

# Unique paths: The experiences of students with dyslexia and dysgraphia in high school evaluations and the history graduation exam

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## Abstract

This study explores the history teaching and assessment experiences of high school graduates in Hungary, with a particular focus on students diagnosed with dyslexia and dysgraphia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten university students to investigate the tasks they encountered in history classes, the nature of their final exams, and their overall experiences with assessment. The results show that history lessons often lacked developmental tasks, and students generally favored oral assessments over written ones. However, source analysis posed significant challenges during oral exams, particularly for students unprepared for such tasks. The findings underscore the importance of tailoring history instruction and assessment to specific needs of students with dyslexia and dysgraphia. In addition, effective differentiation is most beneficial when it is aligned with student preferences as revealed in the interviews. Differentiated assignments and appropriate support strategies can significantly increase their engagement and performance in both classroom activities and graduation exams.

**Keywords:** dyslexia; dysgraphia; history education; high school graduation exam

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## Introduction – a contemplation on the education of history

One of the primary objectives of history education is to teach students critical thinking skills, the ability to identify connections, and an understanding of global events (Gyertyánfy 2014). According to András Gyertyánfy, history education in Hungary currently faces two significant challenges. First, completing the curriculum in secondary schools is often an unattainable goal. Frequently, insufficient attention is given to 20th-century history, with teachers failing to “reach the end of the material” (Gyertyánfy 2014). This omission is particularly problematic, as understanding contemporary global conflicts requires a foundational knowledge of 20<sup>th</sup>-century events. Second, teachers tend to employ a narrative-driven approach rather than tailoring their instruction to meet students' needs. These issues collectively contribute to high school students developing a negative perception of history as a

subject, leading to widespread disengagement.

Gyertyánfy attributes this lack of interest and enthusiasm primarily to the overwhelming volume of course content. Today's students exhibit unique needs; for instance, their attention spans are often shorter, and their foundational knowledge varies significantly. Additional barriers, such as changing social and technological influences, further complicate effective instruction (Gyertyánfy 2014).

This raises an important question: if an average high school student struggles to connect with the subject of history, how much more challenging is it for students with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia or dysgraphia? The prevalence of severe learning disabilities in Hungary has increased steadily over the past decade, necessitating greater attention to inclusive teaching strategies. According to data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (2024), the number of students with significant learning disabilities rose from 30,104 in the 2012/2013 academic year to 47,933 by the 2023/2024 academic year.

## **Purpose of the study**

This research aimed to examine the experiences and perspectives of students with learning disabilities in relation to their education and assessment. Specifically, the study focused on how these students engage with diverse types of history assignments and examinations. Through a combination of interviews and observations, this paper seeks to identify the significant difficulties and challenges faced by students with learning disabilities in the context of learning and assessment. Additionally, it aims to explore effective methods of support and intervention that could address their unique needs and foster their optimal academic performance.

## **Research methodology**

### **Sample of the study**

The study's target group comprised students admitted to the University of Pécs who have both dyslexia and dysgraphia. A significant challenge emerged when students who had negative experiences in history classes during public education—or had been humiliated in such settings—immediately declined participation when contacted. Consequently, the interviewees were selected from among students who recalled their history classes with either neutral or positive associations. This sampling bias likely results in findings that skew more positively than the actual experiences of the broader population.

Despite this limitation, the interviews yielded valuable insights, although the research findings cannot be deemed representative. A total of ten interviews were conducted, and for the purpose of reporting results, the participants are anonymized and labeled alphabetically from A to J (see Csikos, 2020). The study was carried out in 2023.

The gender distribution of the sample was balanced: four women participated (labeled A to D), while six men were interviewed (labeled E to J). Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 26 years. All interviewees completed their secondary education under the 2012 National Core Curriculum and graduated within that framework (see National Core Curriculum, 2012).

In terms of educational backgrounds, five participants graduated from general secondary schools (B, F, G, H, I), three attended vocational secondary schools (C, D, J), and two graduated from technical schools (A, E). All participants had been formally diagnosed with learning disabilities during their primary school years. These assessments are typically reviewed every two years by pedagogical services, which evaluate any progress or stagnation. A final assessment is issued during high school, valid until the completion of the student's studies, providing guidance for both the students and their teachers.

During the interviews, each participant was asked about the content of their current assessment. Seven participants (A, B, D, F, G, I, J) were fully exempt from spelling requirements, while the remaining three (C, E, H) were partially exempt. Additionally, all participants were allowed to substitute oral examinations for written tests for major assignments and exams, with extra time also granted as needed.

## **The interview method**

Structured interviews were conducted with the participants, adhering to the guidelines of Csaba Csikos (2020). Questions were precisely formulated in advance and followed a consistent sequence during the interviews. The approach also incorporated the insights of Iván Falus (2004), ensuring that the same open- and closed-ended questions were posed to all participants in the same order (see in Appendix).

Given that the research sought to explore the perspectives of individuals with dyslexia and dysgraphia, a group less frequently examined in Hungarian studies, the primary objective was to document and analyze the collected data.

