

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Developmental language disorder (DLD) in school—the experiences of different stakeholders

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## Abstract

Students with developmental language disorder (DLD) are at risk of facing educational challenges in compulsory schools. The aim of this study was to identify factors that stakeholders perceived to have a potential to facilitate or impede learning in students with DLD and thereby contribute to the development of appropriate support for this group of students in the school context. Through individual semi-structured interviews, data was collected from 15 participants in five stakeholder groups: students with DLD (n = 3), parents (n = 3), teachers (n = 3), support staff (n = 3) and Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs; n = 3). By using reflexive thematic analysis, three themes were developed from the interview material: (1) Individual support facilitates learning; (2) the demands of oral and written language differ; and (3) social relations supply and consume energy. The results provide insight into how DLD may lead to challenges in both learning situations and social relations, and about how support may reduce the consequences of DLD.

**Keywords:** developmental language disorder; experiences of school situation; school-aged children; different stakeholders; qualitative interviews

## Background

Developmental language disorder (DLD) is a neurodevelopmental condition associated with significant difficulties with learning, understanding, and using language (McGregor, 2020, p. 981). The term DLD is inclusive of earlier terminology, such as specific language impairment (SLI), as well as related terms, such as language difficulties and language disorder, and the term is used accordingly in this article. The prevalence of DLD is about 7% in children at school entry (Norbury *et al.*, 2016).

There is a low level of knowledge and awareness about DLD in European societies (Thordardottir and Topbaş, 2021), and in terms of research, DLD has received less attention globally than other neurodevelopmental disorders (Bishop 2010; McGregor, 2020). Further research on students with DLD and their school situation could contribute to elaborate knowledge about this disorder in schools as well as in society, and increase the understanding for this group of students and their educational needs.

The present study was conducted in a Swedish setting where the majority of students with DLD are taught in mainstream schools. According to the Swedish school legislature, all Swedish students should be provided the support that allows them to meet curricular requirements (Swedish Code of Statutes, 2010:800, Ch. 3, §10). While additional adaptations are given within the framework of regular teaching, provision of special assistance (e.g., individual support) in compulsory school needs to be preceded by evaluation of students' abilities and the formulation of an action plan that is approved by the principal (Swedish Code of Statutes, 2010:800, Ch. 3, §7–9). Services of Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) in Swedish compulsory education are not mandated by the school law, and although the number of Swedish SLPs employed in schools is growing, the majority of Swedish students with DLD do not receive support from an SLP in their educational settings.

The academic outcomes of Swedish students with DLD in compulsory education have not been investigated yet. However, survey answers collected from 681 principals of Swedish secondary schools in 2016 clearly indicate that students with DLD perform considerably below the national average at the end of compulsory education (Government Offices of Sweden, 2016). This is in line with the conclusion of a recent review of international research done by Ziegenfusz *et al.* (2022), where students with DLD in primary and secondary education were seen to have difficulties with academic achievements, compared to typically developing peers across 44 studies published between 2008 and 2020. The prominent risk of academic failure for students with DLD motivates the provision of effective support to facilitate their achievements in the educational setting. In international research, the importance of including a variety of stakeholders in studies that explore the situation of students with DLD has been emphasised. For research on DLD to have a real-world impact, Kulkarni *et al.* (2022) underscore the importance of listening to the voices of key stakeholders, namely individuals with DLD, their families, caregivers and the professionals who support them. Concerning educational support for students with DLD, the inclusion of a variety of stakeholders is also motivated by findings that indicate that different stakeholder groups may present with differing views. In an Irish setting, students with DLD, SLPs, teachers and parents were found to define the ideal educational support for students with DLD in both common and differing ways (Gallagher *et al.*, 2019). All stakeholders described that the ideal support should be individually tailored. However, while the students described the ideal support as adjustments that would enable them to participate in different situations at school, the adults described the ideal support as interventions that would improve the language ability of the student. The possibility that key stakeholders involved in the educational setting may present with diverse views underscores the significance of involving individuals with different roles when devising support strategies for students with DLD.

