‘It depends on who I’m with’: How young people with developmental language disorder describe their experiences of language and communication in school

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Abstract

Background: The risks of developmental language disorder (DLD) for both educational progress and socio-emotional development are well documented, but little is known about how children and young people with DLD experience and describe their language and communication. The need to complement experimental and quantitative studies with qualitative perspectives of the lived experience of individuals with DLD for speech and language therapists (SLT) practice has recently been foregrounded.

Aims: To understand further the experiences of young people with DLD focusing on language and communication in a school context, and thereby contribute to the improvement of the communicative situation in school for this group. The study is guided by the following research question: How do young people diagnosed with DLD describe their experiences of language and communication in school?

Methods & Procedures: The study is based on data generated from qualitative semi-structured interviews with 23 participants diagnosed with DLD (age 13–19 years old) living in Sweden. All participants attended mainstream schools. To enable data to be collected during COVID-19 restrictions, all interviews were conducted using Zoom. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Outcomes & Results: Four main themes related to experiences of language and communication in school were constructed from the interviews: (1) feelings of inadequacy and comparisons with others; (2) feelings of being misjudged and misunderstood; (3) the importance of feeling safe and comfortable; and (4) the significance of the social and communicative context. The results bear witness of difficult and challenging aspects related to language and communication in school, including educational, social and emotional dimensions. An important outcome of this study is how young people diagnosed with DLD describe their experience.
language and communication functioning to be dependent on both individual characteristics and abilities, as well as situational, contextual and social factors. **Conclusions & Implications:** The results from this study show that young people with DLD can have persisting problems related to language and communication in school, including educational, social and emotional dimensions. SLT services may therefore be needed throughout the school years to ensure that students with DLD receive adequate support. In addition, support that goes beyond language abilities and targets social, contextual and emotional aspects should be considered.

**KEYWORDS**
developmental language disorder, experiences of communication, qualitative interviews, school-aged children, voices of children

**WHAT THIS PAPER ADDS**
*What is already known on this subject*
Children and young people have unique knowledge about their language and communication which is instrumental for designing interventions and support strategies. Qualitative analyses of interview data have been able to identify both risk factors and protective strategies in relation to the well-being of individuals with DLD. Despite this, children and young people with DLD are rarely heard in research or clinical discussions.

*What this paper adds to existing knowledge*
In this study we listen to the voices of young people with DLD as they describe their experiences of language and communication in school. The participants describe a condition that makes them struggle to keep up with peers and puts them at risk of being misjudged by teachers, but also give examples of situations where negative consequences are hardly felt.

*What are the potential or actual clinical implications of this work?*
DLD is a complex and dynamic disorder where contextual and social factors interact with individual abilities in creating the end result. The results of the study indicate that DLD can cause persisting problems related to language and communication in school, with impact on educational, social and emotional dimensions. To counteract these effects, SLT services may be needed throughout the school years, and support that goes beyond language abilities must be considered.

**INTRODUCTION**
The risks of DLD for both educational progress and socio-emotional development are well documented. Risks include lower academic performance (e.g., Conti-Ramsden et al., 2009) and lower post-school employment rates (Conti-Ramsden & Durkin et al., 2012). In addition, young persons with DLD have increased risk of psychiatric problems, for example, anxiety and depression (Beitchman et al., 2001), and difficulties in establishing and maintaining relations with friends (Durkin & Conti-Ramsden, 2010). Moreover, despite being one of the most common developmental conditions, general knowledge and awareness of DLD is limited in society (Thordardottir & Topbas, 2021). This puts children with DLD at risk of not being identified and offered relevant support. DLD has been referred to as a ‘common but hidden’ condition, and both parents and teachers have been shown to misinterpret early signs of language difficulties as shyness, laziness or disinterest (Komesidou & Summy, 2020).
While risks for children and young people living with DLD are recognized in previous research, little is known about how children and young people with DLD experience and describe their language and communication, and how they perceive, for example, social and contextual factors to impact on their participation in various activities. Recently, a number of studies have highlighted the importance of listening to voices of children and young people with DLD, to further understandings of how children and young people experience life with communication and language difficulties (Lyons et al., 2022; Hersh et al., 2022; Lyons & Roulstone, 2018; Doell & Clendon, 2018). The need to complement experimental and quantitative studies with qualitative perspectives of the lived experience of individuals with DLD, and the psychosocial process by which a communication disorder impacts a person’s life, is particularly foregrounded for speech and language therapists (SLT) practice. Children and young people have unique knowledge about their difficulties, needs, and strengths which is invaluable for designing effective, relevant, and motivating interventions and support strategies (Lyons & Roulstone, 2018; Lyons et al., 2022; Owen et al., 2004). Nevertheless, the perspectives of children and young people with communication disorders are often disregarded in both research and SLT practice (Merrick et al., 2019).

