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Reading Between the Lines: Dyslexia Awareness Among Young Adults in Contemporary China

Houben, Wieke

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Reading Between the Lines: Dyslexia Awareness Among Young Adults in Contemporary China

by
Wieke Houben
S2954443

Leiden University
MA Asian Studies

Supervisor: Svetlana Kharchenkova

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1. Introduction

Dyslexia is one of the most common learning disabilities in the world, affecting an estimated 1 out of 10 people (according to Brighter Strides ABA). Dyslexia is typically defined as a specific learning disorder characterized by difficulties with accurate or fluent word recognition, spelling, and decoding, despite normal intelligence and adequate educational exposure. In many Western countries, increasing awareness has led to early diagnosis, inclusive teaching strategies, and educational reforms and accommodations. In China, however, dyslexia remains misunderstood, underdiagnosed, and often completely invisible. Students with reading and writing disabilities are frequently mislabeled as careless or lazy, and they rarely receive the support that they need. This situation is especially troubling within a highly competitive academic culture such as China, where exam performance, competitiveness, and conformity leave little room for students with learning disorders to flourish.

The importance of this topic lies in its scale and impact. Despite dyslexia's high global prevalence, public understanding in China remains very limited, and institutional recognition is minimal. Misconceptions about its causes are common and contribute to stigmatization. These misconceptions do not simply reflect gaps in information but represent deeper cultural and structural barriers to inclusive education.

This thesis will focus on the younger generation of China, aged 18 to 32, which is a demographic that has recently emerged from the school system and now stands at a critical point between being former students and future educators, professionals, and parents. Their perspectives provide unique insights into how dyslexia is perceived by a generation that is both shaped by the current education system and positioned to influence its future development.

The central research question guiding this study is, *what is the level of awareness of dyslexia among Chinese young adults?*

Although a substantial body of research has explored dyslexia in China from all kinds of aspects, such as neurological, linguistic, and cognitive perspectives, the sociocultural dimensions of dyslexia remain an area where more research is needed. Previous research has addressed the emotional and psychological side of dyslexia, but they mostly focused on young children, teachers, and parents and how they deal with dyslexia and what their experiences

are, leaving the awareness and views of a big part of the Chinese population, the younger generation, absent from academic discourse. So, this study addresses that gap by investigating the level of awareness of dyslexia among Chinese young adults. Understanding how this generation perceives dyslexia provides information into both the consequences of the current practices and the possibilities for change in attitudes and awareness towards the disorder. This thesis does not aim to examine medical diagnoses, intervention methods, or the experiences of students currently in school. Instead, its scope is limited to social awareness and public understanding among young adults in China.

To answer the research question, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach by combining a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews. This approach enabled both the detailed exploration of personal experiences and a broader analysis of trends across different backgrounds and contexts. While participants often reported having witnessed peers with learning problems, the term “dyslexia” was unfamiliar to many. Recognition of learning disabilities was rare in Chinese school settings, and misconceptions about dyslexia’s nature and causes were common.

Nonetheless, the findings also point to a growing openness among the younger generation. Many participants expressed support for increased awareness and improved support systems. This points to the emergence of a generational shift in attitudes: one that is still in early stages but could shape future policy and educational reform.

By examining how dyslexia is perceived or overlooked by young adults in China, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how learning disabilities are socially perceived and how cultural contexts shape and influence learning disabilities. It highlights the barriers posed by educational structures, public discourse, and social stigma, while also identifying early signs of positive change within an emerging generation.

The following chapters will first provide a literature review to examine previous research and contextualize the topic. It will then present the research design and methodology, followed by the analysis of the collected data. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the findings, their implications, and direction for future research. The thesis offers both a critique of current limitations and a foundation for future research, increased awareness, and inclusivity.

2. Literature Review

Dyslexia, a common learning disorder affecting reading and writing abilities, has been extensively studied in Western contexts, yet remains under-researched in the context of China. Despite growing awareness of learning disabilities worldwide, dyslexia is still not widely recognized within Chinese educational and medical frameworks. This literature review examines the extent to which dyslexia is understood and recognized in China and explores how societal and institutional perceptions influence the barriers faced by dyslexic students. Key themes discussed include the historical and cultural attitudes towards learning disabilities, the role of educational policies, the accessibility of diagnosis, support systems, and societal pressures.

The study of dyslexia in China began later than in the Western world. However, since the 1980s, a substantial amount of research has emerged, providing valuable insights into the condition within a Chinese context. The topic of dyslexia has been researched from a lot of different perspectives, including cognitive, educational, and sociocultural angles. This literature review synthesizes previous studies to explore the discourse on dyslexia in China, analyzes key themes, and identifies gaps that this research aims to partially fill. By establishing this foundation of knowledge, this literature review will create a framework for answering the research question.

2.1 Understanding Dyslexia

Dyslexia has been studied extensively in countries that use the alphabetic writing systems for over a century (Chung, 2010). The term ‘dyslexia’ was introduced in 1877 by Rudolph Berlin, but its meaning has evolved over time. Initially, dyslexia was defined as “word blindness,” a hereditary visual disability that selectively affected reading skills without compromising oral or nonverbal reasoning skills (Stein, 2018). Until the mid-20th century, dyslexia was widely believed to be a visual-processing disorder, where individuals struggled to recognize words due to deficits in visual perception.

However, this understanding shifted significantly in the 1950s when Noam Chomsky introduced his revolutionary linguistic theories, which challenged the idea that dyslexia was rooted in visual deficits (Stein, 2018). Over time, dyslexia came to be recognized as a language-based disorder, primarily involving phonological deficits rather than visual impairments. According to modern research, dyslexia is characterized as having difficulty in

acquiring phonological processing skills, which are essential for reading and language comprehension.

Despite extensive research, a universally accepted definition of dyslexia remains elusive (Chung, 2010). This is because the different characteristics of language writing systems can contribute to various types of deficits. Early research on dyslexia was predominantly based on alphabetic languages such as English, leading to the long-held belief that dyslexia did not exist among Chinese readers because of the logographic nature of the Chinese script (Rozin, Poritsky, and Sotsky, 1971). This misconception stemmed from the idea that Chinese characters rely more on memorization than on phonological processing, implying that reading disabilities in Chinese would be fundamentally different from those in alphabetic languages. However, later studies demonstrated that Chinese readers can indeed experience dyslexia, though it manifests differently compared to alphabetic dyslexia.

2.2 Difference between Alphabetic and Chinese Dyslexia

While dyslexia is often linked to phonological deficits in alphabetic languages, research suggests that the neural mechanisms underlying dyslexia vary between writing systems (Li et al. 2022). One commonality is that dyslexia involves a universal attention-related dysfunction, meaning that attention-related issues in dyslexia present regardless of language background. However, the specific brain regions affected by dyslexia differ between alphabetic and logographic readers.

A study by Li et al. (2022) pointed out that children with dyslexia who read alphabet-based languages (like English) tend to have less brain activity in areas on the left side of the brain that help with hearing and sounding out words. In contrast, Chinese children with dyslexia showed more activity in a part of the brain on the right side that helps with understanding visual information, like shapes and spaces. This means that dyslexia in Chinese readers may be more related to deficits in visual-motor integration rather than phonological deficits alone. These findings highlight the importance of studying dyslexia in the context of different writing systems, as research based on alphabetic languages may not fully capture the complexities of dyslexia in non-alphabetic languages.

2.3 Research about Dyslexia in the Chinese Language

As said before, the study of dyslexia among Chinese readers began gaining traction in the 1980s, and interest in the topic has grown significantly over the past two decades. Most of these studies have focused on three main aspects (Zhang et al. 2023): linguistic profiles (Ho et

al. 2004, Cheung et al. 2009, Cheng et al. 2021, McBride et al. 2018), neural mechanisms (Hu et al. 2010, Zhang et al. 2012, Li and Bi 2022), and genetic bases (Su et al. 2015, Kong et al. 2016, Waye et al. 2017).

Although these studies have greatly advanced our scientific understanding of Chinese dyslexia, the importance of research from a sociological perspective remains. Existing research has explored how societal perceptions, educational policies, and cultural attitudes, particularly those of parents and educators, shape the experiences of individuals with dyslexia in Chinese-speaking regions.

A study conducted by Chan et al. (2023) perfectly reflects the gap in research on dyslexia in China. The study focuses on the systematic review of special education studies published between 1971 and 2020 in Greater China (including Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and mainland China). The study focuses on three major disabilities: autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia. Their analysis of 619 academic articles revealed a striking imbalance in research distribution: 56.4% of studies focused on ASD, 26.9% on ADHD, 1.4% on both ASD and ADHD combined, and only 9.2% on dyslexia (5.8% of the studies did not focus on a specific disability).

This disparity is particularly surprising when compared to the global prevalence rates of these conditions: ADHD affects approximately 9.4% of the population, ASD around 1.4%, and dyslexia between 12-14% (Chan et al., 2023). Despite being the most prevalent of the three, dyslexia has received the least scholarly attention in the context of China. This lack of academic focus in China on dyslexia reinforces the perception of dyslexia as a “hidden disability” within the Chinese context (Chan et al., 2023). The limited research and discourse on dyslexia may contribute to insufficient awareness, delayed diagnosis, and inadequate support systems for individuals with dyslexia in China (Chan and Mo, 2021).

2.4 Awareness and Misunderstandings

2.4.1 Lack of Standardized Testing

Even though the research on dyslexia is growing in China, the public awareness of the disorder remains low (Lin et al., 2020). One of the factors that contributes to this is that there is no standardized testing system to detect dyslexia. Unlike in Western countries, where dyslexia assessments follow well-established criteria, China lacks a uniform framework, leading to inconsistencies in prevalence estimates and difficulty in early identification (McBride, Wang, & Cheang, 2018). There are tests for dyslexia in China, but they often focus

on memorization. While this is useful, dyslexia involves multiple deficits, so a broader range of factors should be considered (Hou et al., 2018).

