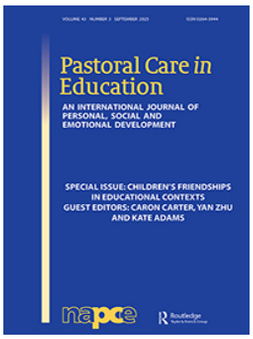

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Meeting the well-being needs of children with literacy difficulties: a whole school appreciation of adaptive teaching strategies that prioritise the individual

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ABSTRACT

Whilst much is known regarding the health and well-being of school pupils in primary schools, there is less understanding of the factors that may hinder or facilitate improvement in these areas for children with literacy difficulties. This article, based on a research study that derived data from primary school staff members via individual interviews, and from a range of school children through a series of multi-modal focus groups, provides insight into the lived experiences of practitioners and pupils, in terms of the factors that influence the well-being needs of those with literacy difficulties. The findings show that adaptive teaching strategies that place the individual child's specific challenges at the forefront of the support for those with literacy difficulties were valued by both practitioner and pupil, and that a whole school approach that prioritised this stance produced beneficial outcomes. Implications of the findings, in terms of the nuances of adaptive teaching and the potential pitfalls to achieving a whole school approach, are discussed, and recommendations for future practice and research, that stem from these, are made.

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literacy difficulties; whole school approach; adaptive teaching; primary school

Introduction

Exploration of the factors that influence the health and well-being of school children is an important and popular area of research, yet for those who experience literacy difficulties there is still much to learn (Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2021). Indeed, little is known regarding the features and practices within schools that may improve children's self-perception regarding literacy difficulties (Wilmot et al., 2023), and with a clear push (see Department for Education (DfE), 2021), for quality differentiated and adaptive teaching, there is a distinct need for research that explores if and how adaptive teaching strategies may provide a suitable vehicle to help meet the well-being needs of children with literacy difficulties. This article reports on a study that sought to investigate the relationship between children's literacy difficulties and their well-being, according to the pupils and staff, through an exploration of policy, provision and practice within one school setting. In

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this paper, specifically, we focus on adaptive teaching strategies and their role in meeting the needs of children experiencing literacy difficulties. In the next section we ponder on literature that explores the experiences of children with literacy difficulties, examine the role of adaptive teaching strategies to help in aiding their outcomes in terms of attainment and well-being, and make the case further that research is required in this area.

Dyslexia, literacy difficulties, adaptive teaching and well-being

Conceptual and definitional issues of the term 'dyslexia' have persisted over time and across professional, research and social domains (Solvang, 2007). Whilst the recent Delphi dyslexia study (Carroll et al., 2025) aimed to tackle this issue by identifying areas of consensus from a range of experts in the field with the hope of offering clarity in terms of how it should be defined, working definitions are regularly criticised for their nebulous nature (Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2021). Indeed, Elliott (2020) identifies four different conceptions of the dyslexia construct that are widely used, that she labels: Dyslexia 1 (a word-level difficulty); Dyslexia 2 (a clinically derived subgroup of poor decoders); Dyslexia 3 (intractability to high-quality intervention); Dyslexia 4 (a neurodiverse profile). The enduring issues of both conceptualisation and definition have meant that associated terms, such as 'literacy difficulties' – used to identify those whose word reading and/or spelling is significantly below what would be expected – are often utilised interchangeably with 'dyslexia' across European contexts (Novita, 2016), and within influential guiding bodies including The International Dyslexia Association. In recognition of the criticisms of the concept and definition of dyslexia, and taking into account that the children involved in the research project that provides the basis for this article, all of whom present literacy difficulties, in the remainder of this paper we adopt the term 'literacy difficulties'. Children with literacy difficulties face specific well-being challenges, but in the main, issues manifest in terms of oral, and written domains of language, such as reading, spelling, writing (see Snowling & Melby-Lervåg, 2016), other learning and attentional difficulties (see Snowling et al., 2020), and poor academic performance (Zach et al., 2016).,

In response to current Teacher Standards (DfE, 2021) in the United Kingdom (UK), the Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (DfE & Department of Health DoH, 2015), and a shift in practice in terms of meeting the educational needs of children, from differentiation to adaptation, teachers are now expected to embrace more flexible and adaptive strategies to suit the individual learner, in favour of giving additional and separate tasks to pupils (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). Adaptive teaching is 'teaching that arranges environmental conditions to fit learner differences' (Corno & Snow, 1986, p. 621), and an approach that ensures that pedagogy is responsive to students' needs. Adaptive teaching is tailored for the individual abilities, interests, and backgrounds (Ellis et al., 2017), and grounded in the fundamental belief that as each learner is different, then teaching requires flexibility and adaptation (Westwood, 2018). Adaptive teachers draw on a range of strategies and techniques including: 'accommodation' by varying delivery of presentation and providing localised and individualised guidance; and 'matching' where delivery of content to sub-groups of students with similar needs allows teachers to teach to strengths (Corno, 2008). Other adaptive teaching strategies include, but are not limited to: 'assessment for learning' based on the child's abilities, and potential for growth; 'flexible grouping' such as small groups, one-on-one sessions, and peer tutoring to suit

the individual; 'varied learning materials' to cater for individual learning preferences; and 'adjustable pacing' in recognition that as children progress at different rates then so too should the pace of instruction (Sullivan et al., 2019; Zafiri et al., 2019).,