Failing to include the perspective of children and young people in research and letting others, for example, parents or carers, voice their views can be problematic. Studies have shown that the views of children and young people can differ from the views of these other groups (Gallagher et al., 2019; Goldbart & Marshall, 2011; Markham et al., 2009). While students with DLD, at a group level, under-achieve compared with students with typical language development, studies looking at individual performances find exceptions. Some young people with DLD do indeed do well in education and later employment (Dockrell et al., 2007; Durkin et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2010). Similarly, the consequences of DLD on emotional aspects and psychosocial well-being show a diversity of outcomes, with some children with DLD experiencing difficulties and others reporting a general satisfaction with their lives (Roulstone & Lindsay, 2012). Such results highlight the heterogeneity among children and young people with DLD, and that experiences and views will differ between individuals (Lyons et al., 2022).

DLD FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

It has been suggested that the reasons for not including children and young people with communication problems in research studies are that they cannot be trusted as sources of information (McLeod, 2011; Gallagher et al., 2021; Merrick, 2020), or that children and young people with communication disorders are vulnerable and should be protected from challenging and difficult conversations (Gillet-Swan & Sargeant, 2018; Merrick, 2020). There is now growing evidence that children and young people with communication disorders can indeed, and are also willing to, participate in conversations about their needs and wishes, and in meaningful ways contribute to both research and development of SLT practice (Lyons et al., 2022). Lyons and Roulstone (2018) interviewed children with speech and language disorder and found that while communication impairment, relational problems and worries about educational progress constitute potential risks to children’s well-being, feelings of hope and agency, as well as positive social relations, may serve to protect children’s emotional welfare. In other studies (Lyons & Roulstone, 2017; Merrick, 2022) children and young people with speech and language disorders have expressed views about diagnostic practices and the relevance of interventions. Given the opportunity, students have also been shown to be able to actively participate in developing and evaluating support strategies in school (Merrick, 2022; Tancredi, 2018). This is especially important in light of, for example, Gallagher et al. (2019), who showed that students’ views about barriers for educational progress and participation in school in some areas differed from the views of teachers and parents.

Results from previous studies have shown that children with speech and language disorders explain communicative constraints both in relation to their own limitations and to hindering factors in their environment (Connors & Stalker, 2007; McCormack et al., 2010; Merrick & Roulstone, 2011). Other studies have also shown that the support and adjustments made by others can be experienced to facilitate communication and social interaction for children and young people, strengthening the view of communication disorders as intrinsically ‘relational constructs’ (Lyons et al., 2022, p. 6). In this perspective, communicative problems go beyond the individual person, placing a shared responsibility for effective communication on all communicative partners. In a study specifically focusing on children with speech sound disorder, McCormack et al. (2010) put forward how children describe their problems both in terms of a ‘speaking problem’ by the child and a ‘listening problem’ by the communicative partner. Relatedly, McLeod et al. (2013) argued for the importance to understand communication disorders in a contextual perspective, where children’s communicative ability and communicative behaviours differ between social spheres in their lives. In their private sphere, children’s communication disorders had little impact on their lives, including relations and activities.
In more public spheres, such as school, children could find communication challenging and they experienced both frustration and embarrassment in social situations. Similarly, results presented by Hambly (2018) reveal how children’s experiences of their communication disorders can be intimately related to the social situation including both the attitudes and the behaviour of others. Children’s experiences of their communication problems also differed from professionals’ (e.g., teachers’) views. Professionals more often attributed interactional difficulties to the children’s communication disorders and did not, to the same extent, consider problems as situational (Hambly, 2018).

The abovementioned studies give important insights into how children and young people experience life with a communication disorder, and how their views can differ from how others understand communicative problems. Despite a growing body of qualitative studies promoting voices of children and young people with communication disorders, further knowledge about the impact of speech and language impairment from the perceptive of children and young people is still much needed (Lyons & Roulstone, 2017; Lyons et al., 2022). The current study addresses this need by providing analyses of how Swedish young people experience language and communication in school. As previous studies have mainly involved children under the age of 12, the study particularly contributes to expand the existing literature by exploring voices of young people rather than children, as it cannot be assumed that experiences and beliefs remain the same throughout childhood and adolescence (Roulstone & Lyons, 2022).

Aims and research questions

The aim of this study is to further understand the experiences of young people with DLD focusing on language and communication in a school context, and thereby contribute to the improvement of the communicative situation in school for this group. The study is guided by the following research question: How do young people diagnosed with DLD describe their experiences of language and communication in school?

METHODS

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (appl. 2020-02505). All participants were given written and oral information about the project and were also given opportunities to ask questions about the specific study.

Participants

Individuals born between 2002 and 2007 and diagnosed with DLD were invited to participate through a survey distributed in one Swedish healthcare district and with online advertisements distributed through social media channels for special interest groups within the domain of language and communication disorders. A total of 23 young people between the ages of 13 and 19 years (13 males and 10 females) agreed to participate. All participants attended mainstream schools, but some received parts of their education in smaller groups.