As highlighted by Lin et al. (2020), the estimated number of individuals with dyslexia varies widely due to differences in assessment methods. Some studies suggest that dyslexia affects around 5% of Chinese children, while others indicate a prevalence closer to 10-12%, similar to global rates (McBride et al., 2018). However, without standardized tests, these figures remain uncertain. In addition, a lack of official recognition and clear diagnostic criteria means that many individuals with dyslexia go undiagnosed, further limiting access to the needed interventions and help.

The challenge extends beyond diagnosis. In China, standardized assessments such as the Gaokao (the national university entrance exam) serve as a critical determinant of academic and career success. Since dyslexia is often not formally recognized within the education system, students with dyslexia do not receive accommodations such as extended time or specialized learning tools, which are common in Western countries. This gap perpetuates educational inequality, as dyslexic students are expected to compete under the same high standards without the necessary help.

2.4.2 Special Education Policies

Limited awareness of dyslexia significantly impacts various social, economic, political, ideological, and cultural domains, creating barriers for individuals with the condition. This issue is particularly evident in the context of the Gaokao. While the regulations state that “reasonable convenience” (MoE 2024, No. 2) should be provided for students with special needs (Cui et al., 2019), the guidelines are vague and lack clear definitions. This ambiguity further complicates the process, as individuals with disabilities must request accommodations themselves, yet provincial government agencies ultimately decide what support to provide. The lack of awareness among service providers further exacerbates these issues, leading to inadequate recognition and support for people with disabilities (Cui et al., 2019), including dyslexia. According to Cui and colleagues, “The awareness issue leads to discrepancies between what an applicant can use and the actual accommodations provided” (Cui et al. 2019, p. 323).

It is important to note that only since 2015 have students with recognized disabilities been formally eligible to participate in the exam with official accommodations (MoE, 2015a). Prior to this, while technically permitted to take the exam, students with disabilities often faced difficulties due to the lack of standardized support measures, like exams in Braille or

audio-based exams. This development underscores how, historically, standardized exams like the Gaokao were not designed with students with disabilities in mind (Qu, 2022). While recent reforms have granted these students more rights and educational support, there is still vagueness around whether dyslexia is formally recognized within China's special education policies. These policies continue to primarily address physical disabilities (Wang & Yu, 2007), as can be seen in the application form for special needs during the Gaokao.¹ Learning disabilities such as dyslexia are often either categorized under broader categories like "mental disorders," which is not the right category, or omitted entirely.

In contrast, according to research done by Xue and Song (2019) about public health policy regarding dyslexia in China, several other countries have introduced laws and regulations to ensure equal rights for individuals with dyslexia. In the United States, 30 states have implemented dyslexia-related laws to improve screening and identification, integrating dyslexia into special education systems to ensure access to public education services. In the United Kingdom, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) of 1995, later replaced by the Equality Act of 2010, was enacted to combat discrimination against people with disabilities, including dyslexia. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, policies for individuals with dyslexia are relatively well-developed. In Hong Kong, the Educational Bureau mandates annual dyslexia screenings for new students and provides interventions for identified cases. In Taiwan, the Special Education Act requires schools to offer special exam services and additional support for students with dyslexia (Xue & Song, 2019).

China, however, has yet to fully integrate dyslexia into its disability system. While awareness and policy development are slowly improving through various initiatives, significant progress is still needed to ensure individuals with dyslexia receive the support they need (Xue & Song, 2019).

2.4.3 Teachers and parents

While research on dyslexia in China has grown, its relatively late emergence has contributed to a continued gap in understanding, particularly among those who interact with dyslexic children: teachers and parents. Teachers play a big role in supporting children's academic progress, particularly in the case of students with dyslexia. Despite their direct involvement, studies indicate that many teachers lack a clear understanding of dyslexia.

¹ 中华人民共和国残疾人证申请表 (Application Form for Disability Certificate of the People's Republic of China).

In Yin, Joshi, and Yan's (2020) article, they state that "public awareness for dyslexia just emerged in Mainland China, and official efforts to help children with dyslexia just started." (Yin et al., 2020, p. 250). Their study focuses on the level of awareness among early literacy teachers, comparing Chinese teachers' knowledge with that of teachers in alphabetic-language systems. Their findings suggest that, in general, "Chinese teachers showed less knowledge about dyslexia but similar misunderstanding." (Yin et al., 2020, p. 247). That term "misunderstanding" is particularly significant, as misinformation about dyslexia often arises due to a lack of awareness. A key example of this misunderstanding is evident in Yin et al.'s study, where they interviewed and conducted surveys with teachers from developed regions and underdeveloped regions, which showed that around 60 percent of Chinese teachers in their study falsely believed that dyslexia can be caused by literacy-poor home environments. This belief is incorrect, as dyslexia is a neurodevelopmental condition that individuals are born with, rather than something influenced by external factors. Their study highlights not only the limited knowledge Chinese teachers have about dyslexia but also their difficulties in identifying the condition.

This challenge is exacerbated by the lack of standardized diagnostic tools. As McBride, Wang, and Cheang (2018, p. 217) point out, "there is no single standardized test of dyslexia in Mainland China." Without a widely accepted diagnostic framework, teachers and parents, but mostly teachers, struggle to correctly identify dyslexic students. Consequently, many teachers and parents misinterpret the consistent academic struggles of dyslexic children, often attributing their underachievement to carelessness or lack of effort (McBride et al., 2018). This misattribution can have severe consequences for dyslexic students, as they may be labeled as lazy or unintelligent, which can be damaging to their self-esteem.

The invisibility of dyslexia in Chinese schools further contributes to these misconceptions. Cai examines this issue through interviews with the director of Weining, one of the few organizations in China dedicated to dyslexia support (Cai, 2018). The director of Weining emphasizes the challenges faced by individuals with dyslexia, stating that although the affected population is large, their struggles are often dismissed or misunderstood. Unlike visible disabilities, dyslexia is "not seen by the eye, but invisible" (Cai, 2018), leading many to assume that these students are no different from their peers in daily life.

2.4.4 The Emotional and Psychological Impact of Dyslexia on Children in China

The lack of awareness and understanding among teachers and parents regarding dyslexia can increase the emotional damage for children affected with the condition. The

invisibility of dyslexia within Chinese society and education means that affected students often internalize their struggles, which leads to unfortunate psychological outcomes. Students with dyslexia frequently experience mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, due to the ongoing stigma and lack of recognition. These emotional burdens are not only consequences of academic struggles but also the results of being mischaracterized and seen as undisciplined or unintelligent. As Livingston et al. (2018) and Huang et al. (2020) report, undiagnosed dyslexia can lead to serious psychological harm. Multiple studies have shown that individuals with dyslexia or other learning disabilities face an increased risk of experiencing negative outcomes in various areas of life, including emotional, social, educational, and occupational fields (Livingston et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2025). This heightened risk can largely be attributed to the stigma surrounding learning disabilities, as well as the often-negative attitude educators have towards students with such challenges (Livingston et al., 2018), as said in the previous section.

For instance, a study by Huang et al. (2020) explored the emotional well-being and overall life quality among Chinese children with dyslexia. The study found that children with dyslexia exhibited more emotional instability and had a lower quality of life compared to their peers without dyslexia. Furthermore, the research highlighted the importance of the family environment in shaping the emotional outcomes of children with dyslexia. While a supportive family and reading environment do not directly affect the dyslexia itself, they can play a critical role in alleviating emotional distress, helping to mitigate some of the negative emotional symptoms associated with the condition (Huang et al., 2020). This can also have a positive outcome towards academic achievements.

Additionally, the pressure to succeed academically and professionally can be another major source of stress for individuals with dyslexia. Success is often measured in educational and occupational terms, both in Western cultures and China. As individuals with dyslexia often face challenges in these areas, their inability to meet societal expectations of success can contribute to emotional distress (Nalavany et al., 2011). This underscores the big role society plays in shaping the emotional well-being of individuals with learning disabilities. Both children with dyslexia and their parents report that their experiences are deeply affected and shaped by society's often negative attitudes, which tend to celebrate ability while marginalizing those who are different (Leitão et al., 2017).

2.4.5 Cultural Attitudes and Societal Pressure

Beyond a lack of formal knowledge, cultural beliefs play a significant role in shaping misunderstandings about dyslexia. The influence of Confucian ideals, combined with the highly competitive nature of Chinese education, contributes to the pressure placed on students (Berry, 2011). As McBride et al. (2018, p. 222) explain, “Chinese cultural attitudes about school learning being primarily about hard work and less about talents or difficulties can sometimes be problematic for Chinese families with children with dyslexia because hard work alone will not solve the problem.” In a society where academic success is often equated with perseverance and diligence, children with dyslexia face immense pressure to improve through sheer effort, an expectation that fails to acknowledge their specific learning challenges. This deeply ingrained belief system makes it even more difficult for parents and teachers to recognize dyslexia as a legitimate learning disorder rather than a personal failing. As a result, many children with dyslexia remain undiagnosed or unsupported, further reinforcing the cycle of misunderstanding and stigma.

A crucial factor influencing attitude towards dyslexia in China is the concept of “collective shame” (Chan et al., 2022). In Chinese culture, as mentioned before, academic performance is not only an individual matter; it is also seen as a reflection of the entire family (Zhu & Chang, 2019). When a child has academic struggles or has to withdraw from school because of academic underachievement, which can be caused by a learning disability, it can bring shame to the family, leading parents to resort to extreme measures to prevent failure (Mo & Chan, 2022). Chinese parents often view academic excellence as essential for upward social mobility and class advancement (Wang & Rao, 2020). This intense pressure can lead to family conflicts and mental health issues, as parents and children alike experience heightened anxiety over academic performances (Chan et al., 2022).

These cultural attitudes contribute to the lack of dyslexia awareness and support, as many Chinese parents struggle to accept that their child’s academic difficulties stem from a neurological condition rather than a lack of effort. At the same time, it is a global phenomenon that some students who struggle academically choose to hide their difficulties out of fear of stigma, rejection, and discrimination (Denhart, 2008). Unlike conditions with visible symptoms, dyslexia is often overlooked because affected individuals may intentionally conceal their struggles to avoid discrimination or bullying (Nalavany et al., 2011). This fear of announcing they have dyslexia stems from anticipated stigma, meaning that individuals do not need to experience direct invalidation to feel distress; they only need to anticipate it (Earnshaw et al., 2012). The burden of hiding dyslexia throughout life can lead to low self-

esteem, anxiety, and other negative impacts. Therefore, in the context of China, the absence of research on dyslexia, especially intervention research, may be partly due to the invisibility of the condition, but at the same time it also increases that problem. This perpetuates a cycle of misunderstanding and unawareness, further hindering the well-being of individuals with dyslexia.