The views of different stakeholder groups on various aspects of the educational setting of students with DLD have been explored in previous research. Studies that explore the perspectives of students with DLD themselves indicate that while they experience educational support as helpful, they also find aspects beyond educational support to be of importance for their emotional well-being and their verbal functioning in the educational setting. In interviews with young persons with a history of DLD during the first year of post-16 education in the United Kingdom, it was found that most of these persons experienced that the support given to them had facilitated their educational progress (Palikara *et al.* 2009). British students aged 9–12 years who had DLD and were eligible for specialist education support conveyed worries about potential challenges in forming relationships and concerns regarding academic performance (Lyons and Roulstone, 2018). The emotional well-being of the same students was observed to be safeguarded by nurturing positive relationships and experiencing feelings of hope and empowerment (Lyons and Roulstone, 2018). In the Swedish context, social and contextual factors have been found to be central to the experiences of students with DLD (aged 13–19 years), attending mainstream schools, concerning language and communication in the school setting (Ekström *et al.*, 2023).

Other studies have investigated the views of parents of children with DLD on the support offered to their children at school. In a mixed method study conducted in the United Kingdom, parents of 8-year-old children with DLD, placed in mainstream schools, expressed that they had to fight hard for appropriate support for their children and were concerned about the provision of speech and language therapy (Lindsay and Dockrell, 2004). In a later study, Lindsay *et al.* (2016) examined the perspectives of parents of children with DLD or autism spectrum disorder, aged 6, 8, 10 and 12 years, and attending primary or secondary mainstream schools in the United Kingdom. Both groups of parents were generally positive about the educational provisions for their children, and most of the parents in the study were also positive about their involvement in decision-making about provision of support (Lindsay *et al.*, 2016).

Studies that explored the views of teachers found that this stakeholder group acknowledged the challenges that might follow with a DLD diagnosis; however, they could find it difficult to render sufficient support to these students in classrooms. Greek primary school teachers reported that the main challenges for primary school students with DLD in the classroom were learning difficulties, emotional difficulties and behavioural problems (Ralli *et al.* 2022). Teachers in both Greece and the United Kingdom expressed difficulties to identify and support children with DLD in the classroom and reported that they had a lack of training to do this (Dockrell and Lindsay, 2001; Ralli *et al.*, 2022). In a study conducted by Ralli *et al.* (2022), the Greek teachers expressed a need to work together with other professionals to support students with DLD in school.

In summary, previous research provided insights about how students with DLD are at risk of educational and social challenges in their school situation and how the experiences of the students themselves and the stakeholders around them are important in discussions about support. While many of the previous studies explored the views of a particular stakeholder group, the present study attempted to further the knowledge about experiences of students with DLD, parents, teachers, support staff

and SLPs by analysing their views on challenges and facilitators in the last 4 years of Swedish compulsory school.

The aim of this study was to identify factors that stakeholders perceived to have a potential to facilitate or impede learning in students with DLD and thereby contribute to the development of appropriate support for this group of students in the school context. The study set out to answer the following research question: How do different stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, support staff and SLPs) describe their experiences of facilitating factors and challenges in the school situation of students with DLD in Swedish compulsory school?

## Methods

### Participants

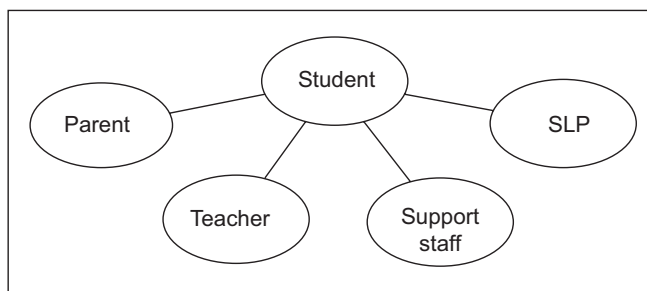
Inclusionary criteria for the students were that they had attended grade 6–9 in a Swedish municipal school with a school SLP on staff, they were diagnosed with DLD, and they had been educated in the Swedish school system since their school entry. Another inclusionary criterion was that the students received support (direct or indirect) from the school's SLP. Exclusionary criteria were as follows: if student and/or parent needed interpreter to participate in the interview. To focus specifically on DLD, students who were diagnosed with additional neurodevelopmental disorders, such as autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), were excluded from the study. However, students also diagnosed with dyslexia were not excluded from the study, as DLD and dyslexia are two language-based disorders and the potential overlap between them is supported by the findings in a recent review of international research (Ziegenfusz *et al.*, 2022).

