Jane (from the example above) believed that her correct prediction proved her intellectual normality: 'I guessed it right! My brains are still working. Not all children with dyslexia are stupid!' Jan (age 9) compared himself with his peers in diverse subjects, 'I am bad in spelling but good in math; other children get bad grades in math.' Almost all of these students also denounce the performance of their peers (e.g. 'Everybody gets bad grades.' 'Nobody understands it.' 'The teacher is nuts.') in their efforts to feel normal. They use distraction (e.g. clowning, thinking pleasant thoughts, doing something else) to regulate their negative emotions. Half of these students mentioned having dyslexic parents or relatives in order to stress that dyslexia is normal and should not be a cause for concern. Jacob (age 12) told us, 'It runs in the family. My father is dyslexic, my half-sister is dyslexic, and they are planning to test my half-brother for dyslexia too.' Marieke (age 10) explained, 'I am just like my father. He is also dyslexic and very strong. I love gymnastics and I am also very strong.'

Several of the students who fit this profile strongly stated that dyslexia should not dominate children's daily lives. Jimmy (age 12) expressed his fear that his mother worries too much about his dyslexia, 'I tell her my grades, but I just act normal. I don't want to make her sad.' Karel (age 11) stressed that there is more to life than homework and dyslexia, 'Don't push too much! Let him [child with dyslexia] play with his friends; don't make him think that he is dumb. They [parents] should never force him to work on his homework.'

Advice from the Students

At the end of the interview, we asked the students if they had any advice for young students with dyslexia, or for their parents and teachers. Irrespective of their own approach, most of the students (81%) stressed the importance of support from teachers and parents. Two-thirds of the students mentioned good educational support and treatment. They also had many practical tips in this

regard; students with dyslexia need more time, extra attention, repeated explanation of the rules, and memory aids. Teachers and parents should help students feel that they will manage in the end. They advised teachers to protect dyslexic students from bullying and never to become angry because of the many mistakes that dyslexic students make in their work. Teachers should not humiliate students in front of their peers. Explaining dyslexia to the whole class might help. Parents should console their children when they are sad, but they should also let dyslexic children live like normal children. Many of the students (61%) underscored the importance of normality. According to Nienke (age 12), 'You just have to work harder. And getting extra attention is nice.' Wim (age 9) advised, 'Pretend not to have dyslexia.' Johan (age 10) said, 'Don't blame yourself. You can't help it. You'll have a hard time the first year, but once you can cope with it, it doesn't matter. I have been to Lydia [for educational treatment] for four years, and now I have mastered almost everything.'

DISCUSSION

Our study of students' strategies for coping with recurrent academic failure strongly confirms our first hypothesis that the main goals of dyslexic students are related to protecting their self-esteem. Eighty-two per cent mentioned goals or concerns related to 'feeling good and not stupid' and 'getting over the shock.' Our second hypothesis about the four strategies for coping with academic failure was also confirmed. The two strategies that could be derived from James' theory of coping with discrepancy between performance and standards proved quite helpful in analysing the students' narratives, as were the two strategies derived from Cooley's looking-glass-self-model. The Jamesian strategy of bridging the gap between performance and standards by putting the situation into perspective proved more complex, however, as the students in this study applied the strategy in both adaptive and maladaptive ways. They spontaneously mentioned the self-talk that they use to overcome the blow and to motivate themselves not to give up. References to dyslexic relatives were used to stress the normality of people with dyslexia and to feel good about the Self. Some students, however, mentioned maladaptive examples of putting situations into perspective, including the use of self-talk to denounce the importance of the standards and to legitimize giving up.

Our third hypothesis concerned the profiles of inner logic. We expected to find two profiles: one focusing on working hard to meet the standards, and another related to hiding poor performance to prevent peer comparison. This hypothesis was only partially confirmed. We found two additional profiles: one focused on both working hard and trying to hide poor performance, and one was oriented primarily towards feeling good about the Self by seeking support from parents, teachers, and peers. The students who responded by working hard were more likely to receive adult support than were the students who tried to hide their poor performance. Peers were less frequently mentioned as sources of support than adults were, and teachers were mentioned less often than parents were. The students who tried to hide their poor performance were often afraid of teasing or bullying by peers. Although the numbers are small, our data suggest the

existence of a relationship between peer avoidance and a lack of teacher and parental support.

Educational Consequences

Our study shows that insights into the coping strategies of students can clarify the relationships between recurrent academic failure, self-esteem, and persistence that have been described in earlier studies (Durrant, 1993; Heyman, 1990; Klassen, 2002; La Greca & Stone, 1990; Linnenberg & Pintrich, 2002; Martin, Marsh, Williamson, & Debus, 2003; Renick & Harter, 1989; Settle & Milich, 1999). Enhancing students' self-esteem can provide a strong stimulus to persist and to overcome their academic problems. This strategy can also obstruct the motivation to persist, however, as with the students who primarily sought to conceal their academic problems for their peers. Students who applied this strategy are likely to lose their motivation, especially if they do not receive support from their parents (Valas, 2001). Moreover, peer avoidance and fear of negative peer comparisons makes students vulnerable to teasing and bullying at school (Mishna, 2003; Singer, 2005).

In the Netherlands, standard practice calls for providing students who are diagnosed with dyslexia with information about dyslexia so that they can understand their learning problems. Parents and teachers should also be informed. Remedial teachers often advise students to inform their peers about dyslexia as well, and they often receive help in preparing class presentations about dyslexia. Although we did not study the information policies at the schools that were involved in our study, they were obviously inadequate. The students told of teachers who became angry because of their slow progress in spelling and reading and who humiliated them in front of their peers. According to the students, many teachers also failed to protect their students from teasing and bullying. In addition, many students doubted their own academic capacities. More insight is needed into how various characteristics of information policies and advice about dyslexia are related to the self-understanding and self-worth of students with dyslexia.

Our study suggests the following recommendations for appropriate practice for teachers. First, teachers should be aware that dyslexia poses a threat to a student's self-esteem. For many students with dyslexia, protecting their self-esteem and position within the peer group is the most important issue, sometimes even more important than overcoming their academic problems. Teachers should therefore be careful not to humiliate these students in front of their peers and to foster understanding of dyslexia within the peer group. Students should also be protected from bullying by their peers. Second, dyslexic students need help to develop positive self-esteem and belief in their own academic capacities. In this respect, good remedial teaching is of the utmost importance. Teachers can also help students to develop adaptive self-talk, through such actions as drawing their attention to small steps forward, good performance in other subjects, and the differences between general academic capacities and problems related to learning to read. The words and messages of the teachers can serve as buildings blocks that students can use to develop their own adaptive self-talk for helping themselves persist in the face of failure. Third, teachers should cooperate with the parents. Our study shows that the parents are

the main source of academic support and emotional comfort for students who cope constructively with recurrent academic failure.

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