While a significant body of research has investigated the cognitive, neurological, and genetic aspects of dyslexia in China, the sociocultural dimensions of the disorder remain underexplored. Existing studies have focused on children, parental attitudes, teacher training, and broad educational systems. However, there is a notable lack of research investigating how young adults in China perceive dyslexia, including their level of awareness, understanding of the condition, and attitudes toward support and inclusion. This demographic, aged 18-32 in this research, is beginning to assume roles as educators, employers, and policy influencers. Despite this, their voices and thoughts about the matter remain largely absent in the academic discourse.

This study aims to fill the gap by exploring the perspectives of young adults on dyslexia in China. By doing so, it offers a timely and original contribution to the understanding of dyslexia awareness and social attitudes in contemporary Chinese society. It builds on the existing body of work and shifts the focus from institutional actors to a generation whose beliefs and values will shape the future of inclusion and disability recognition in China.

3. Methodology

This section will outline the research design and methods that are employed to explore the level of awareness regarding dyslexia in China among young Chinese adults. It provides a detailed explanation of the study's design, participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations. Given the complexity of social perceptions and educational awareness, this study adopted a mixed-methods approach to capture both quantitative patterns and qualitative depth.

3.1 Research Design

The main aim of this research is to assess and understand the level of awareness, attitudes, and knowledge concerning dyslexia among the young Chinese adults. To achieve

this goal, a mixed methods approach was adopted, combining a quantitative questionnaire with qualitative interviews. While the quantitative part aimed to scope the broader awareness trends across a larger sample, the qualitative component aimed to uncover nuanced insights into personal perceptions and societal influences. This approach allows a triangulation of data sources, which enhances the validity of the findings.

3.2 Participant Selection and Sampling

Participants in this research were drawn from the younger Chinese population, specifically individuals aged between 18 and 32. This age range was selected because it includes those who completed their primary and secondary education within China, such as university students and young professionals, and can therefore offer insights shaped by recent experiences within the Chinese education system.

For the qualitative component, eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted. Ten of the interviewees were young Chinese individuals who had completed their primary, middle, and high school education in China. These participants provided firsthand insights into how dyslexia is (or is not) addressed in the Chinese education system, as well as their personal levels of awareness or misconceptions. The interviews further provided insight into the academic environment within the Chinese education system, highlighting its structural characteristics and cultural attitudes, including the intense pressure placed on students to succeed in their academics. These narratives offered important contextual information for the research, helping it by framing how educational norms and pressures may shape the younger generation's understanding, or lack thereof, of learning disabilities like dyslexia.

In addition, one interview was conducted with a representative from the non-governmental organization (NGO) *Shenzhen Weining Dyslexia Education Centre*, which is one of the only NGOs in China that specifically focuses on dyslexia education, support, and awareness. This interview offered a valuable insight from an expert by providing context about the broader social and institutional landscape that surrounds dyslexia in China. The inclusion of this interview enriched the data by offering insight into advocacy efforts, barriers to public awareness, and systematic challenges in promoting dyslexia recognition in China.

Participants were recruited through a combination of personal networks, social media outreach, and snowball sampling. The final sample includes individuals with diverse educational backgrounds (including those who attended public, private, and international schools), gender (with a balance of male and female participants), and regional representation (covering respondents from both urban and rural areas as well as different provinces across

China). At the time of the interviews, all of the participants were studying outside of China, but all had completed their primary and secondary schooling in China, ensuring relevant and context-specific insights.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

3.3.1 Survey

To supplement the qualitative data gathered through interviews, an online survey was developed to collect broader, quantitative insight into dyslexia awareness among the younger generation in China. The survey was designed using an online platform (Google Forms) and distributed via personal methods and social media. 18 responses have been collected.

Participants were eligible to complete the survey if they were aged between 18 and 32 and had completed their primary, middle, and high school education in China. This age group was selected to reflect the younger generation's educational experiences.

The survey (appendix A) consisted of four main sections:

Part 1: Demographic Information

This section aimed to gather basic contextual data, including age group, gender, type of school attended, and the geographic location of their schools.

Part 2: School Experience

Participants were asked to rate the academic environment and academic pressure of their school experiences on a five-point Likert scale. They were also asked whether they had observed classmates with notable struggles in reading and writing. For those who answered "Yes", follow-up questions were asked to explore how both teachers and students responded to those individuals, which provides insight into common perceptions and school culture around academic difficulties.

Part 3: Awareness of Dyslexia

This section focused on measuring familiarity with the term "dyslexia". Questions assessed whether participants had heard the term before, where they encountered it, and how well they understood the meaning of dyslexia. Participants were asked to identify characteristics they believed described dyslexia from a list of possible definitions, some accurate and others reflecting common misconceptions. In addition, participants were asked whether dyslexia had ever been discussed or mentioned in their schools.

Part 4: Attitudes and Perceptions

The final section of the survey explored the beliefs and social attitudes regarding dyslexia of the participants. The questions focused on stigma or discrimination, the likelihood of support, and whether or not the younger generation was more open-minded about learning about learning disabilities in general. The survey concluded with an open-ended prompt inviting participants to share suggestions for improving dyslexia awareness in China, as well as giving them a space to share any additional thoughts on the subject.

The survey combined multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions to ensure a balance of quantitative measurability and qualitative nuance. It was purposefully designed to mirror but also expand upon the questions discussed in the interviews, making it possible to reinforce the mixed-methods design of this research.

3.3.2 Interviews

The semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method for this study. A total of eleven interviews were conducted: ten with young Chinese individuals who completed their primary, middle, and high school education in China, and one with a representative from a Chinese NGO specializing in dyslexia awareness and support.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was conducted in English, either in person or via video conferencing platforms like Zoom and Tencent Meeting. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis by using Clipto (a transcription platform).

An interview guide (see appendix B) was used to ensure consistency across the different interviews while still allowing flexibility for participants to share unique perspectives.

3.4 Data Analysis

3.4.1 Survey Data Analysis

The survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. Closed-ended questions were tallied and converted into tables and percentages, using the tools of the survey platform, to summarize overall trends. In addition to basic statistical summaries, cross-tabulations will be explored in the final analysis phase, particularly to examine how variables like school type or region may correlate with dyslexia awareness.

3.4.2 Interview Data Analysis

The interview data was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, which is widely used in qualitative research for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). After transcription, each interview was carefully read multiple times to gain familiarity with the content. Initial ‘codes’ were then generated based on recurring ideas, experiences, and expressions shared by the participants. These ‘codes’ were subsequently organized into themes such as

- Opinions on the academic environment
- Perceptions of learning difficulties in school
- Reactions of peers and teachers towards struggling students
- Awareness and understanding of dyslexia
- Attitudes toward educational inclusivity and change

Special focus was given to identifying both commonalities and contrasts across participant narratives.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were upheld throughout the research process. Prior to participation, all respondents were provided with information about the research topic and the study’s aims. Informed consent was obtained for both interviews and questionnaire responses. The anonymity and confidentiality of all the participants were assured, and permission to voice-record the interviews was asked before conducting the interviews.

3.6 Limitation of the Methodology

While the mixed-methods design offers a broad understanding of the research topic, the limitations of this research must be acknowledged. The survey sample size was small, which limited the generalizability of the quantitative findings. As such, the survey data should be interpreted as indicative rather than statistically representative, pointing to general trends rather than conclusive patterns. However, the survey still serves a valuable role by providing background and contextual insights that support the qualitative data from the interviews. In addition, the interview and survey participants were distinct groups, which is considered a strength in this case. By involving a greater number of individuals overall, the study benefits from wider input and a more diverse range of perspectives. Ultimately, the interviews

function as the primary data source for this research, offering depth and detail, while the survey supports these findings by highlighting broader patterns in awareness among young adults.

4. Data Results

4.1 Survey

To establish a broader context for this study, a short survey was conducted to gauge general awareness of dyslexia, support systems, and social attitudes within the Chinese education system. The survey targeted individuals who had completed their schooling in China and aimed to identify experiences related to learning difficulties and common perceptions. By identifying common experiences and gaps in understanding, the survey results provide a foundational backdrop that complements and deepens the insights that have been gathered through the interviews. These findings are organized into four key themes that also echo those explored in the interviews. Those being awareness of dyslexia, support for dyslexic students, social stigma, and the perceived need for increased awareness.

4.1.1 Background data

A total of 18 respondents completed the online survey, which aimed to assess awareness, experiences, and observations towards dyslexia and learning disabilities within the Chinese education system. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 32, with the majority (10) falling between 23 and 27 years old, just like the interviewees. The gender distribution was nearly even (8 male, 10 female).

In terms of schooling, 11 participants attended public middle schools, and 10 also attended public high schools. Others had experiences with private or international education. Respondents came from a diverse range of cities and provinces across China. This regional spread includes both economically developed coastal cities and lesser-developed or mid-sized inland regions, just like the participants of the interviews.

When asked about academic pressure during their education in China, no respondent rated it as “low” or “very low.” Seven participants rated it as “high,” five as “very high,” and six as “moderate.” This confirms that a high-pressure academic environment was a common experience among the respondents, regardless of the region.

How would you describe the academic pressure in your school? From a scale from 1 to 5
18 antwoorden

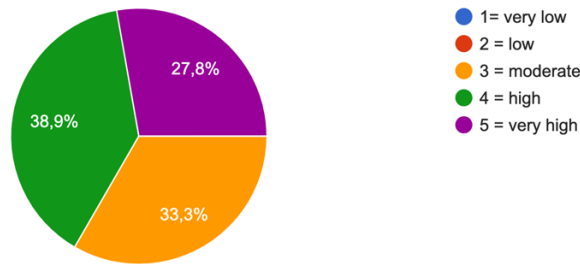


Figure 1

The survey revealed four dominant themes: limited awareness of dyslexia, lack of support, social stigma and misconceptions, and the need for greater awareness.