Procedure

The interviews were conducted by two research assistants who were trained SLTs. To enable data to be collected during COVID-19 restrictions, all interviews were conducted using Zoom. The interviews varied in length between 14 and 45 min (mean of 27 min). The participants were given the choice to be interviewed alone or together with a parent or carer. Six of the participants chose to have a parent present at the interview. All interviews were recorded using a separate audio recorder for data protection reasons.

The interviews were designed to elicit the participants’ descriptions, feelings and views about their language and communication in relation to attending school. An interview guide with seven overarching topics (early years/background; education; social relations; educational support, experienced difficulties; functioning strategies; schoolwork at home) was used to make sure all main areas targeted in the study were covered. The order in which the topics were discussed varied between interviews, and themes were often revisited several times during an interview. Open questions and invitations to engage in conversation were used, for example, ‘Could you describe …’ or ‘How do you feel/think about …’. These elicitations were followed by more specific questions if needed.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and longer pauses and extra-linguistic contributions (e.g., laughter)
were noted. All participants had expressive language abilities to allow for orthographic transcription. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data following the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022). The analysis began by the first author listening to all interviews in their entirety and reading all transcripts to get an initial understanding of the data (step 1). Thereafter, the first author collected all segments of the transcripts relating to the participants’ experiences of language and communication (step 2). As a next step, all authors collectively scrutinized these segments and organized them into potentially meaningful themes collecting segments that seemed to describe similar aspects of how the participants experience language and communication (step 3). At this point, the transcripts were pseudonymized for integrity reasons when sharing data within the research group. This was followed by a review of initial themes considering their relation to each other, looking for, for example, potential overlaps and subthemes, as well as the initial collections of segments (step 4), also a process that involved all authors. The final themes were defined during the actual writing of the report where the overall picture of the results (the themes) was scrutinized in relation to the transcriptions of the interviews during the process of writing (steps 5 and 6). While the writing of the report was led by the first author, all authors were continuously involved in the writing process throughout, as well as in the development of the final themes.

**The reflexive research processes**

All qualitative research is inevitably shaped by the researchers involved (Braun & Clark, 2019, 2022), and the results presented are a product of our work to create data (the interviews), and to develop the analytic themes. To explicate our own positionings in relation to our participants and our study topic, during the analysis, the first author continuously made notes about thoughts, feelings and ideas related to the data and the participants, and how the understanding of the participants’ stories changed in the process. Personal experiences of communication difficulties in the research group (e.g., clients and participants with DLD, friends and family with language difficulties) were discussed alongside interview extracts and candidate themes. These experiences have underpinned the way we listened to the participants’ stories, and were thereby part of forming our understanding of the data. Our background as researcher of communication difficulties and SLTs were a foundation for how our story about the participants’ stories evolved into a narrative that lays a ground for educational change.

The interviews were conducted by two SLTs with knowledge about language and communication difficulties and training to interact with persons with communication difficulties. Their training to assess language and communication, may have to some extent formed the conversations to linger on stories about language and communication difficulties, and what kind of problems the participants experienced and thereby contributed to constructing narratives about language and communication problems in school.

**RESULTS**

Four main themes related to experiences of language and communication in school were constructed: (1) feelings of inadequacy and comparisons with others; (2) feelings of being misjudged and misunderstood; (3) the importance of feeling safe and comfortable; and (4) the significance of the social and communicative context. The themes are described and exemplified with quotes from the interviews. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, and passages chosen for presentation have been translated to English. In the translation, we aimed to preserve the characteristics of the original formulations by not transforming utterances to conventions for written language. When utterances did not adhere to the norms of spoken Swedish, we tried to convey some of these characteristics in the English translation. Passages considered irrelevant for illustrating a theme are indicated by ‘—’ in the quotations.

**Feelings of inadequacy and comparisons with others**

Most participants expressed negative perceptions about their language and communication abilities during some part of the interviews and included descriptions of how they see themselves as lacking competences both in relation to understanding others and to expressing themselves. While some participants described distinct difficulties (e.g., word-finding, pronunciation and grammar), others portrayed more overarching social and pragmatic difficulties, including anxiety and shyness in communicative contexts. In relation to language and communication in educational activities, most participants stated that they find it challenging to talk in class, both when assigned specific tasks involving formal presentations, and more informal activities, for example, raising their hand to take part in classroom interaction or ask for help. The participants particularly voiced how they feel nervous when faced with such situations and that they are worried about saying the wrong things in the classroom.
Some of the young people described in quite specific terms what they find challenging with their language and communication, and how their difficulties are experienced. Examples of such descriptions were ‘losing words’, ‘not finding the right words’, not knowing ‘which word is which’, and not being able to ‘put the words in the right order’. Carol (16 years) described her language difficulties as follows (she has previously in her interview said that she has some problems with reading and writing):

INT1: Are there other things you find difficult? For example, to express yourself or understand what others say.
Carol: Yea, to express myself I find a bit difficult, fcus the words get wrong in my mouth, sort of.
INT1: Mm. Is it because—
Carol: Or it—the word order gets sort of wrong.