Three female students with DLD from two different schools in the same Swedish municipality were recruited to the study. At the time of recruitment, these students were in grade 6, 7 and 9 in Swedish compulsory school. For each student, one parent ( $n = 3$ ), one teacher ( $n = 3$ ), one special education teacher or teacher assistant ( $n = 3$ ), and one SLP ( $n = 3$ ) were also recruited. Two special education teachers and one teacher assistant are referred to as support staff in the current study. In all, 15 participants (14 females and one male) constituted three clusters around each of the students (Figure 1). All stakeholders were familiar with the school situation of the student in their cluster.

### Procedure

Data was collected by the first author through individual semi-structured interviews with each participant. Each participant was interviewed regarding the student with DLD in their specific cluster, and not about the situation of students with DLD in general.

Prior to the interviews, the authors identified seven areas of interest based on previous research (e.g. Lyons and Roulstone, 2018) and SLP clinical experience: background, schooling, functional strategies, experienced difficulties, support in school, social relations and relations between home and school. An interview guide (see Appendix) was created, where the seven areas of interest were presented in written text accompanied by supporting pictures. Prior to the collection of data, a pilot interview was conducted with one student with DLD to test that the questions and



**Figure 1.** Cluster of stakeholders centred around the student with DLD.

the interview guide were relevant to elicit the information needed to answer the questions of the study.

All 15 interviews were conducted during May–September 2022. The interview guide was used for all interviews and the participants spontaneously used it when choosing what to talk about. The first author used open questions to pursue and further explore the experiences of the participants, and the interview took the form of an informal conversation. On rare occasions, the first author used the prepared questions to introduce the areas of interest in the interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. The length of the interviews varied between 27 and 61 minutes (mean length: 44 minutes).

### **Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and extra-linguistic contributions (e.g. laughter, sighs etc.) were noted. The interview data was analysed following the six steps of reflexive thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022). The first author familiarised with the material by listening to and transcribing all the interviews (Step 1). The first author then read the transcripts, identified quotes relating to the research question, and coded these quotes (Step 2). The codes were organised into clusters for the development of initial themes (Step 3). These initial themes were reviewed considering the conformity with initially selected quotes from the interview data (Step 4). The representation of different participant clusters and stakeholder groups were also controlled. The final themes were defined and named during the writing process (Steps 5 and 6).

### **The reflexive research process**

Results of a qualitative analysis are shaped by the researchers involved and the experience and knowledge those researchers bring to the study (Braun and Clarke 2022); which makes it important to state the positions of the authors. All authors of this study were SLPs and had clinical experience of working with school-aged children with DLD. The first author had also been working as an SLP in Swedish compulsory school. The second and third authors were involved in several research projects about children with language disorders. During the research process, the authors brought these experiences into discussions about study design and theme development.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (appl. 2020-02505). The participants of the study were provided written and oral information about the study. They were also offered opportunities to ask questions about the study and their participation. Participants were informed that they could retreat from the study without any explanation. No specific instructions, other than information about the study, were provided to participants. All participants were informed about the risks that they possibly would be able to identify their answers in the written reports and that they also might be able to understand what the stakeholders connected to themselves had answered. Participants were not provided information about other participants' experiences during the interviews.

### **Results**

Three themes were developed from the interview material: (1) Individual support facilitates learning; (2) the demands of oral and written language differ; and (3) social relations supply and consume energy. The presentation of the themes included quotes from the interview material, which were found by the authors to be representative and illustrative of the participants' perspectives. The interviews were undertaken in Swedish and quotes from the interviews were translated into English for this study. Participant quotes reflected what participants actually said and were not adapted to follow the conventions of written language. Names in the quotes were substituted with information in parentheses about the role of the person mentioned, for example (SLP), (student) or (teacher).