4.1.2 Theme 1: Limited Awareness of Dyslexia and Uncertainty

To gauge what the respondents knew of dyslexia, they were asked the question if they had ever heard of the term before. 55.6 percent responded “Yes,” and the other 44.4 percent answered “No.”

Have you ever heard of the term "dyslexia" before?
18 antwoorden

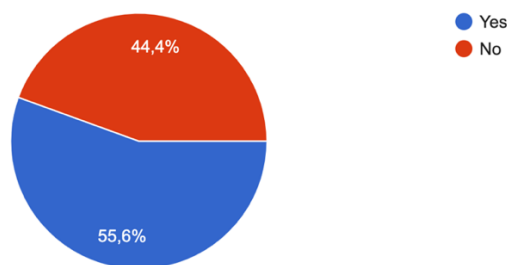


Figure 2

One of the most consistent findings in the survey is the absence of dyslexia from educational discourse. When asked whether the term was ever mentioned by teachers in school, 12 out of 18 (66.7%) respondents answered “No.” Two (11.1%) of them answered “Not sure,” and the other four (22.2%) answered “Yes.” (See figure 3.)

Was dyslexia ever mentioned in your school by teachers?

18 antwoorden

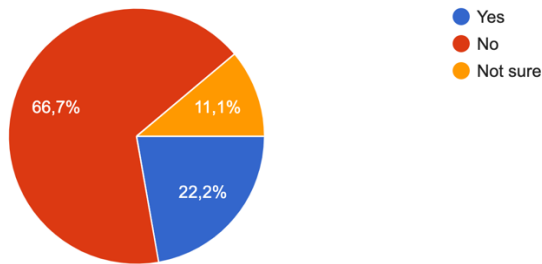


Figure 3

When asked about their friends' knowledge of dyslexia, the most common answer (8) was "some of them know what it is." Five answered "Not sure." Three answered "a lot of them know what it is," and two said "most of them don't know what it is."

How much do you think your friends know about dyslexia?

18 antwoorden

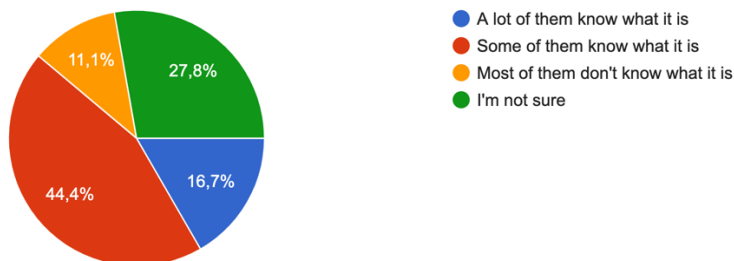


Figure 4

However, on the question of whether they had ever seen or known students who struggled with reading and writing, 50 percent answered "Yes," 33.3 percent "Not sure," and only 16.7 percent said "No."

Have you ever seen or known students who struggled with reading and writing?

18 antwoorden

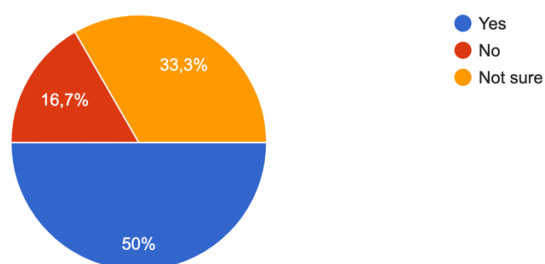


Figure 5

4.1.3 Theme 2: Lack of Support

It is often assumed that awareness and support are closely linked. That without awareness of a condition like dyslexia, appropriate support is unlikely to be provided. While this study did not directly examine how individuals themselves respond to or support people with dyslexia, participants' responses did highlight a perceived lack of support within educational institutions. 9 of the 18 respondents reported that Chinese schools do not provide adequate support for students with dyslexia. Specifically, 9 respondents answered "No," 6 said "Not sure," and 3 answered "Yes."

Do you think Chinese schools provide enough support for students with dyslexia?
18 antwoorden

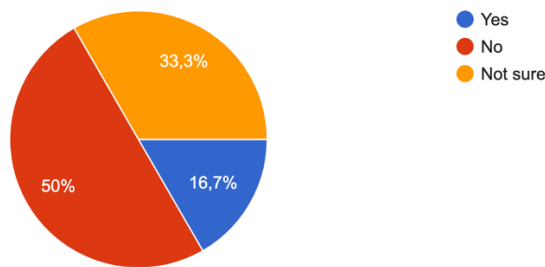


Figure 6

Furthermore, although some participants had seen classmates who struggled with reading or writing, there was little indication that teachers responded effectively. In multiple-choice responses about how teachers reacted to students with those kinds of problems, the most common answers included:

- "Their problems were ignored."
- "They were seen as lazy."
- "They were bullied."
- "Such cases were not regarded as problems."
- "It would be regarded as not studying hard enough."

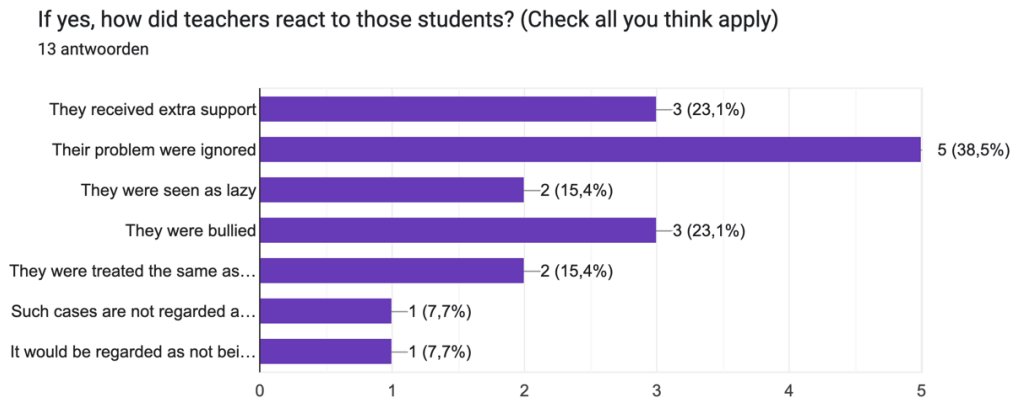


Figure 7

These results reflect a broader institutional failure to recognize learning differences and disabilities, which often results in students being overlooked, mislabeled, or left without the help they need.

4.1.4 Theme 3: Social Stigma and Misconceptions

When it comes to the social perceptions of dyslexia, the survey responses revealed a complex mix of uncertainty, underlying stigma, and mistreatment. Seven answered “Yes,” five “No,” and lastly six answered “Not sure.” So those who said “No” were a minority.

Do you think people with dyslexia face discrimination or stigma in China

18 antwoorden

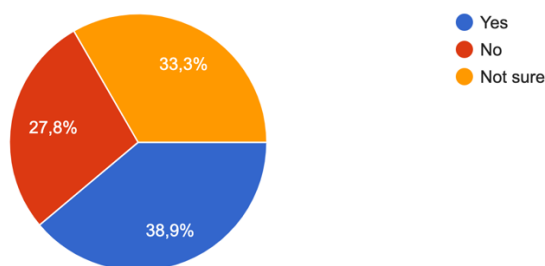


Figure 8

Respondents were also asked whether or not a classmate with dyslexia would have been supported and understood by peers. Answers were mixed.

"Have you ever seen or known students who struggled with reading and writing?" If yes, how did students react to those students? (Check all you think apply)

10 antwoorden

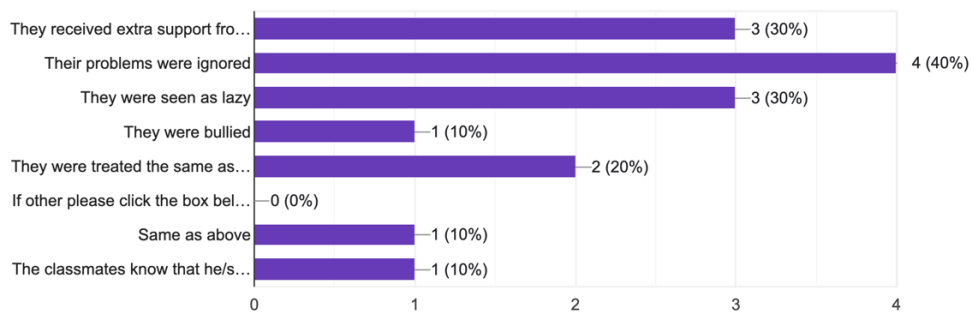


Figure 9

Importantly, a multiple-choice question about how teachers and students reacted to students who struggled with reading and writing provided insights into how stigma may manifest itself socially. While some participants selected neutral or passive reactions (e.g., “Their problems were ignored”), several selected more concerning responses:

- “They were bullied.”
- “They were made fun of by classmates.”
- “It would be regarded as not studying hard enough.”

These responses suggest that students who struggled, whether due to dyslexia or other learning difficulties, were sometimes subject to peer bullying, often due to the little recognition or intervention from educators. In these cases, lack of awareness appears to enable harmful social dynamics, which further increases the stigma through silence.

A dedicated question also explored how participants understood the nature of dyslexia, which revealed a mix of accurate and inaccurate facts.

Which of the following do you think describes dyslexia? (Check all that you think apply)

18 antwoorden

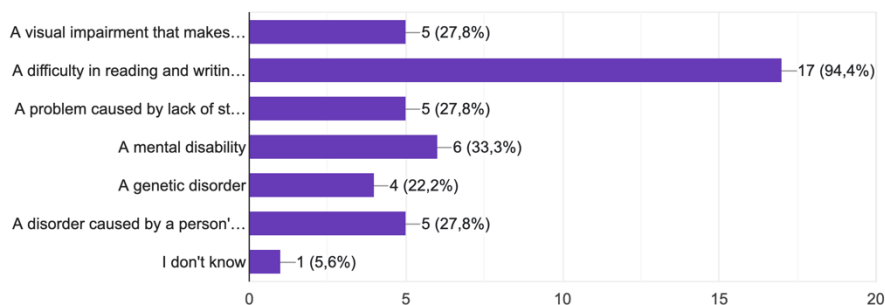


Figure 10

- Almost all the respondents (17) correctly identified dyslexia as “a difficulty in reading and writing.”