For children with literacy difficulties, such individualised and adaptive approaches that put the student's specificity and needs in relation to reading and writing at the forefront of teaching practice, are highly influential for the probability of student success (Antoniazzi et al., 2010; Carvalhais & da Silva, 2010). Researchers interested in this field, including Hoffman and Duffy (2016, p. 173) maintain that 'thoughtful adaptive teaching' that is 'in the moment' 'nonroutine, thoughtful, proactive, and invented', 'a change from usual practice' and 'done in response to students and/or situations' is required to maximise the potential for success. In keeping with these principles, it has been shown that when working with children with literacy difficulties, those teachers who consider the specifics of the individual, including their age, and subject being taught, and those who offer individualised guidance and feedback, as well as different activities, achieve the best student outcomes (Martan et al., 2017). That said, as it has been shown that students with literacy challenges do not only rely on teachers in terms of their learning, but also as a means of emotional support (Livingston et al., 2018), and that the teacher's ability to teach such children depends on their own knowledge of and attitudes towards literacy challenges (Gwernan-Jones & Budren, 2010), the quality of interaction between teacher and student, and the former's ability to value the individualism of the latter, is imperative to outcomes. As such, and in recognition that in relation to literacy difficulties specifically 'children's individual strengths can fail to be realised' (Graham & Grieshaber, 2008, p. 557), research is required to ascertain if and how adaptive teaching strategies embrace the individual needs of children facing literacy challenges.

Literacy difficulties do not only manifest in challenges with reading, writing and spelling, academic outcomes and attentional issues, they have implications for well-being, with those close to children with such challenges regularly voicing concern for their wider mental health (Claessen et al., 2020; Leitão et al., 2017). Research over time has demonstrated how children with literacy difficulties experience and display a range of symptoms and behaviours indicative of poor mental health, including reduced levels of motivation (Morgan & Fuchs, 2007), and academic self-concept (McArthur et al., 2020), poor reading self-efficacy (Carroll & Fox, 2017), and increased levels of anxiety (Francis et al., 2019), and acts of aggression (Maughan & Carroll, 2006). Beyond the increased likelihood for children with literacy difficulties to experience negative emotions such as frustration and anger (Leitão et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2012) as well as social challenges in the school context specifically (Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2021; Wilmot et al., 2023), recent research indicates how early literacy difficulties influence the likelihood of anxiety, depression, and poor reading self-concept beyond school, into adulthood (see McArthur et al., 2020).

Whilst there is an existing evidence base to illustrate an association between literacy difficulties and well-being issues, it need be noted that recent comprehensive systematic reviews of the literature have 'revealed mixed findings' (Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2021, p. 5596) regarding causal links and association. Consequently, work to understand if, why and how children with literacy difficulties are 'at risk of mental health concerns is now a stated research imperative' (Wilmot et al., 2023, p. 2). Furthermore, there have been calls for studies in schools that examine aspects of pupil well-being, including social and

emotional skills, self-perception, self-esteem, the strategies used to cope with literacy difficulties and the role that school and practitioners play in alleviating issues brought about by such concerns (see Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2021). There is a dearth in the literature that specifically focusses on the features and practices within educational settings that may improve how children's perceptions of self, regarding their literacy difficulties (Wilmot et al., 2023), and so recently there have also been explicit calls for research to focus efforts on the influence of quality differentiated and adaptive teaching on the well-being of children with literacy challenges (see Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2021). As such, this article, and the study upon which it is based, comes in response to calls for research to explore the well-being of children with literacy challenges and the role of adaptive teaching strategies as a vehicle to improve this. In the next section we turn our attention to the methodological approaches that guided the empirical study.

The research study

Driven by a desire to gather data to help identify and explore the challenges experienced by children with literacy difficulties, and the wider consequences of this for well-being, we employed an exploratory case study design that focussed on capturing the views of practitioners and pupils in one primary school. Proponents of such an approach, such as Yin (2003) demonstrate its benefits in terms of generating insights with a focus on exploration and discovery of a given topic, and on the utilisation of qualitative and flexible methodologies, that draw on various data collection methods, as clarified below. The wider project focussed on answering the following research questions:

(1) How do primary school pupils, in this single setting, discuss and position their own well-being in relation to literacy difficulties?
(2) How do staff at the school understand children's well-being as influencing or being influenced by literacy difficulties according to the work they do with them?
(3) What policies, provisions and practices are in place in the school to support students with literacy difficulties, and how is this support received by children and school staff?

For this study, this exploratory case study design focussed its attention on exploring the issues captured by these research questions in one case, a primary school located in a town in the South-West of England.