#### ***Individual support facilitates learning***

The first theme concerns the importance of individual support from teachers and other professionals at the school. This support was often described as being offered in other settings than the mainstream classroom. Both the schools involved in the study offered support and teaching in small groups to students with DLD, even if the organisation of these small groups varied within and between the schools.

In the perspective of the students, the classroom could be a difficult place for learning because of disturbing noises. The students with DLD described that they had trouble to focus and attend to their tasks in the main classroom. The small group setting was described as a calmer learning environment, where it was easier to attend to the tasks assigned by the teacher. One of the students described it like this:

First, we listen to a lecture. Then the class gets rather loud and then I notice that I lose my focus if I can't go to the small group. When I'm in my small group I usually focus better, and I start working with the tasks that need to be handed in. And it becomes easier.

The students in this study talked about the importance of getting help from someone who had time to stay with them for as long as they needed. There were examples where students wanted to sit alone with a teacher in the most challenging school

subjects instead of joining small groups. One of the students received individual help from the SLP employed at the school and described it as follows:

She always asks: Do you need help? And it is a rather big difference. It... A teacher moves around. Do you need help? Then the teacher moves on to others and help them more than... The others need. And (SLP) has been the person who has checked with you when you need help. Then, when you have asked for help, she has stayed there and helped you for as long as you need.

Parents in the study talked about the small groups as a better learning environment for their children than main classrooms. The perspective of the parents was that their children felt more comfortable in small groups and that this setting also helped their children to achieve better school results. The parents discussed how a smaller number of students in the group led to a calmer learning environment. The primary focus of the parents was that the teachers in smaller groups had more time to provide individual help to each student, something they meant was difficult to achieve for the teacher in the main classroom. One of the parents described the advantages of smaller group as follows:

Because it is not a lot of noise. Not a lot of children. And then, the teacher has more time and more... To help everyone. For example, if there are twenty or twenty-five children in a room, then it is difficult for her (the teacher) to help them all.

Teachers in the study expressed that they found it difficult to give the students the support and time they required in mainstream classrooms. There were examples where the teachers described how they did their best to offer support and adjustments in the classroom, but how they still could not succeed in providing the required support to the students with DLD. One of the teachers said:

Of course, you try... Spend some more... So that really... Making sure: Has (student) found the right page, the right task? Does she have her headphones? Is the sound turned on? All of that, kind of practical stuff. But you can't sit beside her the whole lesson. After all, there are nineteen other students.

The teachers described the small group as a setting with better possibilities for providing the support needed. The teachers talked about small groups and individual support as a way of providing more help by professionals and providing the students the possibility of working in a slower pace than in mainstream classrooms.

The support staff talked about the small group as a place where the students could claim and receive attention in a different manner than they could in the classroom. The support staff also talked about how the support to students with DLD was to be imparted in all situations in the school environment but not only in small groups and individual settings. One of the support staff talked about how she found this important:

Then I experience with (...) It (...) What's important to (...) Has been important to (student) as well... It is extremely important to get the right



support from teachers. Not only from us in the small context, but also in the bigger contexts. That you make sure (...) This student needs adjustments in the classroom as well to be able to manage this. Maybe needs a (...) A clarified structure, a deeper understanding. [throughout the text, (...) means pause]

SLPs in the study expressed that the students with DLD gained by receiving more individual help from professionals at school, either in small groups or in individual settings. The SLPs also discussed the disadvantages of leaving the classroom. One of the problems described was that students did not want to be perceived as different from their peers and that it could be tough to leave classmates to work in a group without any friends. One of the SLPs exemplified this when talking about a student with DLD:

She wants help, but she also wants to be with her friends and to be like all the others. So, then you want to... Then she wants to go back to the classroom, and we tried like 'How can we give you...?' Because she should be able to get the support in the classroom as well.

The SLPs also found that it could be challenging to provide sufficient support in mainstream classrooms. The SLPs talked about how more professionals at hand in mainstream classrooms could make it possible for the students with DLD to take part in lectures, feel that they belong to mainstream class, and be offered extra support.