Zack (13 years) is interviewed together with his mother, and they co-constructed a depiction of situations where Zack experiences that others have difficulties understanding him:

INT2: And are there any situations when you experience that others have difficulties understanding what you say?
Zack: Yea, sometimes it happens like that, I speak like—think that—‘what did I say?’
Mother: Many times, you speak pretty chaotically.
Zack: Yea I speak pretty chaotically, I talk about something, and then I jump to something else, then something else. Sometimes I go back to the first, in some strange way, and then back to something else.

Carol and Zack both described how they experience a lack of correspondence between what they intend to say, and how their linguistic expressions turn out, and their statements illustrate two different ways of describing problems with language and communication: Zack formulates his problems in terms of something he does himself, while Carol describes her difficulties in terms of something that ‘happens’ with the words when she speaks.

Communicative difficulties were also described in relation to negative feelings and emotional distress associated with language-based activities in school. Linda (14 years), Olga (17 years) and Yvonne (15 years) all gave examples of situations where negative feelings related to communication have prevented them from participating in school activities. Linda explained that she is worried about ‘making a fool of herself’ when talking in class, and Olga described that she avoids writing since she is ashamed of her spelling difficulties. For Yvonne, her worries sometimes hinder her from taking part in classroom conversations.

INT2: How do you think it is to raise your hand and things like that in school, or to talk in front of the class?
Yvonne: I can find that tough. I can feel like—I don’t know, but I’m also really scared that I will say the wrong words. I get so nervous.
INT2: Mm, I get it. Is it something you avoid doing?
Yvonne: Yes

Recurring in our interviews was that participants compared their abilities to those of their peers. When describing their language and communication, the young people often portrayed themselves as less competent than their peers. These comparisons were also defined to result in feelings of incompetence and failure. Ginny (14 years) described reading and writing as something that has been difficult for her throughout her years in school:

INT2: And we talked a bit about this to read and write, how do you think it’s going, with reading and writing?
Ginny: Ehm, writing, I’m not good at spelling really, or sentence construction, ehm and like, eh, I failed in reading in 3rd grade at the National tests, so I think that has put me back quite a bit, like, in reading. And I’ve noticed that now, like, in 8th grade and they, like, that I’m behind, fcus every-one reads, like, really fast an than I come, like, ‘oh no I have half a page left’ if we read a book, for example.

Memories of learning to read also featured in Julie’s (17 years) interview. She, too, compared her abilities with how she perceived her peers’ reading. For Julie, reading was difficult already from the beginning and she remembers feeling almost astonished when she witnessed how her peers learned to read:

INT2: Okay. But, so it was difficult to learn to read basically, when you were in school then
Julie: Yes it was, in 1st grade mainly, in preschool we didn’t really read that much I think, there it was more that I noticed, sometime we got like really small books to try to read. And I noticed that for some, like, they could do it really well and I couldn’t for my life understand how those—I could spell my name and that, of course, but this with reading, just a short paragraph, was really alien to me. I was always looking for the absolutely easiest book I could find.
Already in her early years in school, Julie seems to have been aware of that her development differed from her peers’ and felt a need to find strategies to handle this. Comparisons with others seem to elevate feelings of language difficulties for the participants, and for Elsa (18 years) it seemed mainly to be when she compares herself to others that it becomes noticeable for her that something is different with her language and communication:

INT2: But, how do think it works otherwise with language today?
Elsa: Mm, it works pretty well. It’s just that it takes more time for me sometimes, to reply and think and such, and study and that sometimes. It takes more time for me.

Feelings of being misjudged and misunderstood

The second theme collects stories of how young people with DLD perceive themselves to be misjudged by others, and how their communicative difficulties can be mistaken for other problems. The young people described a variety of situations where they wish people around them would understand more about their language and communication difficulties. They also reported of situations where others’ lack of understanding caused problems for them in school. Olga (17 years) gave a general account of how she wishes that her teachers would see and understand her needs in school, and how Olga’s communicative difficulties might obstruct her teachers from fully perceiving her educational ambitions:

INT2: And if you could describe how your fantasy day in school would look like, what would that be like?
Olga: That would be like, well, that I was really eager to go there for starters. And that I liked it in school. And that the teachers maybe would understand more, that for some it is difficult. And not as for most, that they don’t—they go there and do all assignments they are given and then they go away. Instead that they maybe would get it more, sort of, that I can, want to try to do more things in school.

As Olga’s response indicates, a language disorder can result in feelings of discrepancies between how one understands and conceptualizes educational content, and how one is able to expresses one’s knowledge. Linda (14 years) remembers that she already as a young child had a feeling that she could not fully show her potential in school. In her own words, she expressed this as ‘[I] knew that I can more’—but that she did not really ‘dare to speak’ in class to show this. Relatedly, Paul (19 years) described his language disorder as a fundamental and continuous problem that, in his experience, affects his ability to express knowledge in all subjects throughout the curriculum. While he described that he has enjoyed school overall, he has felt that his language problems have influenced his opportunities to demonstrate his knowledge in the ways that he would have wanted to.