The primary school

Judged to be 'good' by Ofsted in 2024, this mixed sex, primary school has almost 300 pupils on roll. It forms part of a multi-academy trust that consists of one high school, eight primary schools and two infant schools. Approximately one in five of the pupils are eligible for free school meals, and regarding academic outcomes for children attending the school, they are 'average' at reading, 'well below average' at writing, and 'below average' at maths. The school was sampled as a consequence of both convenience, as one member of the research team (Helen) has an established relationship with them, and purposive strategies due to the school's

continued efforts in supporting children's well-being needs in response to their literacy difficulties, as again identified by Helen. The relationship with the school is new, and came about as Helen recently conducted dyslexia diagnostic assessments with year groups, not involved in this research, in the school.

Gathering data

Data gathering utilised two means: multi-modal focus groups with children in years three (aged 7–8) and four (aged 8–9), whose literacy attainment was below age-related expectations as determined by end of key stage one assessments for the year three children, and end of year assessments for the year four children in English reading and writing; and semi-structured interviews with the school's Headteacher and Special Educational Needs and Disability Coordinator (SENDCo). Both means of data collection, including the sampling strategies employed and sample are detailed next.

Multi-modal focus groups – There were four multi-modal focus group interviews with 11 children in total (see Table 1 for details of children's pseudonyms and gender). Within the focus groups the following activities/tasks were used to garner data and to instigate conversation: discussion based on focus group interview themes; the Stirling Well-being Scale (Liddle & Carter, 2010) to encourage children to reflect on and discuss well-being; the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 2012) to encourage children to reflect on and discuss self-perception; child-led walking tours of the school to point out the pupils' important places; children's photographs of important aspects of the school. These activities took place over two sessions, with two Groups: Group 1 consisting of five children, and Group 2 consisting of six children. In the first focus group sessions, children in both groups completed the Stirling Well-being Scale (Liddle & Carter, 2010) and the group discussion focussed here on issues captured by research question one, dedicated to pupils' views of their own well-being in relation to literacy difficulties, and how the latter may influence the former. In the second focus group, group one and two participants completed the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 2012); conducted the walking tour, took photographs, and focussed their discussions on research question three, regarding their views on the support they receive for their literacy challenges. A gatekeeper, the school's SENDCo, helped in the recruitment of participants for the study so although the sampling strategy utilised was random, as all children had an equal chance of being approached to take part in the focus groups, convenience sampling at this point helped improve accessibility and availability of participants, and was performed on the gatekeeper's part.

Semi-structured interview - Semi-structured interviews were employed with two members of the school's staff: the Headteacher and the SENDCo (see Table 1 for details of practitoners' roles and gender), to help capture the issues presented by research questions two and three. The interviews took place in a quiet room at the school and focussed on pupils' well-being in relation to literacy difficulties, the potential for a causal relationship between them, and the strategies within school to help ease any worries and concerns brought about because of the literacy difficulties faced by the children. Again, convenience and purposive sampling strategies were used in the selection of the two interviewees, due to pre-existing relationships with Helen and because of the interviewees' investment in the issue researched.

Table 1. Table of participants.

Data Collection Type	Pseudonym	Gender
Focus Group 1	James	M
	Sarah	F
	Amy	F
	Molly	F
	John	M
Focus Group 2	Toby	M
	Kate	F
	Izzy	F
	Grace	F
	Max	M
	Josh	M
Staff Interviewee	Headteacher	F
	SENDCo	F

Table 2. Thematic map of identified themes and sub-themes, relevant to the RQs.

RQ1 - How do primary school pupils, in this single setting, discuss and position their own well-being in relation to literacy difficulties?
1.1 Feelings and emotions: *1.1.1 Anxiety; 1.1.2 Concern; 1.1.3 Hope; 1.1.4 Expectations*
1.2 Staff support to ease concerns: *1.2.1 Adaptation; 1.2.2 One to One Support; 1.2.3 Pastoral Support; 1.2.4. Tailored/ Individualised Support by school staff*
1.3 Peer support to ease concerns: *1.3.1 Group work; 1.3.2 Ability grouping; 1.3.3 Paired work*
1.4 Other forms of support: *1.4.1 Parental support; 1.4.2 Specialist support*
1.5 Important spaces to ease concerns: *1.5.1 Quiet space; 1.5.2 Affirmation Stations; 1.5.3 Library*
RQ2 - How do staff at the school understand children's well-being as influencing or being influenced by literacy difficulties, according to the work they do with them?
2.1 Individualised Literacy Difficulties: *2.1.1 Awareness of differing literacy needs; 2.1.2: Impact of literacy challenge on wellbeing*
2.2 Meeting children's literacy needs: *2.2.1 Acknowledging difference in need; 2.2.2 Acknowledging difficulties in meeting needs; 2.2.2 Move from assessment to support across whole school*
2.3 Support to improve literacy difficulties: *2.3.1 Inclusive classrooms; 2.3.2 Adaptive teaching; 2.3.3; Individualised/ Tailored Support*
RQ3 - What policies, provisions and practices are in place in the school to support students with literacy difficulties, and how is this support received by children and school staff?
3.1 Whole School Strategies: *3.1.1 Inclusive classrooms across the school; 3.1.2 Consistent messaging; 3.1.3 Senior leadership team; 3.1.4 Whole school training; 3.1.5 Relationship with parents*
3.2 Individualised support: *3.2.1 Adaptive teaching; 3.2.2 Universal Design for Learning*
3.3 Specialist support: 3.*1.1 Therapeutic advisor 2.2.2 Educational Psychologist*