### ***The demands of oral and written language differ***

A common experience among the participants was that it was easier for students with DLD to comprehend oral information and express their own knowledge orally, compared to the written modality. To read texts and obtain knowledge from these was often described as time-consuming and straining. Participants also described that the students with DLD, one of whom was also diagnosed with dyslexia, struggled to formulate their own texts and to express their knowledge in writing.

The students in this study described reading as an activity that demanded a lot of energy and time. Oral examinations were described as an easier way of demonstrating what one had learnt, compared to an examination that laid demands on reading and writing skills. The students in the study described individual oral examinations as facilitating. However, oral presentations in front of the class were considered stressful because of the risk of saying something in a wrong manner and being laughed at by other students. One of the students in the study explained why she found oral examinations easier than reading and writing herself:

Orally, then a teacher is there with me and says, 'This is what you are going to do'. And then the teacher usually writes for me. And I get more help when it is oral. And it is kind of that, that makes it easier for me.

The students talked about lectures as a rather good choice for them to obtain knowledge, but also mentioned certain adjustments needed for them to comprehend what is stated. The students described how they tended to lose track if lectures were



too long or if the teacher spoke too quickly. The usage of difficult words could also complicate their comprehension of a lecture.

Parents in the study found that it was challenging for their children to acquire new knowledge solely through reading. Parents described how their children's comprehension was strengthened by looking at presentations and by listening to texts. One of the parents mentioned how she encouraged her daughter, diagnosed with DLD and dyslexia, to listen to texts when she was studying at home:

And I say: "If you think that you (...) It becomes too much for you to read, listen a lot as well." It makes a difference. It does (...) It helped her a lot too.

Parents described oral examinations as an adjustment that helped their children in presenting their knowledge and to pass school examinations. Parents talked about how their children encountered difficulties comprehending questions in the examination when they read these themselves. Another view of the parents was that it was easier for their children to express their answers orally in examinations instead of writing them.

Teachers in this study mentioned that the demands for written expression are high in the last 4 years of compulsory schooling and that this could be challenging for students with DLD. Teachers provided examples of how students were required to master different text genres, express themselves more formally, and use advanced vocabulary. One of the teachers described a student's encounter with such higher demands as follows:

When we got into history of literature. When they were to look at texts from the Romantic period and. And. And the Enlightenment period and things like that, you know. It. It. It. It. Then like. Then it was somehow like. It did not matter how much picture support and adjustments, but. It was. It is. It was too hard.

Teachers mentioned that it was easier for the students with DLD to express themselves orally, but they also explained how writing is a necessary part of students' education. They talked about adjustments, such as providing more time for tasks that include writing and offering a possibility to complement written examinations orally. They expressed that it was important not to avoid all tasks that set demands on student's writing skills, but to offer them a possibility to show the acquired knowledge.

Support staff expressed that comprehending and formulating texts could be difficult for students with DLD. Difficulties with reading comprehension were described as a disadvantage when the students take written examinations, because not understanding written questions could lead to a failed test. The support staff identified that an oral examination as a complement to a written examination was a good way of giving the student a chance to give correct answers if written questions were not understood. One of the support staff described it as follows:

Because of her difficulties she might have misinterpreted the question, and then the answer will be wrong. And that, you could have detected if you had done it orally.

SLPs in the study expressed that oral examinations could make a difference for the students with DLD. They described how formulating answers and writing them down was yet another step, compared to expressing oneself orally by using language to express knowledge. The SLPs described that writing demands energy in a way that could have a negative impact on results in an examination taken by students with DLD. One of the SLPs tried to explain what makes writing more difficult than speaking when taking examinations:

This very thing about expressing yourself in writing (...) That it is something that (...) Yet another step. Just saying it, then it is easier to retrieve it.

### ***Social relations supply and consume energy***

All participants of the study talked about how social relations in school could affect learning and motivation for the students with DLD. Positive relations with peers and school staff were described to facilitate learning in different ways. Participants expressed that the relationship between student and teacher could affect the actual academic performance of the student. It was stated that social conflicts between the students with DLD and their peers potentially required the involvement of both school staff and parents.