The young people also talked about how they have experienced that their language and communication difficulties have resulted in mistrust from their teachers regarding their study moral and educational efforts. This could, for example, happen when it takes longer to finish a task compared with what a teacher has anticipated. Harry (14 years) gave an example:

Harry: I didn’t manage the last two tasks [—] and then he [the teacher] asked me and I just ‘I didn’t get that far’ I just said. And it was like ‘well what were you doing then’ they almost think that you—’what did you do in class then’ it gets like sometimes, it can get.

INT2: Aa, okay. Yea and how does it feel when they ask like that?
Harry: Well it feels—, it is a bit well then what the fuck I haven’t done anything, I’ve been sitting here working as much as I can.

Harry depicted a situation where the teacher’s reaction made him feel questioned regarding his ambitions and how he had spent his time in class. Similar misjudgements were also described in relation to students’ adjustments of the ways they participate in educational activities and the adaptations they make to compensate for specific difficulties. Rory (18 years) talked about how she has repeatedly tried to explain her needs during reading sessions to her teacher. When the teacher reads aloud to the class and asks students to follow her reading in their own books, Rory needs to ‘shut down’ and close the book to be able to understand the content of the teacher’s reading, something the teacher views as disobedient and disturbing behaviour:

Rory: Yes, I let them know very much, like in Swedish [referring to the school subject Swedish], it’s been a lot there as mum said. A lot with all sorts of things that don’t work. For example, to follow along in the text, like I said several times to her [the teacher] but she doesn’t get it.

INT1: Mm.
Rory: And she still sees me sitting tc, I just like ‘but I have to shut down now’, I close the book, I listen much better. And so she has to, then she says
to me 'yes but you disturb everyone'. But then—I think but I’m not gonna say ‘you are the one disturbing us’. But she says to me that it’s my fault, that I disturb the others.

A related line of reasoning in our data bears witness of how worries about misconception of difficulties related to DLD and fear of others’ judgment can affect young people’s participation in school activities and the ways they engage with their teachers. Several of the participants gave examples of how they refrain from asking for support from teachers because of worries about what their teachers and peers would think of them. For Daisy (15 years), concerns that her teachers might think she is ‘stupid’ if she asks for clarifications make it difficult for her to ask for help:

INT2: And how do you think it is to talk to your teachers? Daisy: Mm, aa I think that goes really bad for me actually. I, sort of, to ask for help I think is really difficult, with assignments and that.

INT2: Okay, is it different teachers or is it about the same with all you think? Daisy: Eh, it’s the same for all, but yea—
INT2: Do you think it is difficult to understand them or is it that they have difficulties understanding you or do you know what it is that gets difficult? Daisy: It is—I shouldn’t think like this but sometimes I think that, I think that they think I’m stupid fcos I don’t get the assignment, and then it gets like, mm I’m not gonna ask now [laughs]

For Daisy, the problem appears not to be her communication difficulties per se that she experiences as problematic in communication with her teacher, but concerns that her teachers will misjudge her intellectual abilities if she reveals that she has not understood their instruction. For Vince (15 years), similar worries are even more prominent, and he explains that he does not dare to ask his teachers when he does not understand as he is ‘dead scared’ that he would be pointed out as ‘someone who doesn’t understand anything’.

The importance of feeling safe and comfortable

Our third theme focuses on how the socio-emotional context are put forward as instrumental aspects in shaping the participants’ experience of language and communication in school. The young people described how their feelings in particular situations affect both their language and communication function, and to what extent they partake in communicative activities in school. Mike (15 years) summarized such experiences in relation to group work:

INT1: Mm, I see. What do you think about group work in school in general? Mike: Mm, if I’m with people I feel secure with then I contribute and talk.

INT1: Mhm.
Mike: But if it’s a group I’m not secure with I’m usually just quiet.
INT1: Okay, so it depends a bit on who is in the group? Mike: Yea, who I’m with.

For Mike, feeling safe and comfortable with the people he engages with seems crucial for to what extent he involves himself in group assignments. Mike described how his communication in group-work is related to the social context and his emotional status. Yvonne (15 years) described similar experiences:

INT2: Mm, and how do you feel about talking to your classmates in school? Yvonne: The ones I don’t have like close contacts with, that can be a bit harder. But the ones I have close connections with, they’re alright to talk to.
INT2: Okay, so it depends a bit on who it is, sort of? Yvonne: Yea

The participants also highlighted how their relation to the person they are interacting with makes communication more or less difficult. For Ginny (14 years), talking in the classroom is linked to severe emotional distress to the extent that she cannot even speak. She described how such activities make her feel and how her ability to speak is affected. However, in smaller groups with peers that she feels comfortable with, Ginny explained that it is less difficult to talk—an account that underlines the importance emotional aspects have for the ability to participate in activities in school:

INT2: Do you think it’s different when you are in smaller groups and so, for example, group work? Or is it the same? Ginny: It depends on who I’m with, if I’m comfortable with the persons or not, if I like know them.
INT2: Yes, but that can make a big difference, sure.