Ethical considerations

The research team's higher education institution gave ethical approval for the study (23/EDN/039), and the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Educational Research Association (2024) were adhered to throughout all stages of the research. Participant information letters were distributed to all participants that detailed the purpose and focus of their means of data collection study, so for the staff members, details of the interview, and for the children and their parents, details of the multi-modal focus groups. These details included the approximate length of the data collection session, the researcher's contact details, and ethical guarantees relating to the right to withdrawal, data protection, confidentiality, and anonymity. Bearing in mind the age of the children, parental consent as well as participant assent were gained in all cases. The information letters for the children and parents affirmed that the purpose of the research was to understand their experiences of literacy, reading and writing, how they felt about these and what happens in school to support these experiences and, as such, they were not informed by this

means that they were performing 'below age-related expectations', although all children and parents would have had this information at the end of the previous academic year. At the beginning of each data collection session, the participant information letter was read by each participant and, during the focus groups verbally relayed to the children also, and informed written and verbal consent was retrieved before data was collected. Considering the children's age, other ethical considerations such as the use of child-friendly language, and a range of prompts were employed, to help ease difficulties in the comprehension of the questions. Both the 'Stirling Well-being Scale' (Liddle & Carter, 2010) and the 'Self-Perception Profile for Children' (Harter, 2012) were completed by hand, manually, within the focus group and handed back to the researcher, who subsequently stored the scripts securely in a locked filing cabinet. Responses to the above scales revealed no discernible findings and in keeping with the guarantees of confidentiality were not shared with the school. As part of the guarantees for confidentiality neither the school nor the names of the children are used in this article, instead they have been allocated pseudonyms, with the school being referred to as 'the school'. The staff members are referred to by their role.

Data analysis

It needs to be noted here that whilst a range of data were collected, this article will utilise qualitative data garnered from the focus group discussions and individual interviews. As themes do not 'emerge' but are 'identified' (Patton, 2014), all data was subjected to an initial process of familiarisation, coding, theming, reviewing and falsification, in keeping with the stages of reflexive thematic analysis advocated by Braun and Clarke (2019). At the familiarisation phase, all data were transcribed using OTTER ai software, and then re-read and checked to ensure fidelity to the audio file. In recognition of the 'centrality of the research question to the research process' (Mason, 2018, p. 9), analysis was guided by the study's research questions so on all occasions focussed on clarifying the issues as captured by: RQ1 - How do primary school pupils, in this single setting, discuss and position their own well-being in relation to literacy difficulties?; RQ 2 - How do staff at the school understand children's well-being as influencing or being influenced by literacy difficulties according to the work they do with them?; RQ 3 - What policies, provisions and practices are in place in the school to support students with literacy difficulties, and how is this support received by children and school staff? NVivo software was utilised during the coding phase, where each individual interview transcript was subjected to a line-by-line approach where words and tags, relevant to the three research questions, were identified across all transcripts. These included codes such as: 'upset' in relation to RQ1; 'individual' in relation to RQ2; 'everyone' in relation to RQ3. The initial codes were then subjected to a further analysis focussing on duplicates and related codes, and where identified these were merged as sub-themes, an example of which were terms such as 'upset' and 'worried' being themed as 'anxiety', and 'terrible' and 'bad' themed as 'concern', sub-themes within RQ1. Links were then made between the codes, and overarching themes were generated through discussion between the authors. All themes were then reviewed in research team meetings, with a specific focus on how they informed the issues captured by the research questions. During and after these meetings the themes were subjected to a comparative analysis, with a specific focus on the 'falsification'

of the themes reported. This process added depth, not opposition, to the findings that provide the focus for this article, and bearing in mind congruence was achieved after this process, the findings presented here have been triangulated by the research team. As mentioned, the primary focus of the analysis of the wider data set was to uncover responses to help understand the issues posed by the research questions, and as a consequence of this process a range of themes and sub-themes relevant to each and across were identified, as captured in table 2 below:

In response to the main research questions, that sought principally to explore pupils' and practitioners' views of literacy difficulties and their well-being, and the associated policy, provision and practice within one school setting, one common finding that broached all three research questions focussed on the practice of adaptive teaching strategies to target literacy challenges, and the holistic provision and approach across the school to valuing the individual in terms of such needs, and these findings are presented next.