Students with DLD in the study provided examples of both positive and negative relationships with their teachers. The students described how a good relationship with a teacher potentially made a great difference in their academic performance. One of the students described how she succeeded to get a passing grade in English when she got a new teacher:

I haven't been that good in English and mathematics. Because I have (...) (struggles with words) Have always had a hard time in mathematics and English. And in eighth grade I passed in English. Because then I got (...) A teacher named (teacher) came. Then I finally passed. When (teacher) came, then it became (...) All of a sudden, English was more fun.

Social relationships with peers were another aspect in the interviews with the students with DLD. There were examples of how they enjoyed spending time with their friends during breaks and how collaborating with a friend could be supportive when working with assignments in the classroom. One of the students talked about how she and her friend supported each other:

Because I have a pal named (friend). Because he and I sit next to each other in the classroom, he and I. And if he doesn't understand then I explain to him and if I don't understand then he explains to me. Then we sit (...) We always sit and help each other. No matter if it (...) Which lesson it is, we always help each other if we don't understand. So (...) If not both understand, we raise our hands and ask. And then we get it explained for both of us.

Parents described how their children could be exposed to unkind behaviour of peers in school, and how the children often addressed them as parents for support. Parents

talked to their children on phone about conflicts with other students during school hours as well as after school at home. One of the parents shared how she supported her child:

And then she has (...) Then she has called me and been sad and I have had to (...) Talk to her. And say: "It's like this. And they (the peers) are the ones who have done wrong. They should know better." Like that. Depending on what has happened. And then talked to her when she has arrived at home.

Similar to the students with DLD, parents described their children's relationships with teachers with positive and negative examples. Factors influencing relationships included teachers' interest to help students in both learning situations and in resolving conflicts with peers.

Teachers in the study described how students' trust in school staff created a difference in their school performance. One of the teachers considered students' trust in school staff as crucial for achieving many of the goals in compulsory school:

Yes. Yes. Oh yes. I think that it was (...) I (...) Actually, I think that's what (...) What made her actually make this. It was that she (...) That she had great confidence in all the adults in the team.

Teachers in the study also talked about how friendly relations of the students with DLD supported their performance in school in different ways. Teachers described that performance of students with DLD was strengthened when they and their friends encouraged each other in studies.

One of the descriptions from support staff in the study was how a close and positive relationship with a student with DLD emerged from working together. A positive relationship with the student was described by the support staff as an important foundation for learning:

Yes, that makes a big difference. Of course. It's like with all learning, that you have to like build a relationship. You have to believe in the student. So, it's very important to have high expectations and all of that. You know that from other research too, that it's incredibly important.

SLPs in the study described how relations between students with DLD and school staff affected the learning of students both positively and negatively. One of the SLPs described the importance of social relations for the performance of a student, and how a particular student could skip lessons or refuse to work because of disagreement with a teacher. Another SLP mentioned how the support provided by school staff unfamiliar to a student did not have the best results:

No, she has a hard time with new persons. If a new adult is introduced for example. So, to just give support where she leaves the classroom to work with a certain person, that might not be the best solution if she doesn't know that person. But (...) But then, of course, after a while she gets to know that person as well. But she is (...) She is very relational that way.

SLPs in this study also observed that language difficulties of students with DLD could lead to communicative misunderstandings with peers. They described how students with DLD were affected by these conflicts, and how school staff sometimes were required to support students.

## Discussion

The five stakeholder groups in the study contributed different perspectives of experienced challenges and facilitators associated to their roles, building a rich description of conditions for three students with DLD in the last 4 years of Swedish compulsory school. Different aspects presented by the participants in this study supported the inclusion of multiple stakeholders in discussions about interventions and support for students with DLD, which was in line with the conclusions of previous studies (Ebbels *et al.*, 2019; Gallagher *et al.*, 2019). The three themes developed from the interviews showed that different stakeholder groups found individual support, social relations, and different demands of text and spoken language to be important aspects of the educational setting for students with DLD. This proposed that these areas should be considered when developing educational support for this group. The findings contributed to increased understanding of potential benefits and barriers for students with DLD from a global perspective.