- 5, however, also believed that dyslexia is “a problem caused by lack of studying.”

- 5 selected that dyslexia is “a visual impairment that prevents you from reading.”

- 5 saw dyslexia also as “a disorder caused by a person’s environment.”

- 6 selected that dyslexia is “a mental disorder.”

- And lastly, 4 selected that they thought that dyslexia is “a genetic disorder.”

4.1.5 Theme 4: Strong Desire for Greater Awareness

The data also showed the encouraging fact that nearly all the respondents, 14 out of 18, agreed that awareness of dyslexia should be improved in China (see Figure 5).

Do you think dyslexia awareness should be improved in China
18 antwoorden

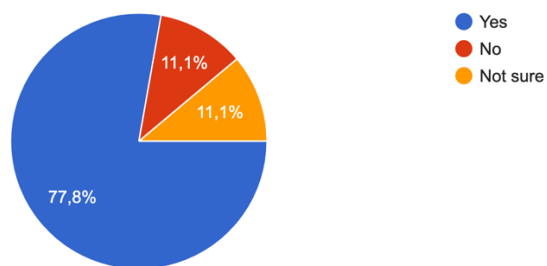


Figure 11

The survey also showed that the younger generation is presumed to be more open-minded and understanding about learning disabilities than the older generations. With 11 answering “Yes,” 4 “Not sure,” and 3 “No.”

Do you think that the younger generations are more open-minded and understanding about learning disabilities than older generations?
18 antwoorden

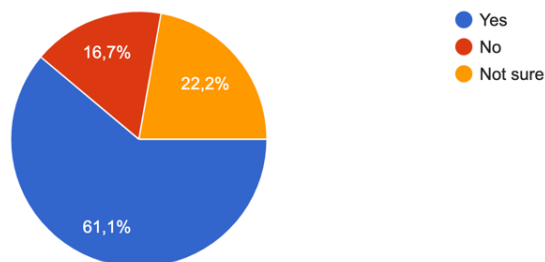


Figure 12

Participants also suggested various ways to increase the visibility and understanding of dyslexia in the open question where they could write their own answers. This included media campaigns, school education programs, institutional recognition, and public engagement. Several also mentioned that younger generations appear more open-minded and accepting of learning disabilities than the older generations, indicating a generational shift in attitudes.

4.2 Interviews

This section presents the key findings from the qualitative interviews conducted.

While analyzing the data, three central themes emerged:

1. The stressful and meritocratic nature of the education environment
2. Low awareness and recognition of dyslexia or learning disabilities
3. Stigma and misconceptions surrounding dyslexia
4. Willingness for change

Each theme is presented with illustrative quotes from the participants, derived from the interviews, to reflect the depth and range of their experiences and observations.

This section will first provide the background information of the participants to create the foundation.

4.2.1 Participant Background

The majority of my interviewees (6) attended both public middle schools and public high schools. One participant attended a public middle school followed by a private high school, another attended both private middle and high schools, and one participant transitioned from a public middle school to an international high school still located in China. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 30. This demographic reflects a relatively recent experience of the Chinese education system.

The participants came from a geographically diverse range of provinces and municipalities, including cities such as Changsha (Hunan), Cangnan (Zhejiang), Hengshui (Hebei), Guangzhou (Guangdong), Chengdu (Sichuan), Shijiazhuang (Hebei), Kunming (Yunnan), Bayin (Gansu), and Langfang (Hebei). This mix represents a mix of large urban centers (e.g., Guangzhou, Chengdu, Changsha), mid-sized or smaller cities (e.g., Shijiazhuang, Kunming, Langfang, Hengshui), and more rural or county-level areas such as

Cangnan and Bayin. As such, the sample includes perspectives from both economically developed coastal regions and less developed or more rural inland areas, as well as locations that sit somewhere in between.

This regional diversity is significant, as it provides insights into how systematic pressures, like the intense academic competition, limited dyslexia awareness, and social stigma, manifest themselves across different contexts. Despite the differences in development levels, participants described many similar challenges, suggesting that the core issues explored in this research are widespread and deeply rooted in the structure and culture of the national education system.

4.2.2 Theme 1: A Stressful and Meritocratic Educational Environment

The interviews consistently showed that participants described their educational experiences as intense, highly competitive, and emotionally taxing. Academic performance was seen as the only way to get opportunities for your future, and the education system provided little room for failure and personal growth. This broader cultural and institutional framework produced significant stress for students and created a rigid hierarchy within the classroom with little room for people who couldn't keep up academically.

Overall Pressure and Emotional Strain

Many participants described a school environment where students were expected to succeed in their education at all costs. The pressure to achieve high grades, particularly on exams like the Gaokao, was described to stem from both internal motivations and external factors, including teachers, parents, and broader expectations:

“I think everyone was struggling... I think the pressures, the external pressures, like expectations from parents and teachers, and also the general environment, especially toward the end of senior high school, are really high. Everyone gets super stressed because they want to pass the Gaokao and get into a good, highly ranked university so they can be recognized by everyone. Those are some pretty basic external pressures. And I think those might actually be the main pressures, because from the time you're a kid, you're being pushed by outside forces, and it's hard to really go after what you actually like. You don't really know what your internal motivations are, so you just keep pushing to do things.” (Interview #4)

One participant described the pressure they endured in middle school, which caused them to enroll in an international school, where the pressure is less high, in order to improve their mental and physical health:

“My parents said, ‘If you have so much pressure in public school, which is hurting your health, we will put you in an international school, because I really don’t want this to kill my daughter.’”
(Interview #9)

Two interviewees came from schools that followed the *Hengshui* model, which is a strict and regimented approach to secondary education that originated from Hengshui High School in the Hebei province, China. Hengshui High School became famous for producing top scorers in the Gaokao. This system is known for long study hours, their military-style discipline, and high academic demands, often at the expense of students’ well-being.

“Yes, our school followed the Hengshui model. It’s very effective for getting good grades, but not so good for students’ physical or mental health. My school was very strict. In China, unless you’re in an international school, most students get into university through a big exam, so the competition is very intense. Every school wants their students to get higher grades so they can go to better universities. Since it was a private school, it wasn’t run by the government, so there was also a financial motive. We had a very strict timetable—we got up around 5:30 a.m. and went to sleep around 11 p.m. We had classes all day: about five in the morning, four or five in the afternoon, and three in the evening. Every day we had to study Chinese, math, and English. Because I was in the arts track, I also had to study history, politics, and geography. The school also made sure we exercised to build our physical health—we had to run 800 meters every day after the second class in the morning. We didn’t have a choice; everyone had to do it.” (Interview #6)

Others described the emphasis that is put on students to succeed in their academics and the fear of future consequences if students failed to meet expectations:

“Our families think that if you don’t come into a good university, our lives will be destroyed. That’s the situation in China.” (Interview #8)

Meritocracy and Exclusion

Interviewees described the structure of the education system as strictly meritocratic, and heavily based on results and talent. Participants indicated that students who performed well were supported and recognized by teachers, while those who did not meet the

expectations, including people with learning disabilities, were often excluded from opportunities and ignored.

Interviewees described the education system in China as

“Right now, it’s based heavily on meritocracy. If you can’t perform, you get left behind.” (Interview #3)

“I think there are multiple factors that lead to this status quo. The education system doesn’t care about people who perform worse than others. They still focus on picking the elites. I also think it’s a cultural issue. People don’t recognize “losers” in China. It’s a very competitive society, so if you don’t keep up, you get drowned out easily.” (Interview #2)

The interviews also highlighted that people who may have dyslexia or other learning disabilities were most likely to be filtered out during the Zhongkao (the high school entrance exam) or the Gaokao, which means that they were unlikely to pass the exams that will get them into good high schools or good universities.

“The entrance exams for both high school and university gradually screen out students with learning difficulties.” (Interview #2)

“If they really have dyslexia, I can’t meet them in my school because of the selection system. How could they pass the exam?” (Interview #8)

One participant also pointed to a recent state policy change that happened in 2021, where the state banned private tutoring and cram schools, which were officially intended to reduce inequality in education. However, the interviewee perceived an alternative motive:

“One interesting thing about the pressure-reduction policy is that it’s not really about mental health or equality. The government wants more students to go to technical schools because China is facing a labor shortage. They don’t want everyone going to university. They want more factory workers.”

Other interviewees similarly emphasized the extreme level of competition and pressure in the education system, noting that not everyone can win and that the system filters out everyone who can’t keep up academically.

“I realized that education model wasn’t about cultivating young generations; it was more about producing a product. And the ‘product’ was students with good grades.” (Interview #3)

Hierarchy in the Classroom and Teacher Prioritization

Several interviewees noted that teachers mainly focused their attention on students with high academic potential and those who were performing well academically.

“We had about 40 to 50 students in a class, so we were divided into six groups. Students were ranked from number one to number six based on test scores. Number one was the top student, and number six was struggling. After every test, the groups were adjusted. Teachers were told (by principals) to focus more on the higher-performing students because they had a better chance of getting into top universities.” (Interview #6)

Teachers were also incentivized by their higher-ups to prioritize students with better scores, as they could receive bonuses if those students were accepted into high-ranking universities. This prioritization of high performing students also created classroom hierarchies where lower-performing students were put in the back of the classroom where they were overlooked.

“Basically, they can do anything they want back there. The teachers won’t care about them as long as they don’t talk and influence the students who are at the front of the class.” (Interview #9)

4.2.3 Theme 2: Limited Awareness and Recognition of Dyslexia and Learning Disorders

The second major theme that emerged from the interviews was the limited awareness and understanding of learning disabilities, particularly dyslexia, among teachers, parents, society, and even the participants themselves. When asked if they ever heard of the term “dyslexia, six out of the nine participants had never heard of it before. Of the three interviewees who had heard the term before, two of them first heard it once they were studying abroad, and one first heard about it once they got enrolled in an international high school with an American education model in China.