Positive relations are not only portrayed as affecting the ability to communicate with certain persons—positive social relations can also be perceived as something that facilitates communication in school more generally. Nick (18 years) described how his peers contribute to making...
participation in classroom activities work rather well for him:

INT2: Mm, I get it. And how do you think it is to speak in front of the others in the classroom if you are doing a presentation or something?
Nick: Yes, it's fine, fine, 'cos the ones I'm with in the class, they're a good gang, if you put it like that.

Emotional aspects do not only affect whether young people take part in communicative activities in school—emotional states can also influence how young people perceive their communicative abilities. Ginny (14 years), quoted above, described how stress and anxiety can make it 'difficult to talk' and exemplifies with a situation where she 'just stuttered'. Both Rory (18 years) and Elsa (18 years) described related experiences. Elsa described how she is 'not really able to get hold of' what it is she wants to say when she gets nervous, and Rory explained that when she feels nervous 'the words come really weirdly'. Paul (19 years), too, mentioned the importance of feeling relaxed and at ease to be able to communicate well. He gave an example of how he experiences talking to his teachers, something that he thinks works 'pretty well' when he relaxes:

INT2: Mm mm. And how do you think it has been, and is it today, to communicate and talk to your teachers?
Paul: Yes well, it's pretty okey after all. When I sort of relax, then it's quite alright, as I said. Then I can like choose what to say, there are no demands there. But yeah, it is okey, we have good communication.

The significance of the social and communicative context

While the young people described that they experience problems with language and communication in some situations in school, most of them also gave examples of situations where they perceive their language and communication to be well-functioning. The young people did not describe their communicative abilities as being the same in all situations and with all people. Tim (13 years) told that he does not dare to speak in the classroom at all but said that talking to his teachers is 'fine' and talking to his friends is going 'really well'. Rory (18 years) and Daisy (15 years) described similar experiences. Even though both explained that they have a lot of communicative difficulties in school, they said that social communication with friends in school is unproblematic, and they both think that they and their friends understand each other very well.

The social context and the framework for the activity can also influence how the ability to read is perceived. Paul (19 years) described that reading aloud in school has consistently caused problems for him, even though he does not experience any trouble reading in his spare time. For Olga (17 years) reading can be perceived very differently depending on the context:

INT2: Okay, mm. What are your feelings about reading on your own, you know, schoolwork, schoolbooks and so, how do you feel about that?
Olga: It's fine when I have, when I can decide on my own how much time I have to read. So I don't 'read like, you know, if a teacher tells me 'read from page 50 to 60' then I can't read that much. So I have to like split it up, and then process it afterwards, and then read the next. But otherwise, I can like, I—it's a bit tricky to read but I feel that in my pace it is fine, it is. So I haven't had any big problems with that.

Relatedly, time can also be perceived as an important aspect in relation to demands for attending to someone else's talk. For Kyle (17 years) it is difficult to understand others when they talk for too long:

INT2: Are there any situations where you feel that it's hard to understand others?
Kyle: Well, it happens if someone for example like talk too long so to speak. Then you disappear into the words and things like that. But that's if you talk like for up to thirty minutes or longer.
INT2: Okey, so then it can be a bit hard?
Kyle: You like disappear into the words, sort of.

While this specific way of depicting difficulties with understanding is unique to Kyle, descriptions of having difficulties to understand longer sequences of talk and listening to someone talking for a long time were expressed also by others. Daisy (15 years) and Olga (17 years), for instance, both describe similar problems as Kyle, but expressed their experiences in terms of 'not listening anymore' if someone talks for too long. Relatedly, Olga explained that the communicative context can affect her ability to comprehend verbal language in school. She described how situations where she is expected to perform several activities simultaneously make it difficult for her to really understand what her teachers say. For Olga, it feels like her teachers 'speak a different language' in these situations.

One of the most significant contextual factors that is highlighted as influencing how language and communication is perceived in school is the communicative partner. Several of the young people explained how they experience that their communication functions well with
some people, but does not work at all with others. To what extent communication with others is perceived as well-function is also described to be dependent on other people’s adjustments of their communication. The experience of talking to specific teachers varies for both Yvonne (15 years) and Mike (15 years), and this is explained in terms of how well the teachers adapt their communications to suit students with DLD:

INT2: Mm. How do feel it is with the teachers, talking to them and understanding what they are saying, how do you feel that is?

Yvonne: Sometimes it is like they forget I have language disorder. But other than that, I think it’s quite alright. Yes.

INT1: Yes. How is it to talk to the teachers and so in school?

Mike: Mm, it’s fine with a lot of the teachers.

INT1: With a lot of the teachers?

Mike: Mm.

INT1: Yes. What is it that you feel makes it fine?

Mike: When they talk to me and agree on what I’m supposed to do.

INT1: Yes.

Mike: And make a plan.

INT1: Okay. That sounds good. And the ones that it is not so good with, what is it there that doesn’t work?

Mike: Ehh, well partly. They don’t speak directly to me. They think I am going to do more or less the same as them, as the rest of the class.