Research findings

The children were forthcoming in identifying the concern that literacy caused and their difficulties whilst studying it, with James saying: *'I find the English writing and stuff quite hard . . . .when I'm learning English, mostly I feel terrible'*. Guided by all three research questions, and their focus on practitioner and pupil explorations of the experiences of children with literacy challenges, and how the school aimed to meet their well-being needs, the participants in this study clarified a range of strategies couched in approaches of adaptation that they found beneficial, to both tackle literacy difficulties and to enhance perceptions of wellbeing. Staff and children alike voiced an appreciation of holistic responses to valuing the individual in terms of their literacy challenges, and although elements of a whole school approach to well-being were found wanting at times, the product of such work at the school created tailored support that targeted the specific needs of each child, leading to perceived improvements in wellbeing.

Awareness and acknowledgement of adaptation across the school

Focussing here on the issues captured by RQ1, and also RQ3, children acknowledged how the school adapted practices to suit their own literacy difficulties, with an awareness of the role of grouping, based on ability in spelling, and then in the categorisation of pupils, accordingly, using colours. Seen as a central tenet of adaptive teaching (Sullivan et al., 2019), grouping became a focal point of discussion within all focus groups, where the children openly spoke about how work was adapted in these settings to help meet their literacy needs, with Sarah, for example, stating: '*the red groups get some easy spellings, the green and blue are like the middles, and yellow, (they receive) the hard ones'*. The children were fully aware of such whole school practices, here in terms of how groups were formed, with Amy, for example, stating that '*our teacher does a little spelling test (and) we start in that, and then she sorts them out from there'*, and consistently felt that adaptation was justified as a means of encouraging confidence at an individual level, thus enhancing wellbeing, as one child shows:

> Toby - If you have a lower level then it's not unfair for other people who aren't as confident, so the groups are open and chosen, depending on how confident we are. If you're like finding it tricky, you should be able to stay where you think that your spelling group should be . . . .You can then be put it in a spot where you can get 10 out of 10 . . . .I just need to feel like I can still get 10 out of 10 on the spelling test.

The use of adaptation as a means of encouraging learner confidence in literacy isn't new (see Humphrey & Mullins, 2002; Maclellan, 2014), with such approaches having wider benefits for improvements in children's levels of engagement, motivation, self-regulated learning and general wellbeing (Randi, 2017). Guided by RQ2 and RQ3, staff at the school acknowledged the significant role of this strategy as part of their wider whole school approach to meeting the needs of children with literacy difficulties, and spoke often about their work regarding the early identification of such children, as is shown:

> SENDCo - We will always notice what (the children) are working towards or what they are below in. The Headteacher and I do regular pupil progress meetings here, and we do three of those a year with the teachers too, and we look in particular at those who are making less than expected progress, working below where they should be for their age, or (those who have) gone backwards as well. I think . . . .that early identification . . . is a key area, and that's what we've sorted here . . . .we identify early those children that need something else or something different.

The acknowledgment of adaptation by children, and the prioritisation of early identification of pupils with literacy difficulties, stemmed from the school's desire for a holistic approach to meeting the needs of each individual child, showcasing some of the practices in place in the school to support students with literacy difficulties (RQ3). The school's Headteacher maintained this stance when she claimed that *'we start at reception and go all the way through, with everybody, and we're really big on the individual and that we all learn things differently'*, whilst one of the children, Kate, demonstrated her individuality when stating *'I don't compare myself towards other people. I just try and compete against myself to see what I can do better than I did the last time I did it'*. Although some, such as James, in keeping with recent research (see McGillicuddy & Devine, 2020), voiced concern and anxiety over the use adaptation through grouping, as it made him feel *'terrible', 'bad'* and *'upset'* that he was in *'lower groups'* and that the *'other children knew'* this, by and large the children appreciated the use of adaptation through grouping and valued the individualised nature of the support they received for their literacy difficulties. In this regard, one of the children maintained:

> Amy: Because some people find it hard to spell . . . .the tricky words that some people find it easy to spell so they get given words (at their level) so they can actually spell and learn how to spell . . . . Because everybody is really different . . . .it means that not everybody will always be the same and everybody can be different . . . . so doing work that you felt confident in doing . . . .could help you do the next one up.

Another child, Izzy, agreed when stating that some *'people are less confident . . . .so if we all had the same literacy work some people might not understand it . . . . (which could make them) stress out'*. Others, like Toby felt that without adaptation he would *'just get frustrated . . . .as the harder work doesn't really make sense'* and that in such scenarios he would feel anxious, or in his words his *'tummy would get butterflies in it'* during literacy. The findings presented above, captured in the views of James, Amy, Izzy and Toby, don't

only demonstrate how the pupils position their own well-being in relation to literacy difficulties (RQ1), but capture an appreciation of specific practices in place in the school to support students with literacy difficulties (RQ3). This approach to adaptation in literacy was the result of an explicit commitment to a whole school ethos that focussed on valuing the individual, and it is to this theme that the findings now turn their attention.

Valuing the individual through adaptation – a whole school approach?