One interviewee reflected on their lack of awareness during their schooling and how their understanding changed after moving abroad:

“Personally, I feel that I didn’t know the term (dyslexia) when I was a student. No one told me about it. I had difficulty with certain subjects, and I thought it was because I didn’t study hard enough or wasn’t diligent enough. It felt like a matter of self-discipline and personal intelligence. I just interpreted it that way. But ever since I came here (Leiden University, the Netherlands) and started exploring the disability center at the university, I realized they offer assistance for people with

dyslexia, depression, anxiety, and other issues. They also provide extra study finance for those students. That's when I started to realize that students with these problems can receive help.”
(Interview #4)

Many participants also noted that dyslexia and learning disorders in general are not widely recognized or understood in China, which contributes to a lack of diagnosis, support, and inclusive education. One interviewee explained this dual issue of both ignorance and denial:

“Interviewer: *Do you think they ignore it, or do they not know dyslexia exists?*

Interviewee: *I think both. On the one hand, they don't know about these learning disabilities. On the other hand, even if you show them information from the internet, they might still ignore it, thinking it's an excuse or believing the child can overcome it by just studying harder.”* (Interview #3)

This lack of recognition was further reinforced by the highly selective nature of the Chinese school system. Several interviewees pointed out that students with dyslexia would likely have been filtered out during entrance exams, making them nearly invisible within mainstream academic settings.

“Actually, I don't remember this clearly. Because after we graduate from middle school, before entering high school, we have to take an exam. Only students who get good grades on that exam can go to a good high school. So, I think students suffering from dyslexia may not be able to get good grades, and I didn't really meet any.” (Interview #7)

“I think if they really have dyslexia, I can't meet them in the school because of the selection system. How could they pass the exam? Yeah. So, I think I can't meet them in our class.” (Interview #8)

Several interviewees commented that students with learning difficulties or those who suffered from dyslexia (either known or unknowingly) are often misattributed to laziness or poor attitude, rather than it being understood as an actual disability. As a result, these students frequently went unacknowledged by both peers and teachers.

“In my middle school class, I believe there were some students who struggled. However, they were never really acknowledged; neither the classmates nor the teacher paid much attention to them. I think that was very sad.” (Interview #2)

“Probably some students had problems with focus or reading, but they were not identified as having a disability.” (Interview #1)

“My mom is an English teacher in middle school in China, and I don’t think she’s aware of it (dyslexia). She thinks it’s more about attitude.” (Interview #2)

In addition to general unawareness, participants also mentioned a reluctance among teachers and parents to acknowledge learning disorders. One participant suggested that the social stigma around disabilities plays a big role in this:

“We don’t treat people like they have a disability. And also, the parents are very sensitive about this. They might accept that their child learns slower, but they often can’t accept that the child might have a disability.” (Interview #6)

Altogether, these accounts reveal a widespread gap in both recognition and acceptance of dyslexia and learning disorders within the Chinese education system, contributing to underdiagnosis, lack of support, and social marginalization for students who struggle to keep up academically.

4.2.4 Theme 3: Stigma and Misconceptions Surrounding Dyslexia

The third theme focuses on how dyslexia and other learning disorders are perceived socially, especially through the lens of stigma, denial, and misunderstanding. All of the participants indicated that there was stigma when asked the questions if they saw stigma and discrimination when it comes to dyslexia and overall underperformance in class. Participants observed that students who struggled with reading or studying were frequently seen as lazy, undisciplined, or simply “not trying hard enough.”

As one participant explained:

They’ll say you didn’t put in enough effort and you’re not working hard enough.” (Interview #9)

Another echoed this perception:

“I think in China, people don’t see it as a disorder. They think it’s more of an individual problem with studying. They might think, “Oh, maybe you’re just not studying hard enough.” So, people don’t recognize it, or they just ignore it.” (Interview #5)

Several interviewees mentioned that mental health issues and learning disabilities are often dismissed as “Western concepts” or non-existent, which makes them irrelevant to Chinese society.

“I’ve seen news stories in China about Western celebrities with learning disabilities like dyslexia, and many people leave comments saying these disabilities don’t exist in China. It’s just a Western thing.” (Interview #9)

“They don’t care about learning disabilities. They think if a student says they have a problem like reading or writing difficulties or ADHD, the teachers and parents will think the student is just making excuses and doesn’t want to study hard.” (Interview #3)

“Because this is not an illness, it’s just your own problem. You don’t want to study. You don’t work hard, and yes, such things. So, I think if someone really has such a disability, they wouldn’t know that. So, they just are ignoring the disability, and they just say that you have to work harder, and I think they might not think that’s a real problem; they just think you should work harder, yes.” (Interview #8)

Some also noted that teachers are often hesitant to recognize or address potential learning disorders. When asked whether dyslexia is acknowledged in the Chinese education system, one participant shared:

“Um, I don’t think so. Because, in primary school, if a child is very young and shows signs like learning more slowly or not being as “smart” as the top students, we usually think it’s because they lack basic knowledge. So, teachers just ask them to do more exercises. We don’t treat people like they have a disability. And also, the parents are very sensitive about this. They might accept that their child learns slower, but they often can’t accept that the child might have a disability.” (Interview #6)

This hesitation is rooted in a broader fear of discrimination:

“In China, as teachers, we don’t want to say that a student has something wrong with their mind. We avoid calling it a disability or letting others know that a specific student has a disability because we’re afraid they’ll be discriminated against.” (Interview #6)

The stigma extended beyond the classroom. Participants also emphasized the shame parents feel when their children show signs of difference or struggle academically:

“Interviewer: You mentioned that some parents might ignore signs of dyslexia. Is there shame involved if a child has something “abnormal”?”

Interviewee: Yes, definitely. Some parents feel ashamed if their child isn’t successful. It’s hard for them to accept failure or difference.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Interviewee: It’s cultural. Society is very competitive. People compare their children constantly—who is more successful, who has the better child. If your child isn’t doing well, others judge you. So, parents deny the problem to avoid shame. In the West, differences are more accepted. In China, everyone wants to fit in. Being “special” is often seen negatively. There is a term for dyslexia in Chinese, but people don’t really see it as a disability. They think of disabilities as physical, like losing a limb. Mental or cognitive disabilities are not taken seriously. People think those are not important.”
(Interview #10)

These beliefs often led to further marginalization of students who were struggling academically. Some participants expressed concern that these misconceptions caused shame, isolation of students who needed the extra support, and the discouragement of seeking help.

4.2.5 Theme 4: Willingness to Change

All interviewees expressed a strong belief that the Chinese education system should provide more support for individuals with dyslexia. Many participants felt that, while change would be challenging, there was a clear need for increased awareness, institutional support, and systematic reform.

One interviewee emphasized the dual need for teacher training and structural change:

“First, teachers should be better educated about learning disabilities. Even if the education system stays the same, if teachers are aware, they can help students more. Second, the entire educational structure needs to change. Right now, it’s based heavily on meritocracy. If you can’t perform, you get left behind. Education is so tightly tied to career development that only students at top universities can get good jobs.” (Interview #3)

A recurring sentiment was the importance of public awareness and broader understanding, not only among educators and students, but also among policymakers and educational regulators:

“I think not only teachers and students should know, but also officers or regulators. They should know about this. I mean, because regulators hold more resources. Their goal is to make more students get good grades; this is their priority. So, if they know more about mental disorders or disabilities, maybe they can provide some humanitarian help for those students. Because if they don’t, they won’t allocate

any resources to us. Even if they find some students with issues, they might try to erase them if those students have negative behaviors that could impact the school's reputation.” (Interview #7)

When asked directly whether the education system should do more to support students with dyslexia or other learning disabilities, one participant responded:

“Definitely. Because they are not mentally disabled. If they are educated in a proper way, they can perform just as well as others.” (Interview #1)

Another acknowledged that meaningful change would not be easy because

“Many people don’t understand these issues at all.” (Interview #7)

Yet despite the challenges, there was cautious optimism about future improvements, particularly as demographic changes may lead to smaller class sizes and more individualized attention.

“Maybe in the future, teachers will have more time and patience to help students with learning disabilities. I hope things will change then.” (Interview #9)

While these calls for change were widespread, it is worth considering that some participants may have been influenced by social desirability when expressing these views, for they wanted to be seen as thoughtful or morally responsible. In a research setting, especially one dealing with issues of fairness and inclusion, expressing support for change could be seen as the “right” thing to say. Still, this does not negate the value of their reflections. It rather highlights the tension between past educational experiences and their current aspirations for reform.

In addition, many participants acknowledged that during their own school years, their focus was overwhelmingly on themselves, on surviving the pressures of exams and academic performance. This intense focus left little space to reflect on the experiences or needs of peers with learning disabilities. Although their concern for inclusivity may not have been prominent at that time, their current perspectives still shed light on important gaps in the system and contribute meaningfully to discussions.

In sum, the participants’ reflections still offer valuable insights into how the system might become more inclusive and responsive in the future. Taken together, the interviews help

paint a broader picture of how younger generations in China currently understand and perceive dyslexia, as well as the overall level of awareness and visibility of dyslexia among the younger generation in Chinese society.

5. Discussion

This research investigated the awareness, recognition, and perception of dyslexia among young adults in China. The research used a mixed-methods approach comprising qualitative interviews and a supporting quantitative survey. The data revealed four themes that did not only reflect the current status quo of dyslexia awareness in China but also highlighted broader systematic and cultural barriers. The themes are (1) the rigidity of a high-pressure meritocratic education system, (2) the limited public and institutional awareness of dyslexia, (3) the stigma and misconceptions around dyslexia, and (4) a generational shift in attitudes and openness to change.

All of these themes are analyzed through the lens of young Chinese adults, who offered a unique perspective as individuals recently shaped by the education system and potentially positioned to shape its future.