Olga (17 years) provided an example of the opposite situation. For Olga, talking to teachers can be difficult since they sometimes misunderstand what DLD is, and therefore make unhelpful adjustments. Olga described a situation where a teacher simplified her way of talking to the extent that Olga felt as if she was treated like ‘a little child’, unable to participate in adult conversations. While Olga explained that she understands such adaptations to be intended as helpful, they nevertheless cause problems in her interaction with her teachers.

DISCUSSION

The results from this study, presented as four separate but interrelated themes, offer insights into how young people diagnosed with DLD describe experiences of language and communication. The study contributes perspectives from young people on what it can be like to live with DLD, with a specific focus on experiences in school. The young people in our study described their language and communication in many ways, and the aspects of life DLD was perceived to affect varied between participants. While the specific details of the accounts offered in our study will not apply to everyone living with DLD, the overarching gist of the account and experiences are reflected in previous studies of DLD and potentially relevant also for other young people living with a communication disorder.

In line with recent studies (e.g., Lyon & Roulstone, 2018; Gallagher et al., 2019; Hambly, 2018), this study shows that there are important lessons to be learnt by including children and young people with DLD in research, and asking them about their experiences, wishes, needs, perceptions and understandings of life with a communication disorder. The participants in our study bear witness of difficult and challenging aspects related to language and communication in school, including educational, social, and emotional dimensions. Since most participants in our study are quite elaborate and do not necessarily display pronounced difficulties participating in our interviews, our study supports the notion of DLD as being a condition that can be hidden (Komesidou & Summy, 2020). An important addition to such a description based on our results is that DLD might be a hidden disorder from others, but it is certainly not hidden from young people living with the condition.

Our results support understandings of DLD as a condition that affects individuals in different ways (Lyon et al., 2022; Roulstone & Lindsay, 2012). The study reveals that young people diagnosed with DLD describe their language and communication functioning to be dependent on both individual characteristics and abilities, as well as situational, contextual, and social factors. Moreover, in relation to communication problems in school, aspects transcending specific language abilities were put forward as constraints. In particular, socio-emotional dimensions such as insecurity about one’s abilities and apprehensions of others’ judgements were prominent limiting factors in the young people’s descriptions.

Language and communication function as dynamic and varying

In the young people’s descriptions, language and communication functions come across as both dynamic and situational. It is apparent that they do not view their communicative abilities as being the same in all situations and with all people. Instead, language and communication are described to vary depending on social and relational aspects, on psychological and emotional aspects, as well as contextual factors and frameworks for the activity. Similar results have previously been presented by, for example, McLeod et al. (2013) and McCormack et al. (2010). The sig-
significance of others’ way of talking is highlighted in many of the young people’s stories in our study. Their experiences of communication and to what extent they can participate in language-based activities in school are described as highly dependent on their communicative partners. The young persons’ stories strengthening the view of communication disorders as ‘relational constructs’ that has been suggested by Lyon et al. (2022, p. 6), in which communicative problems are conceptualized as shared responsibilities among all those participating in a communicative activity.

From our results, communicative problems are not only relational in the sense that accountability for effective communication is shared between communicative partners. How young people perceive their language and communication function is also rendered in relation to how they recognize others’ language and communication. The young people in our study recurrently compare their own abilities to those of their peers and use their peers as measurement for their own language and communication. Most often, comparisons with peers were described to evoke feeling of inadequacy, incompetence, and failure, and this was sometimes also explained in relation to memories from early years in school. Language and communication could also be viewed as relational when it comes to consequences of communication difficulties and how these difficulties are understood by others. Our results show that young people with DLD can experience that other people misunderstand and misjudge their language and communication disorder—both as lack of knowledge and competence in subject matters, and lack of ambitions and devotion to school assignments. When other people are not aware of one’s language and communication problems, there is a risk that they misunderstand actions and behaviours and make inferences about personal characteristics and motives that are not true. As has previously been highlighted (e.g., Komesidou & Summy, 2020), for students with DLD, there is a risk that difficulties with language and communication are interpreted as unwillingness to engage in educational tasks or even misbehaviour. As our results show, such misjudgements can impact both the emotional state and psychological well-being of young people, as well as to what extent they participate and engage in educational activities.

**Emotional aspects seen to impact language, communication and participation**

Emotional and psychological dimensions related to language and communication were important in the young people’s description of their language and communication. A significant aspect from our interviews concerned how feelings of safety and comfort were described to facilitate language and communication function, in contrast to feelings of insecurity and being nervous that were put forward as hindering factors. The young people emphasized that their language and communication were more well-functioning in situations where they feel secure and comfortable, and where they can relax. Negative feelings like stress and anxiety related to or caused by talking in certain situations were recurrent in their descriptions, and, in some of the accounts, such feelings were also described to negatively affect language and communication function.