In the first theme of the study, the participants emphasised the facilitating effect of individual support for three students with DLD. Individual support was often described as students being assisted by support staff or school-based SLPs in the classroom (push-in model) or at a setting outside the classroom (pull-out model). While versions of both these models were reported by participants, the provision of individual support in a smaller group setting was described as more common and conventional than the setting where support staff or school-based SLPs were present in the main classroom. A pattern of pull-out model being more frequently used than interventions in the classroom by SLPs employed in Swedish schools was also identified in a recent study conducted by Sandgren *et al.* (2023). While the study results indicated that Swedish school-based SLPs more often provided intervention to students with DLD outside the main classroom, the Swedish school legislature states that support for students with disabilities should be provided in the group to which the student belongs (Swedish Code of Statutes, 2010:800, Ch. 3, §8). Additionally, positive results on various aspects of students' language function, following SLPs collaborating with teachers in the classroom, were indicated in a review of international research on SLP school-based service delivery (Archibald, 2017). In order to meet decrees of the school legislature, Swedish school-based SLPs could strive to increase the provision of push-in services in the mainstream classroom while possibly gaining better effects of their support to students with DLD.

The second theme was developed from the perspectives the participants presented concerning how different demands of written and oral communication affected the school results of the students with DLD in the present study. Participants perceived that it was less demanding for the three students to acquire and demonstrate knowledge through oral communication than through the written modality. However, teachers in the study mentioned that goal requirements in secondary education include some demands on the students' writing skills, meaning that it is not

possible to present all tasks orally to students with DLD. The results of this study indicated the need for guidelines clarifying when and how adjustments of written assignments could be made for these students in educational settings. Additionally, the results of the present study indicated that the provision of support focusing on written language could be important for students with DLD in Swedish secondary schools. Considering that 10% of the Swedish school-based SLPs in the study conducted by Sandgren *et al.* (2023) never offered intervention in literacy domain to students, this could pose an area of development in the Swedish setting. Results of a study conducted by Fallon and Katz (2011) suggested professional preparation as a key factor for SLPs providing written language services in schools. Fallon and Katz (2011) proposed extending the education to SLP students as well as offering professional development for practising SLPs within this area as ways to improve the delivery of written language services in schools. The results in the present study suggested that Swedish school-based SLPs, working in the later part of compulsory education, should be encouraged and supported to provide interventions targeting written modality to assist students in meeting grade requirements.

In the third theme, the participants described how social relations were perceived to affect the educational settings of three students with DLD. In line with the views of 9–12-year-old students in a study conducted by Lyons and Roulstone (2018), the slightly older students in the present study experienced social relations as something that could have both negative and positive effects on their situation. This view was also presented by adults in the present study who described social relations to have the potential to both facilitate and impede knowledge acquisition of the three students in the study. In a small-scale study, Blaskova and Gibson (2023) explored the perspectives of friends to students with DLD (aged 6–8 years) in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. The authors found that peers did not report communication difficulties related to their interaction with the students with DLD taught in mainstream classrooms. More problems were expressed, however, concerning their interaction with students with DLD attending a specialist language and communication class every morning and joining mainstream class in the afternoon. The authors discussed that limited presence in mainstream classroom during day hours could be a disadvantage concerning peer relations for students with DLD. Another possible cause, presented by Blaskova and Gibson (2023), was that the students taught in mainstream classrooms had less severe communication difficulties than the children attending specialist language and communication class, giving these students an advantage in social interaction with peers, regardless of the setting where they were taught (Blaskova and Gibson 2023). In the Swedish school setting, a majority of students with DLD are taught in mainstream education. Considering the results of the study conducted by Blaskova and Gibson (2023), this inclusion could have positive effects on the social interaction of Swedish students with DLD. However, the Swedish setting also implies that students with different severities of DLD are integrated with typically developed peers in main classrooms. Possibly, Swedish students with severe language difficulties could not have the same beneficial effect of inclusion as the students with milder DLD. Also, students in the study conducted by Blaskova and Gibson (2023) were younger than students of the present study, and while students in the study done by Blaskova and Gibson (2023) described social interaction in play situations, social interactions of secondary school

students are mostly characterised by verbal interaction, which could present other demands on the oral communication skills of students with DLD.

