



## Recounting the K-12 school experiences of adults who stutter: A qualitative analysis

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### ABSTRACT

This study qualitatively explored the primary and secondary (K-12) school experiences of adults who stutter. The primary investigator conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 participants, a first focus group interview with 6 participants, and a second focus group interview with 4 participants. Participants discussed the various ways in which stuttering affected their personality; emotional and psychological experiences in the context of school; academic and learning experiences; classroom participation; teacher and peer relationships; speech therapy experiences; school activity involvement; and post-educational experiences. Results suggest that school is a complex cultural environment in which students must engage on academic and social levels. People who stutter may experience observable and unobservable challenges as they navigate the complexity of school.

**Educational objectives:** After reading this article, the reader will be able to: (1) provide a rationale for the need to explore the school experiences of people who stutter; (2) describe the major themes associated with the school experiences of participants in the study; and (3) discuss how knowledge of school experiences can be useful to classroom teachers and speech-language pathologists.

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### 1. Introduction

School is a complex environment where students must interact with many different individuals and communicate successfully in many different ways (Keefe, Moore, & Duff, 2006). It has been suggested that individuals who stutter can encounter many negative experiences at school, specifically during the primary and secondary grades (Blood, Blood, Tellis, & Gabel, 2001; Guitar, 2006; Ribbler, 2006). Several authors have suggested ways in which teachers can interact with people who stutter (PWS) in the classroom (LaBlance, Steckol, & Smith, 1994; Pindzola, 1985; Swan, 1993) to make the educational environment much easier for children who stutter. Because childhood and adolescence are critical periods for the development of self-concept and identity (Tatum, 1999), the ability of children who stutter to navigate these periods and develop a positive identity is critical (Daniels & Gabel, 2004; O'Brian, Jones, Packman, Menzies, & Onslow, 2011). School experiences are an important part of children's development; therefore, there appears to be a critical need to understand

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the school experiences of people who stutter. To date, however, limited research has focused on the impact of stuttering on the primary and secondary (i.e., K-12) school experiences of PWS (Ribbler, 2006).

Though few studies have been done in this area, support can be drawn from recent qualitative studies. For example, a number of research studies have focused on the personal accounts of PWS regarding their life experiences (Corcoran & Stewart, 1998; Crichton-Smith, 2002; Hugh-Jones & Smith, 1999; Klompas & Ross, 2004). Most of these accounts have focused on general social experiences (Corcoran & Stewart, 1998; Crichton-Smith, 2002; Klompas & Ross, 2004) and clinical experiences (Hayhow, Cray, & Enderby, 2002; Plexico, Manning, & DiLollo, 2005; Stewart & Richardson, 2004). Though none of these studies focused specifically on school experiences, the importance of school emerged as a theme. For example, Crichton-Smith (2002) identified difficulties with social situations, including experiences with peers in school, as a theme within the study of the life experiences of PWS. Similarly, Klompas and Ross (2004) found that PWS reported that stuttering had an adverse effect on educational experiences, along with many other aspects of their lives. These findings support the need for future research studies that specifically seek to understand the school experiences of PWS.

Other studies have explored the perceptions that educators report of students who stutter. These studies have found that educators at all levels (including speech-language pathologists) consistently report negative attitudes towards PWS (Cooper & Cooper, 1996; Crowe & Walton, 1981; Dorsey & Guenther, 2000; Lass et al., 1992, 1994; Ragsdale & Ashby, 1982; Yeakle & Cooper, 1986). Thus, teachers, administrators, speech-language pathologists (SLPs), and other important helping professionals who work with children who stutter in the schools may openly or inadvertently behave negatively towards them. These research studies do not provide any direct support to confirm that negative attitudes lead to any obstacles for children who stutter, though such attitudes could potentially make school more difficult for children who stutter.

Similarly, several studies have found that peers who do not stutter report negative attitudes towards children who stutter. In one study, Davis, Howell, and Cooke (2002) explored the relationships of children who stutter with their classmates. Participants included 403 children from 16 classrooms in 16 different schools across England. Each of the 16 classes had one child who stuttered. The students were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the child who stuttered in their class. Results revealed that children who stutter were rejected significantly more than their peers, were less likely to be popular or nominated as leaders, and were more likely to be victims of bullying. Other studies have found that teens (Evans, Kawai, Healey, & Rowland, 2007) and younger children (Franck, Jackson, Pimentel, & Greenwood, 2003; Hartford & Leahy, 2007) reported negative perceptions of children who stutter.

Along with negative perceptions by peers, there is also some research that suggests that children who stutter experience a large degree of bullying and teasing. Hugh-Jones and Smith (1999) conducted a retrospective mixed method study that explored the bullying experiences of PWS. First, the authors interviewed eight adults who stutter, and used these qualitative results to develop a survey. The survey covered areas such as perceived severity of stuttering, school friendships, bullying experiences, parent and teacher awareness, and short and long-term effects of being bullied. Participants included 276 members of the British Stammering Association. Results indicated that the participants had difficulties making friendships as a result of stuttering, experienced name calling, threats, physical bullying, had belongings stolen, and were victims of rumors. Participants also reported that bullying had both short-term and long-term consequences in the areas of personal effects (e.g., anxiety, self-esteem, and depression), school work, and speech difficulties. Other studies (Blood & Blood, 2004; Blood, Boyle, Blood, & Nalesnik, 2010; Langevin, Bortnick, Hammer, & Wiebe, 1998) reported similar findings. Specifically, children who stutter were found to be significantly more likely to be bullied and teased, as much as one time per week.

As a result of these experiences, it is important to understand the ways in which people who stutter experience the school setting. A useful and widely used approach for investigating a topic such as this is qualitative research (Corcoran & Stewart, 1998; Crichton-Smith, 2002; Klompas & Ross, 2004; Plexico, Manning, & Levitt, 2009a, 2009b).

### 1.1. Qualitative research

Qualitative research is based on the constructivist paradigm. This paradigm suggests that multiple realities exist in the world and that these realities are context-bound (Creswell, 1998; Maxwell, 2005). Researchers using this paradigm acknowledge that the researcher is the instrument of research, and thus plays a key role in how data are collected and analyzed. There are several traditions of inquiry within the qualitative paradigm (see Creswell, 1998 for an extended review). Because the present study seeks to describe the experiences of PWS in school, the phenomenological tradition was best suited for the topic of study. This tradition “focuses on the analysis of conscious and immediate lived experience and is sensitive to the uniqueness of persons” (Cornett-DeVito & Worley, 2005, p. 318).

Within the phenomenological tradition, semi-structured and focus group interviews are tools used to capture the meaning that participants attach to their experiences. Both interview formats are useful in their own ways for obtaining participant experiences. Semi-structured interviews are useful because the investigator can spend an extended amount of time with one participant. Focus groups, on the other hand, are employed in order to observe the interactions among participants, capture subtleties of interaction that would not occur in a more controlled, one-on-one interview setting, and support or explore findings from individual interviews (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001; Glesne, 2006; Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1998). One major advantage of focus groups is that this method of interviewing offsets limitations in face-to-face interviewing of a single individual, because participants may be more likely to reveal information in a group setting where others in the group are revealing the same information (Glesne, 2006). A second major advantage is that individuals who are uncomfortable or shy in a one-on-one interview may feel more relaxed in a group setting among other participants who

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