Guided by RQ2 and RQ3, and largely derived from the interviews with the Headteacher and SENDCo, one pertinent theme for them was the emphasis placed on valuing the individual across the whole school, and the central role of the '*inclusive classroom*' as part of this '*whole school ethos*' (Headteacher). Pupils, such as Molly, were less likely to utilise specific language of a whole school approach, but did at times verbalise the enactment of such an approach when stating that *'although Miss teaches all of us, if someone gets stuck she would go over to help them. She will teach us in the exact same way, but focus on us individually*'. Such examples of valuing the individual within each classroom across the whole school, rooted in the belief that no two learners are identical and that effective education can only be achieved through flexibility, adaptability and responding to the individual's needs (Ellis et al., 2017; Westwood, 2018), was achieved at the school through clear leadership where the *'senior leadership team*' emphasised often to both staff and children that at an individual level '*we're all good at certain things and we're all different*' (Headteacher). Both the Headteacher and SENDCo spoke about the persistent nature of maintaining this whole school ethos via regular messaging to the school's members, as is captured below:

> SENDCo – We do this (regular messaging) so that for the teachers, TAs, and everyone, then everyone knows all the expectations of the school, all those things on how each child is important.

In terms of meeting the needs of children experiencing literacy challenges, and as part of their whole school approach to such issues, the school sought external support for individual pupils, including a specialist therapeutic advisor using techniques such as *'the Davis Dyslexia Correction Method with a child with dyslexia'* (SENDCo). Additionally, and as a means of targeting children '*that are having a literacy wobble*', the school also *'do a lot of work with outside support, who work with the class TAs, so that they are very trained in emotional thinking . . . .so they can help boost children'* (Headteacher). Both the SENDCo's and Headteacher's views here showcase both how staff in the school understand how children's literacy difficulties may be impacted as a consequence of the work they do with them (RQ2), and examples of practices in place in the school to support students with literacy difficulties (RQ3). Children, such as Grace, identified a range of spaces that allowed their individuality to flourish, including '*affirmation stations*' (see Figure 1) that can be found in each and every classroom across the whole school where pupils felt they *'can calm down there*', should their literacy challenges or, indeed, any other form of social, emotional and behavioural difficulty become too much for them.

The creation and use of such spaces in each classroom in the school, are active demonstrations of adaptive practices across the whole school that value the individual, but as has long been shown (see Thomson, 2003), establishing, maintaining and

Figure 1. Affirmation station - a space in each and every classroom at the school that the children valued as a way of encouraging their individuality.

enacting a whole school approach to meeting children's literacy difficulties were not always easy or indeed apparent. When exploring assessment in literacy for example, and used as an example by staff where they felt literacy difficulties were being targeted by the work they do with them (RQ2), the school's SENDCo claimed that previously they '*were spending way too much time assessing the children, but not enough time teaching them*' leading to a change in practice so that *'this (was their) first year without assessment*'. The children, however, still felt that assessments were ever present in literacy and were a prominent cause of their well-being concerns, with one child arguing:

> James - I think we've got like double the amount of assessments that (other) years have. . .. Basically, we have three assessments . . . .three readings . . . .three grammar (tests) . . . and last year, we had two of each . . . . . With tests, there are too many words on the page and it makes my head hurt.

As educational establishments that achieve a whole school approach, it has long been argued, sustain a 'coherent co-ordinated approach across all parts of the school' (Weare, 2004, p. 55), the disparate views of staff and pupils regarding assessment cast doubt on its actualisation on all fronts at the school. Furthermore, as whole school approaches 'focus on the totality of the school as an organisation in its community including all aspects of social life' (Weare, 2004, p. 55) such as relationships with parents and the surrounding community, the data gathered during the staff member interviews demonstrated a divergence from this stance also. The adoption of an 'us and them' (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) dichotomy was present in the views of both the Headteacher and SENDCo, when they spoke of the home-school relationship in response to literacy challenges experienced by children, as is shown below:

> Headteacher – For parents, they often think that once they've been diagnosed (with Dyslexia), that that's great, that's it, it's fixed them, but they don't understand that actually it's (continuing) supporting them and giving them strategies that are going to help them (at home) . . . . They think as soon as it's been diagnosed, that you can fix it, but they don't understand.

> SENDCo – We'd like parents to hear children read on a daily basis, that would be the ideal as well. But it's not possible . . . .because some parents . . . .just leave it up to school.

Despite claiming the realisation of whole school provisions and practices in place in the school to support students with literacy difficulties (RQ3), it need be noted that both staff member interviewees were aware of such issues in their whole school approach and vocalised a desire to engage with parents more often as a means of helping them to meet their children's literacy needs. Indeed, to encourage parental partnership on this front '*training . . . .and workshops for parents*' (SENDCo) are held often, and although such strategies may demonstrate traditionally held power dynamics that places schools as experts and parents as novices in children's education (Warin, 2009), that run contrary to the concept of a whole school approach (Weare, 2004), the fact that such liaison between school and home exists shows a commitment on the school's behalf to embrace principles in keeping with this. Furthermore, in recognition that whole school approaches may not be something that are achieved but are constantly worked towards, staff acknowledged the importance of regular and ongoing training to help both establish and maintain an ethos that values the individual's literacy challenges, with the Headteacher, for example, stating that *'although we have had training, we're still not there, none of us are experts . . . .so it would better for everybody to have more specific training to give us all a better understanding'*. Whilst not fully achieved, the product of this whole school approach, grounded in principles of adaptation to help meet the literacy challenges of children at an individual level, was valued by staff and pupils alike. In the discussion that follows we ponder on some of the implications of these findings.