The accounts from our interviews reveal that it is not just language skills per se that are perceived to influence communication function and participation in language-based activities in school. Emotional and psycho-social aspects such as feelings of safety/unsafety, comfort/discomfort, worries about lacking abilities, anxiety for the perceptions and judgements of others, and the quality of relations with communicative partners are included in the young people’s descriptions of how they experience their language and communication in school. The young people’s responses highlight how it is not necessarily their language and communication difficulties that cause problems for them—worries about how others might act and react can also be a significant concern and something the hinders young people from participating in educational activities and social encounters in school. Similar aspects have also been discussed by, for example, Merrick and Roulstone (2011) which strengthen the importance of these perspectives. Concerns about other people’s reactions and opinions can also prevent young people with DLD from requesting the kind of help and assistance from teachers that they need in order to fully understand learning activities.

**Intrinsic, extrinsic and relational factors recognized to influence communication**

In the young people’s accounts of their language and communication function and what factors that are important, they include aspects related to themselves, their competencies and their behaviours (i.e., how they speak, if they listen, their ability to comprehend, how they feel), aspects related to their communicative partners, aspects related to the nature and quality of the relation with communicative partners, as well as situational and contextual factors. This has also been shown in previous studies where children with speech and language disorders explain communicative constraints both in relation to their own limitations and to hindering factors in their environment (Connors & Stalker, 2007; McCormack et al., 2010; Merrick & Roulstone, 2011). The results are particularly important considering results indicating that communica-
tive partners to a larger extent account for communication problems with reference to children’s and young people’s communication disorder (Gallagher et al., 2019; Goldbart & Marshall, 2011; Hambly, 2018; Markham et al., 2009). Failing to recognize extrinsic and relational factors in analyses of communication problems pose a risk of neglecting crucial aspects of the communicative situation and thereby also important possibilities to improve communication. From children’s and young people’s perspective, this might also cause feelings of an unfair distribution of responsibility for communicative problems and cause feelings of being misunderstood.

**Limitations of the study**

The results of this study should be seen in the light of some limitations. Even though an interview is conducted to explore the views and experiences of the person being interviewed, it is important to remember that interviews are collaboratively constructed. The topics covered may occur both as a consequence of the interviewer showing interest in specific areas, and because the topics are particularly important and meaningful to the interviewee (Rapley, 2015). While efforts were made to ask the participants about both positive and negative aspects of their language and communication in school and, where possible, to pose questions about language and communication function, rather than problems, the interviews were somewhat skewed towards experiences of difficulties. This could perhaps be explained by the overarching aim of the research project to improve educational support for students with DLD, thereby foregrounding areas in need of improvement for both the interviewers and the interviewees.

In the presentation of our results, female participants are slightly over-represented. We did not have a specific focus on subgroups based on, for example, gender or age and in the analysis, we have treated all participants as unique individuals and not as representatives of specific groups. In addition, steps 2–5 of the analytic process were conducted on pseudonymized transcripts where we did not know the gender of the participants. It was not until the final step 6, that the overrepresentation of quotes from females was revealed to us. Relatedly, the two SLTs conducting the interviews differed somewhat in their interview styles. For example, interviewer 2 more often asked open follow-up questions and engaged in small talk compared with interviewer 1, which could be reflected in the fact that more quotes from interviewer 2 were chosen to exemplify the themes, something that was also revealed at the last step of the analysis.

As the quotes were chosen for their ability to convey aspects from the analysis we wanted to illustrate, and chosen without us knowing neither the gender of the participants nor which of the two interviewers that had performed a specific interview, we decided not to replace any quotes as we did not want our knowledge about the participants to influence our selection of quotes. However, the fact that more quotes from females than males were considered suitable could reflect a difference in how female and male adolescents express themselves regarding language and communication. This could be a relevant topic to explore in future studies.

**CONCLUSIONS**

DLD is a complex and dynamic disorder in which contextual and social factors interact with individual abilities and emotional aspects in shaping the condition. Only by listening to those affected can we begin to grasp the full range of consequences (Lyons et al., 2022; Hersh et al., 2022; Lyons & Roulstone, 2018; Doell & Clendon, 2018). In this study, young people with DLD report persisting problems related to language and communication in school, impacting on educational, social, and emotional dimensions. To address these effects, SLT services may be needed throughout the school years to ensure that students with DLD receive adequate support. In addition, support that goes beyond language abilities and targets social, contextual and emotional aspects should be considered. The importance attributed to social and contextual factors by the young people when describing their language and communication in school strongly underscores the necessity of including relational aspects in DLD theory as well as in clinical practice.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We are truly grateful to the young persons who agreed to participate in this study and so generously shared their stories with us. Thank you for making this study possible! We are also appreciative for helpful comments and suggestions that we received from our colleagues at various stages of this study. The interviews were conducted by Paulina Johansson and Paola Zardan Burgos.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data are not available.
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How to cite this article: Ekström, A., Sandgren, O., Sahlén, B., & Samuelsson, C. (2023) ‘It depends on who I’m with’: How young people with developmental language disorder describe their experiences of language and communication in school. International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders, 1–14.

https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.12850