5.1 Meritocratic Pressure and Systematic Filtering

The interviews and survey responses repeatedly emphasized the extreme academic pressure embedded in the Chinese education system. Participants painted a picture of a learning environment where standardized tests like the Zhongkao (high school entrance exam) and Gaokao (college entrance exams) were big stress factors. This is also supported in the survey data, where 100% of respondents rated their academic pressures as moderate, high, or very high, with none selecting the options that described the pressures as low. This indicated the widespread intensity of academic expectations across school types and regions. Those exams not only caused major pressures on students, but they also served as a filter. This filter filtered out the students who struggled academically, including those with often undiagnosed learning disabilities, such as dyslexia. This meritocratic system prioritizes academic outcomes over individual learning needs. As Interviewee #2 remarked that the education system gradually screens out students who have learning difficulties, it is fair to assume that people with dyslexia will get filtered out too and have fewer chances to get good academic opportunities in the future.

Although the policy reform since 2015 has improved access for students with recognized disabilities (MoE, 2015a), dyslexia remains largely absent from the official discourse due to the lack of recognition and diagnosis.

The hierarchical nature of Chinese classrooms, where teachers focus their attention on high-performing students, further exacerbates the problem that students with dyslexia face. Several interviewees described a marginalization of students perceived as “low-achievers”, who often got relegated to the back of the classroom and given minimal support. This also reflects the structure described by Cui et al. (2019), where teachers are rewarded for students’ success and are thereby not focusing on students who struggle but who may desperately need the extra instructions and support. This research, however, did extend it by demonstrating how such practices of teachers contribute to the invisibility of dyslexia within the system. Additionally, many interviewees reported class sizes of 40-50 students or higher, a structure that makes individual learning needs nearly impossible to detect, especially for students who do not visibly disrupt the flow of the classroom.

Survey findings further support the fact that students with dyslexia often go on unnoticed. While 50% of respondents said they had observed classmates struggling with reading or writing, a majority noted these students were either ignored or seen as lazy. This suggests that those with potential learning disabilities are not only unsupported, but they are actively mischaracterized, which reinforces the idea that the academic system has no framework to recognize or retain them, which also leads to low awareness of dyslexia overall.

One participant also highlighted recent state policy changes such as the 2021 ban on private tutoring and cram schools. While officially intended to reduce educational inequality, the participant speculated that it may also serve state interests in increasing the labor force for manual jobs by reducing access to elite academic tracks. This view reflects a deeper skepticism about how educational reforms may serve to regulate social mobility, especially affecting people who have learning disabilities. This further emphasized the problems that people with dyslexia face in their lives.

5.2 Low Awareness and Misrecognition of Dyslexia

One of the most striking findings was the widespread unfamiliarity with the term “dyslexia.” Seven of the ten interviewees had never heard the term before, and 66.7% of the survey respondents said the word was never mentioned by teachers during their schooling. Among those interviewees familiar with the term, most encountered it after leaving China or during their international education experiences. This suggests that for many young adults in

China, the awareness of dyslexia has emerged only after leaving the confines of the domestic education system, underscoring the invisibility of dyslexia within the Chinese context.

Interestingly enough, even though the survey indicated that a majority of respondents had heard of the term “dyslexia,” there remained a significant amount of confusion and misconception surrounding its actual meaning. Many participants associated dyslexia with laziness, environmental causes, lack of studying, or even visual impairment. These are all factors that are not relevant when it comes to dyslexia, so this finding suggests that there is still a lack of substantive understanding of what dyslexia truly entails within the younger generation. The participants’ testimonies demonstrate that their misunderstandings were often rooted in a system that failed to inform them. Their reflection also highlights a delayed awareness that emerged only in adulthood, emphasizing how invisible dyslexia remains during formative schooling years.

These findings confirm the conclusions of McBride et al. (2018), who note that despite the growing global awareness of dyslexia, the disability remains poorly understood in China due to the absence of standardized diagnostic criteria and a lack of formal teacher training.

The lack of recognition means that dyslexic students often struggle in silence and don’t know what is wrong with them. They start to doubt themselves and can’t understand why they can’t keep up with the rest of their classmates. Without a name or diagnosis for their struggles, they are less likely to receive accommodation or empathy. As one interviewee (Interviewee #10) insightfully noted, *“I realized that the educational model wasn’t about cultivating young generations; it was more about producing a product. And the ‘product’ was students with good grades.”* This quote perfectly illustrates how systemic priorities can overshadow the need to understand individual learning needs. In this system where results are more important than personal learning growth, dyslexic students remain unidentified, excluded, and misunderstood.

The interview conducted with a representative of the Weining Dyslexia Education Centre in Shenzhen, which is one of the only NGOs in China that focuses specifically on dyslexia, provided both a hopeful and sobering perspective. While the center has made considerable progress in raising awareness locally in Shenzhen through educational videos, workshops, posters in the subways, and outreach to both parents and teachers, they also emphasized that such awareness is not evenly distributed across China. Although the NGO created resource rooms for teachers and provided educational lectures, this is not reflective of

the national situation. The representative highlighted the fact that parents from all over the country, even Xinjiang and Tibet, came to their organization for help, which underscores the nationwide demand but also the scarcity of this kind of support. The presence of this NGO, however, demonstrates that it is possible to build awareness and foster informed support, but it also highlights the limited scale and need for broader policy and public health involvement.

5.3 Stigma, Shame, and Cultural Barriers

A recurring theme in both the data sets is the stigma surrounding academic underperformance and learning disabilities. Dyslexia is frequently misunderstood, not only as a personal shortcoming but also as something that brings collective shame upon the family. This is supported by the work of Mo & Chan et al. (2022), who discuss how the concept of “collective shame” within Chinese culture, which is rooted in Confucian values, frames a child’s academic difficulties and disabilities as a failure of the entire family. This fear of collective shame is also the reason why some parents are reluctant to acknowledge the chance that their child may have a disability or take them to a specialist to get a diagnosis. Several interviews confirmed this by sharing that parents don’t take their children for a formal diagnosis due to the fear of social stigma. As a result, many dyslexic students go without medical evaluation or educational accommodations, which further increases their problems. The emotional toll of this stigma was especially clear among the younger generation, who are more exposed to global discourse of mental health and inclusivity yet still constrained by cultural expectations at home.

Interviewees recounted that struggling students were often labeled as lazy or “not working hard enough,” a belief supported by the cultural notion that diligence, not innate ability, is the key to success (McBride et al. 2018). As one participant (Interviewee #8) observed, *“I also think it’s a cultural issue. People don’t recognize ‘losers’ in China.”* Similarly, survey respondents noted that struggling students were either ignored, blamed, or even bullied. This suggests that the school environment may compound the emotional toll faced by undiagnosed dyslexic students. It also further highlights the fact that Chinese society in general is not tolerant towards people who are outside the norm, which greatly affects people with dyslexia.

While previous studies have shown that undiagnosed dyslexia can lead to significant psychological harm, including anxiety, low self-esteem, and social exclusion (Livingston et

al., 2018; Huang et al., 2020), the findings of this research also suggest that even if a student gets diagnosed, their situation most likely will not change significantly, because low awareness among the younger participants in this research, along with the ongoing societal pressures and misunderstandings, continues to be a barrier to meaningful change.

5.4 Emerging Awareness and Potential for Change

Despite the often-negative findings, there are reasons for optimism. Both interviewees and survey participants expressed a strong desire for improved dyslexia awareness and institutional recognition. Notably, 12 out of the 16 survey respondents agreed that dyslexia awareness should be increased in China (see Figure 11), and all the interviewees emphasized the need for more support and understanding.

Many participants observed a generational contrast in attitudes toward learning disabilities. The respondents, who were all young adults, were generally more open to recognizing dyslexia and showed a greater willingness to advocate for inclusivity. Several interviewees reflected on how their parents or teachers, often from older generations, dismissed learning difficulties as laziness or a lack of discipline, which revealed a persistent gap in understanding. This generational shift aligns with broader trends described by Chan and Mo (2021), who note that younger Chinese citizens are increasingly willing to challenge traditional narratives about disabilities.

This shift, however, is far from complete. While the younger generation may be more receptive, many participants also acknowledged that misconceptions and stigma persist among their own peers. Some described classmates with learning difficulties being ignored or even bullied, and a few mentioned to have previously misunderstood dyslexia themselves. This underscores that the younger generation, although more open to change, is still influenced by societal stigma and misinformation and has a long journey ahead in fully accepting neurodiversity.

Encouragingly, participants offered concrete suggestions for driving progress. These included nationwide media campaigns, better teacher training, and curriculum reforms that normalize and explain learning differences. Such measures were seen as key to creating a more supportive and informed environment for students with dyslexia.

Importantly, several participants expressed hope that official recognition of dyslexia within national education policies could catalyze systemic change. Recognition would not only legitimize the condition but also pave the way for early diagnosis, teacher preparedness, and exam accommodations. As one interviewee emphasized, “I think not only teachers and students should know, but also officials and regulators.” This points to the need for change beyond only the classroom but also at institutional and policy level. Currently, students with dyslexia, whether diagnosed or not, are not granted any accommodations during high-stakes exams like the Gaokao, unlike in many Western education systems. Participants noted that even if such accommodations were introduced, they might face resistance from other students and parents, who could view them as unfair privileges. This concern reflects broader public debates in China around perceived preferential treatment for certain groups, such as ethnic minorities, in the education system. This creates a vicious cycle: without recognition, there are no accommodations, and without accommodations, dyslexia remains invisible or ignored. In order to break this cycle, sustained top-down policy reform and widespread public education to reshape entrenched cultural attitudes will be required.

6. Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer the question: *What is the level of awareness of dyslexia among Chinese young adults?* Through a combination of surveys and in-depth interviews, the study explored how this demographic understands, recognizes, or misrecognizes dyslexia, and how their perceptions reflect broader structural and cultural forces.

The findings show that dyslexia remains largely unrecognized among the young adults in this study. Most participants reported never hearing the term “dyslexia” during their schooling. Even among those who had encountered the word, often through international education or self-directed learning, there was considerable confusion about its meaning. Many associated dyslexia with misconceptions, reflecting a lack of formal education and public discourse on the topic. While awareness is beginning to grow within this generation, it is still fragmented, inconsistent, and shaped by stigma.

The young Chinese adults in this study echoed broader systematic and cultural factors which were identified in earlier research, such as an exam-driven, meritocratic education system that marginalizes struggling students, insufficient teacher training, and social stigma

rooted in expectations of success. At the same time, their personal reflections added depth and nuance, enriching existing literature with lived experience.