Discussion

The adaptive teaching practices valued as a means of tackling literacy difficulties by practitioners and children at the school were grounded in principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), an inclusive approach to teaching that recognises and responds to learner variability. Molly's assertion that her teacher teaches '*in the . . . .*

same way' but that she '*focusses on us individually*', is a child's working illustration of Hamilton and Petty's (2023, p. 6) vision of UDL in practice, in that it should embed 'flexibility and choice in order to make learning accessible to the widest possible range of students,' This flexibility was appreciated by the children interviewed as part of this study as it had positive implications for their well-being in relation to the literacy difficulties they faced. Further, the practices in place in the school to support students with literacy difficulties, such as the embrace of key components of UDL via adaptive teaching were observed within the data through flexible curricula and instructional strategies. That said, elements of differentiation, via the grouping of children explained previously, received mixed views in terms of its impact on well-being according to the children with literacy difficulties. In keeping with recent research, by the likes of McGillicuddy and Devine (2020, p. 553) who claim such forms of grouping are a 'symbolically violent process that negatively impacts the psychosocial positioning of children as they negotiate their identities', pupils in our study vocalised how the groups they were allocated to had detrimental consequences for their well-being as it made them feel *'terrible'*, '*bad*' and *'upset'* (James). Others though, such as Amy and Izzy, held more favourable views of grouping strategies and recognised their role as part of a suite of adaptive teaching strategies, where individual competencies and characteristics can be nurtured, facilitating wellbeing (see Theresa-Linder & Scwhab, 2020). Bearing in mind that one of the five key recommendations of the recent Education Endowment Fund (EEF) report regarding 'Special Educational Needs in Mainstream School (EEF (Education Endowment Fund) [EEF], 2020) was that carefully selected small group work should complement high-quality teaching, the approach at the school, to our mind at least, doesn't seem far removed from such guidance.

The main focus of the findings was in terms of the school's tailored and individualised response to each child's literacy difficulties, that was valued by both pupils and practitioners. Previous claims that literacy instruction 'fails to realise a fundamental tenet of providing equitable educational opportunities to diverse groups of children' (Graham & Grieshaber, 2008, p. 557), were not widely observed at the school or, indeed, apparent within the views of both practitioners and children gathered during the interviews and focus groups. Instead, and embracing the plurality of students within each classroom, the teachers did not subscribe to 'one-size-fits-all' approaches but instead adapted their teaching for the individual, locating heterogeneity as the building block of their literacy practices (Bondie et al., 2019). To establish such adaptive and individualised teaching, Theresa-Linder and Scwhab (2020) recently suggest teachers should consider five domains of practice: (i) instruction, such as personalised support for students and modification of language and interaction to suit need; (ii) organisation, via grouping and modification of learning environment and time frame; (iii) social/emotional/behavioural practice, based on immersement in individual pupils and interacting accordingly; (iv) assessment and monitoring, by determining progress in a range of ways, and (v) collaboration, through teamwork and multi-agency support to best support the needs of the individual. Practices of individualised instruction, organisation and social/emotional and behavioural adaptation were evident within the data gathered at the school, leading to perceived improvements in wellbeing according to the children, but those interested in tailoring literacy instruction for those with difficulties in the subject, it is suggested, should strive for success across all these domains.

One way in which the school adapted practice to suit the literacy needs of the individual was in their creative use of space. During the child-led walking tours, pupils identified a variety of spaces that they found particularly useful when dealing with the stresses brought about by their own literacy difficulties. Recent advice in this area has identified that within any school, the creative use and adaptation of learning environments and situations to help support children's literacy development, is central for those hoping to improve the well-being of children experiencing literacy difficulties (Forsling & Tjernberg, 2023). Such advice should not come as a surprise bearing in mind that adaptive and relational approaches that position literacy education as a whole – the teacher and teaching, and student and learning, within the learning environment – often leads to success (Persson, 2013). Furthermore, there is a widely held and established belief that successful literacy education depends largely on the teachers' awareness and use of activities that support both the functional, and formal elements of literacy skill development, and their ability to balance the two (Forsling & Tjernberg, 2023; Moats, 2010). Bearing in mind that teachers and their choices have been positioned as the most important component in children's literacy learning (see Cummins, 2017; Pressley & Allington, 2015), practitioners interested in meeting the well-being needs of children with literacy difficulties, should strive to continuously develop their professionalism by reflecting on their own teaching, understanding their students' progress and re-modelling their teaching via a creative use of space, to achieve adaptive and individualised approaches to teaching literacy (Timperley, 2019).