Throughout the three themes constructed from the interview material, stakeholder groups in the study described how language difficulties of the students with DLD could be a challenge in both learning situations and social relationships. The participants also exemplified how the consequences of DLD could vary depending on the demands placed on students' language ability and different social contexts of school environment. As in the study conducted by Ekström *et al.* (2023), the language and communication functioning of the students with DLD was described as dynamic and situational. An implication of the experiences expressed by the participants of the present study was that the educational risks associated with DLD were not necessarily static or impossible to diminish. On the contrary, the participants of the study illustrated many possible ways of reducing the negative effects of DLD in school situations.

The results of the present study, exploring stakeholders' views of facilitators and obstacles in educational settings of students with DLD, indicate that further studies on the social relations of students with DLD must be motivated to optimise these students' possibilities for social interaction as well as their conditions for learning during compulsory education. The initial study done by Blaskova and Gibson (2023) could be followed up by studies investigating social relations in other age groups. Studies could also explore peer relationships of students with DLD. This could be done by interviewing both students with DLD and their respective friends in school settings to explore friendships from both perspectives. Studies that investigated peer relationships of students with DLD with an approach that centres these children are limited in extent (Blaskova and Gibson 2021); thus, this motivates continued research within this field.

### Limitations

The present study was centred around a few students with DLD from Swedish secondary school. While the results presented were derived from the situations of these particular students in their specific educational settings, the identification of these aspects across the stakeholder groups implied that the results were potentially relevant to the school situation of other students with DLD. Although the perspectives shared by the participants about facilitators and impediments for learning were individual experiences, the same could be significant for other students with DLD in Sweden as well as globally.

It is reasonable to assume that the aspects identified in this study also affect the learning situation of students without a DLD diagnosis. However, the interview material was collected with an outspoken focus on DLD experiences in school situations, and participants of the study shared their experiences on this particular topic in their interviews.

The exclusion criterion that persons in need of interpreter could not participate in the study mainly applied to parents who were in the process of assimilating to the Swedish language, as Swedish was the language of instruction in the school setting. The perspectives of these parents might have differed from the parents included in the study, and this could have affected the results. The exclusion criterion in this



study was created due to lack of resources for interpreter services; however, future studies should strive to include the perspectives of key stakeholders with differing language backgrounds.

The over-representation of female stakeholders in the study could in part be explained as a reflection of the over-representation of females in professional groups working in Swedish schools. However, the inclusion of more than one parent in participant clusters could have created greater diversity in the participant group.

Participants in the study were informed about the interviewer's position of being a clinical SLP currently involved in research on DLD in a school setting. This information might have affected the experiences shared and the manner these were described by the participants in interviews. However, the conditions were the same for all participants, as the same interviewer conducted all 15 interviews of the study.

Results of the study were developed from a limited number of stakeholders ( $n = 15$ ) expressing their experiences about a limited number of students with DLD ( $n = 3$ ). Malterud *et al.* (2016) suggested that qualitative interview studies could benefit by focusing on the contribution of new knowledge derived from the analysis instead of numerical input of participants. The experiences reported by the participants contributed new knowledge in accordance with the study's aim and research question, indicating that the sample size was sufficient for the study. However, it cannot be ruled out that a larger group of participants would have altered the results of the study.

## Conclusion

Developmental language disorder affects the academic achievements of students throughout compulsory education (Ziegenfusz *et al.*, 2022). In the present study, key stakeholders were found to perceive the provision of individual support, social relations of the student, and differences between oral and written communication as important factors that facilitate or impede learning in the case of three Swedish students with DLD in secondary education. The results suggested that these three areas should be taken into consideration when developing educational support for students with DLD. The inclusion of perspectives of different key stakeholders in the study added to a nuanced picture of the situation of students with DLD, supporting earlier recommendations for including key stakeholders in discussions about support in educational settings (Ebbels *et al.*, 2019; Gallagher *et al.*, 2019). A positive indication from the study is that negative consequences of DLD in the last 4 years of compulsory schooling are viewed as possible to diminish through the provisions of support and interventions in school situations.

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Appendix