Many stated that the term “dyslexia” had rarely, if ever, been discussed in their social circles and that people around them often held misconceptions or had no knowledge of the condition at all. In addition, several participants reflected that during their own school years, they, like most students, were primarily focused on surviving the pressures of academic performance, not on observing or understanding others’ struggles. This individualistic focus, intensified by the competitive environment, meant that few students paid attention to classmates who might have been dealing with learning disabilities. As a result, the school environment was not only academically high-pressured but also socially isolating, creating little room for collective awareness or empathy. This suggests that the lack of awareness is not just an individual issue but a wide generational and societal gap, also among educated youth.

This educational structure not only fails to recognize dyslexia, it actively conceals it as well. As a result, many participants explained that they rarely encountered students with diagnosed or even suspected learning disabilities in their class. This absence meant that lack of awareness among the younger generation was not limited by lack of education but also by lack of exposure, which reduced the opportunities for students to learn about dyslexia through observation, interaction, or school discourse. The filtering effect thus contributes not just to educational exclusion but to a broader social invisibility of learning disabilities among young adults.

Despite these barriers, this research also reveals signs of a generational shift. All of the young adults interviewed demonstrated a willingness to engage with the concept of learning disabilities, expressing empathy for students with dyslexia and calling for more support and recognition in schools. As previously noted, some responses may have been influenced by a desire to appear socially responsible or informed. However, even this tendency reflects growing awareness of dyslexia as a legitimate issue deserving attention.

In conclusion, this research finds that the level of awareness of dyslexia among young Chinese adults is not only low but often characterized by confusion and limited understanding. While most participants were unfamiliar with the term or held inaccurate beliefs about dyslexia, many still expressed a willingness to support greater awareness. This tension between limited knowledge and a desire for change reflects both the shortcomings of the current education system and the potential for progress within this generation. The

younger generation is more open-minded and shows greater curiosity and empathy toward learning disabilities, but they remain products of a system that has not equipped them or their peers with the language, understanding, or tools to recognize dyslexia. Bridging this gap will require a multi-level effort: schools should include learning differences in the educations of their teachers and curriculum, policies must formalize dyslexia as a recognized condition, and cultural narratives must shift to embrace neurodiversity rather than penalize or exclude it.

Understanding how this generation perceives dyslexia not only sheds light on current failures in educational inclusivity but also points toward future possibilities. As this young generation takes on roles of influence in education, family, and policy, they have the potential to change the narrative around dyslexia in China, provided they are supported by institutional change and empowered with the right knowledge. This study addresses a gap in the existing literature by focusing specifically on the awareness of dyslexia among young adults in China, a group often overlooked in research about dyslexia, which tends to overlook awareness and mainly focuses on children with dyslexia or on formal education policies. By centering the voices of young people, this research offers a fresh perspective on how generational change may influence future discourse and support for dyslexia. It underscores the urgency of recognizing dyslexia not as an individual shortcoming but as a social and educational issue that demands collective attention.

6.1 Future Research and Limitations

While this study offers important insights into the awareness of dyslexia among young Chinese adults, it also presents several limitations that should inform future research. Notably, the relatively small sample affects the generalizability of the findings. The reliance on self-reported perceptions further limits the scope of the conclusions. These constraints mean that the results should be interpreted as exploratory rather than definitive. However, they also highlight meaningful directions for future research. Larger-scale studies with broader and more demographically diverse populations would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of dyslexia awareness across different regions and social contexts in China. Future research could uncover regional disparities, cultural nuances, and structural influences that shape public understanding in more detailed ways. Ultimately, more research is needed to deepen the understanding of how younger generations perceive learning disabilities, and in this case dyslexia. This thesis serves as a useful foundation for further inquiry.

7. Bibliography

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8. Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Questions

Part 1: Demographic information

1. What is your age? (18-22, 23-27, 28-32, etc.)
2. What is your gender? (M, F, Other, prefer not to say)
3. In which city did you attend middle school?
4. What type of middle school? (Public, private, international, other)
5. In which city did you attend high school?
6. What type of high school? (public, private, international, other)

Part 2: School experience

7. How would you describe the academic pressure in your school?
(Scale: 1 to 5, 1 = very low and 5 = very high)
8. Have you ever seen or known students who struggled with reading and writing?
(Yes/No/Not sure)

9. If yes, how did teachers react to those students?

- * They received extra support.
- *They were ignored.
- *They were seen as lazy.
- *They were bullied.
- *They were treated the same as their peers.
- *Other (short answer)

10. If yes, how did students react to those students?

- *They were treated the same as their peers.
- *They got extra help.
- *They were bullied.
- *They were seen as lazy.
- *They were treated the same as their peers.
- *Other (short answer)

Part 3: Awareness of dyslexia

11. Have you ever heard of the term “dyslexia” before?
(Yes/No)

12. If yes, where did you first hear about dyslexia?

- * school
- *social media
- *news
- *friends/family
- *other

13. Which of the following do you think describes dyslexia? (Check all that you think apply.)

- * A visual impairment that makes it hard to see words.
- * A difficulty in reading and writing despite having normal intelligence.
- * A problem caused by lack of studying.
- * A mental disability.
- * A genetic disorder.
- * A disorder caused by a person’s environment.
- * I don’t know.

14. Have you ever seen discussions about dyslexia or learning difficulties on social media?
(Yes/No/Not sure)

15. If yes, where have you seen discussion about dyslexia? (Check all that apply.)

- *WeChat articles
- *Weibo
- *Douyin

- *News websites
- *Online forums
- *I have never seen discussions about dyslexia.

16. Do you think that the younger generations in China are more aware of learning difficulties like dyslexia compared to older generations?
(Yes/No/Not sure)

17. How much do you think your friends know about dyslexia?

- * A lot of them know
- * Some of them know
- * Most of them don't know
- * I'm not sure

18. Was dyslexia ever mentioned in your school, by for example teachers?
(Yes/No/Not sure)

19. Do you know if any of your peers suffered from dyslexia?
(Yes/No/Not sure)

20. Do you think Chinese schools provide enough support for students with dyslexia?
(Yes/No/Not sure)

Part 4: Attitudes and perceptions

21. Do you think people with dyslexia face discrimination or stigma in China?
(Yes/No/No sure)

22. If someone in your class had dyslexia, do you think they would have been supported and understood by peers?
(Yes/No/Not sure)

23. Do you think dyslexia awareness should be improved in China?
(Yes/No)

24. If yes, what could be improved? Open question

25. Do you think that the younger generations are more open-minded and understanding about learning disabilities than older generations?
(Yes/No/Not sure)

26. If you have any comments about learning difficulties in China, please share them here.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

The interview questions were organized into four main sections:

- Part 1: Background Information

This section established the basic demographic and educational context of the interviewee. It included the participants' age, the cities where they attended school, and whether they were educated in public or private institutions. Participants were also asked to describe the overall academic environment in their schools, which helped to contextualize later questions.

- Part 2: Awareness of Learning Differences

This section of the interview began with open-ended questions about whether participants had ever noticed classmates who struggled with learning in general, without already specifying the type of learning difficulty. This broad approach allowed participants to reflect on a variety of challenges they had observed, such as attention issues, memory struggles, or trouble with educational performance. From there, the questions gradually narrowed down to focus on reading and writing difficulties in particular. This structure helped avoid priming participants or introducing bias too early in the conversation, making room for more natural and authentic responses.

- Part 3: Awareness of Dyslexia

Once general learning difficulties were explored, the term “dyslexia” was introduced to assess participants' familiarity with the concept. They were asked whether they had heard of the term before, where they encountered it, and what they understood it to mean. Additional questions explored whether dyslexia is recognized within Chinese schools by teachers and students and whether students showing such signs were identified or supported. This part also explored awareness of educators and institutional policies or tools for supporting students with dyslexia, particularly in relation to the Gaokao.

- Part 4: Final Reflections

The final section encouraged participants to reflect on the broader issues of dyslexia awareness, not only from a personal standpoint but also in terms of their social circles and generational context. They were asked whether they believed people from their generation, including their friends, classmates, or peers, were generally aware of dyslexia. This helped gauge the perceived prevalence of awareness within the younger generation of China. They were also asked to share their views on whether schools should do more to support students with such difficulties and what could be done to improve awareness and support systems moving forward in a more general sense.

Part 1: Background Information

1. Name and age

2. Can you tell me a little about your educational background?
 - Which cities/provinces did you attend school in?
 - Was it a public or private school?
3. How would you describe the academic environment in your school? (high school and middle school)
 - What was your experience in middle and high school?
4. What kind of learning difficulties did students in your school typically face, if any?

Part 2: Awareness of Learning Differences

5. Have you ever heard of students struggling with reading and writing in your school, or did you know somebody who struggled with that? If so, how was it perceived by teachers and classmates?
 - Was it known they had difficulties in the class?
 - Were they treated differently?
6. Were there any students in your school who seemed to struggle with reading or writing despite being intelligent in other areas?
7. Do you think students who had difficulty with reading or writing received support in school? If so, what kind? If not, why do you think that was?
8. Are there ways in which the school tests the reading and writing ability of their students apart from the normal exams?

Part 3: Awareness of dyslexia

9. Have you ever heard of the term “dyslexia”? If so, where did you hear about it?
 - How would you translate dyslexia in Mandarin Chinese?
10. Can you describe what you understand about dyslexia?
11. Do you think dyslexia is widely recognized in Chinese schools? Why or why not?
12. Do you know if there were students with dyslexia in your school?
13. If a student had dyslexia in your school, how do you think teachers and classmates would have reacted?
 - (helps assess stigma, misconceptions, or support systems.)

13. Do you know if there are any tools to help students with dyslexia during the Gaokao (college entrance exam)?

Part 4: Final thoughts

14. Do you think that a lot of people from your generation know about dyslexia?

15. Do you think schools in China should do more to support students with learning difficulties like dyslexia? Why or why not?

16. Do you think there should be more awareness for dyslexia?

- If so, what do you think could be done to improve awareness and support for students who struggle with reading and writing?