A central tenet in creating positive learning environments that are both adaptive and individualised is that this is achieved across the whole school (Hellawell, 2022). The practitioners interviewed as part of this study claimed that there was a distinct whole school approach that placed the individual pupil, and their difficulties, front and centre of the literacy strategy. Indeed, and to this end, children such as Molly and Grace identified and spoke of whole school practices that they found beneficial in helping them to overcome their literacy difficulties and to alleviate stress brought about by them. That said, regarding assessment and the extent to which it impinged on literacy educational experiences, the data revealed a disparity between teachers and children in this regard. Whilst not unexpected that children voice opposition to assessment practices, and acknowledging that disparity here does not equate necessarily to a lack of a whole school approach to literacy challenges, education establishments and practitioners hopeful of achieving such a stance may find it useful to take heed of recent advice from the likes of Cavanagh et al. (2023), whose work focusses on the components necessary to achieve whole school approaches to meet the needs of children with special educational needs, including those associated with literacy difficulties. Three core aspects are identified as influential for success: (i) prioritising and training all staff in specialised and targeted work to support children's well-being, (ii) the school's ethos, environment, curriculum, teaching and learning needs 'buy-in' from all staff and to be championed by leadership and management. (iii) include the whole school audience, by paying attention and responding to the voice, needs and views of the whole staff team, pupils, parents and carers, wider community, and outside agencies (Cavanagh et al., 2023).

Whilst elements of all three of these core aspects were reflected in the data gathered to suggest a thorough approach at the school, in keeping with previous findings relating to home-school relationships of children with literacy difficulties, the inclusion of parents as

part of a true whole school approach often remains elusive (Leslie et al., 2025). Bearing in mind the challenges that children with literacy difficulties face in their schooling, it isn't surprising, then, that their parents experience adversity in establishing home-school partnership (Leslie et al., 2025). Yet, with an emphasis globally, as well as nationally (see DfE & DoH, 2015), on parental engagement via active participation in their child's academic performance and well-being (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014), schools and parents need to embark upon a process of 'mutual reach' where the relationship is characterised by a cooperative and democratic exchange of knowledge and ideas between the two parties (Warin, 2009). As such, the concept of 'parental allyship' (Gray & Gayles, 2018), may provide a fruitful avenue for those hoping to achieve home-school relationships based on the principle of 'mutual reach'. Defined as the additional responsibilities that such parents take on and perform, beyond those expected of parents of children without literacy difficulties, 'parental allyship' is a concept that destabilises traditional power dynamics in the home-school relationship, by allowing parents to work from a position of privilege and power to guide the school in tackling the barriers to learning that their children face (Radke et al., 2020).

Limitations, future directions and conclusion

At this point we'd like to acknowledge some of the limitations of the study and the accompanying data set, to help position the findings within the field. Firstly, this was a small-scale study, with data gathered from just one primary school, located in a town in the South-West of England, and so it is acknowledged that the data and findings generated should be scrutinised in terms of their generalisability and transferability. Not only was the study limited in terms of site, but also in terms of participant numbers, with the findings derived from two practitioners and eleven children and, as such, readers should position the findings within this limited sample. It is also acknowledged that due to Helen's existing relationship with the setting, that elements of insider research were present, which bring with it both methodological disadvantages of compromised objectivity and power differentials, as well as advantages of a deeper understanding of context and increased rapport with participants (Braun and Clarke, 2019). That said, and bearing in Braun & Clarke's (2019) sentiments regarding that researchers may be deemed 'outsiders' if they do not belong to the group to which the participants belong, the extent to which this was insider research is negligible.

In response to these limitations, we encourage future researchers interested in the findings to focus their attention on exploring the factors that influence the health and well-being of school children with literacy difficulties, across multiple schools that may vary in terms of their own demographics, and across a wider sample of practitioners and children. Whilst the focus here was on the primary school setting, future research may find it fruitful to explore whole school approaches to adaptation, individualisation and meeting the needs of children with literacy difficulties across differing key stages, and the variables that may influence its likelihood. Finally, and so that whole school practices that target children's literacy challenges can be more fully understood, research that captures the subjective experiences of parents of children with literacy difficulties, and specifically how their interactions with the practitioners, and also their children, are influenced by the school, is required (see Leslie et al., 2025).

Whilst the findings reported here are limited in terms of their generalisability, and that they may not capture some of the nuances that research across differing schools and educational stakeholders may offer, they contribute to our understanding of the value placed on whole school approaches, grounded in principles of adaptive teaching, that prioritise and respond to each individual child's specific literacy difficulties, and that such approaches are identified as beneficial as a strategy to help meet the well-being needs of such pupils. The findings revealed that whole school approaches do not happen by chance, but consequently they also uncovered opportunities and avenues of exploration for schools, staff, parents and children to work together to achieve more holistic strategies, that place the pupils' literacy challenges at the heart of the support in school. Such work, it is recommended, should capitalise on adaptive teaching practices, at a whole school level, to prioritise the individual's needs, with schools working democratically with parents under the principles of allyship.

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