## **The path to the assessment of knowledge of history**

### **Types of tasks in history class**

The ten interview subjects were asked whether there were exercises in their history classes. Six people (A, C, E, G, H, J) clearly indicated that there were no exercises in class, in the case of two people (B, I) it was varied, one of them had a change of teachers and one of the history teachers used exercises during lessons while the other did not. In the other case, assignments were given not in history class, but in the history elective. In the remaining two cases (D, F), exercises were regularly solved in class. Various researches also support the fact that the ways the exercises can be solved are officially formalized, are rarely integrated into the structure of the lesson, and predominantly do not serve developmental goals, but rather a

disciplinary tool, or perhaps a tool for exam preparation (Fischerné Dárdai 2020, 105.). The subjects who had assignments in class were asked if there was a typical exercise that would have caused them problems. The answers were as follows:

(B): *“There was none, except when a longer text had to be processed alone - lack of time”.*

(F; I): *“We got tests that could also be at the graduation exam”.*

## Assessments, challenging task types

Next, the students were asked about the written and oral assessments. In the six cases where there were no assignments solved in class, there were questions about possible difficult tasks. First, the subjects were asked about the written assignments, what type they were, and if they had a problem with any of them. In most cases, the written final topic tests were already graduation exam-type assignments. Concepts, dates, source analysis, short essay, true-false, matching, map analysis. In cases where these types of tasks were already practiced in class, similar ones were included in the papers, which greatly helped the student's confidence and success. Several highlighted essay writing as a task they struggled with, the correct use of sources, and the amount of writing itself were problems mentioned. The next question was whether they received any help from their teacher and whether there was any differentiation. Out of the ten cases, one person (J) did not remember exactly, three people (A, H, I) did not receive any help, and in three cases (B, D, F) it was discussed with the teacher that if they needed more time, they could continue writing the test during a break. Three people (C, E, G), on the other hand, were given differentiated tasks, for example, they could ask the teacher to restate the question while writing a paper. In several cases, interpretation problems were observed here (C). In another case, part of the paper was different from what the classmates were given: the short choices were the same, but the essay did not have to be written as a whole, he only had to write main outline points (E). In the third case, the tasks were the same, only one or two of them were taken out of it, and at the end of the class, he could tell what he intended to write for which task, and he could also finish the tasks orally if needed (G). In the following, the study deals with how the subjects would have experienced it if the teacher had made exceptions during the tests for them. Since the answers were extremely diverse, it seemed to be appropriate to present the reactions of each respondent.

(A): *“Honestly, I don't know, maybe I would have been anxious that I would be distinguished from the others, but maybe (...) it was good because I was really able to prepare for the graduation exam”.*

Subject (B) hid his condition, so he was happy that he was not distinguished from the others: *“I have always felt that because of this disability, I am stigmatized and I cannot wash it off and therefore I am an odd one out, I am not enough to others, I will always be weaker, I will always be worth less, I will struggle in vain, I will not be as good as the others, I will always have to put more work into*

*things than the others and even then they will judge my work, my work will be the bad one.” (...)*

(C): *“I had and still have problems with this, and now for me, it’s somehow stepping out of my comfort zone to do this interview with you, and I can finally talk about it openly because a few years ago I wouldn’t have been able to help, because I wouldn’t have been able to talk about it, because this disability is such a sore spot for me, over the years, I have received much more negativity than positivity because of my disability, and because of this I still have a bad feeling.”*

Subject (D) would have reacted *“obviously negatively”* to the exception.

Subject (E) gave the following answer: *“I didn’t feel that I cheated my classmates with this, they agreed that I needed this kind of help.”*

Subjects (F), (I), and (J) said they could not even imagine the scenario.

Following this, the subjects were asked whether they get stressed out when they have to give a written account of their knowledge. In seven (A, B, C, D, F, G, H) cases, the answers were that they do not feel the written exam situations to be stressful. In the remaining three cases, the subjects gave an affirmative answer. The following answers were indicated as the reasons for this: *“I’m an anxious person, I’ve always been and always [will be]”* (E); *“It’s common that I felt like I couldn’t give as much as I wanted. I could not write down what I wanted to, mainly either because I was tired, or I had to pay so much attention to making sure the sentences I was writing down were legible, because then at least I would get points for that for sure. There were multiple occasions that I had no time to write down every crucial piece of information, even though I knew them”* (I); *“I was very anxious while writing the essay.”* (J). The question arose as to what extent the teachers emphasized the spelling of foreign cities, concepts, and foreign persons during the written assessment. In most cases, the instructors accepted phonetic writing and did not deduct points for swapping one or two letters. In one case, the student had discussed with their instructor that because they were preparing for the advanced level exam, the “traditional” preparation, similar to the others, would be more beneficial. In addition to preparation, the subjects indicated several other problems as well. It was common that there was not enough space on the paper, since they wrote in large letters, and in several cases, the students did not know exactly what they had to write down. As a result, they wrote down everything that came to their mind but ran out of time. Subsequently, the students were asked whether they had the same problem during the oral exams, and they gave negative answers, thus concluding that for students with partial disabilities, this particular problem occurs in written assignments. In addition, another problem was when the student misread the questions and therefore misinterpreted the task. To remedy this, they tried to use different tactics, for example, they read the task twice or tried to handle parts of it separately: however, this took up even more time.

The next part of the study deals with oral assessments. In all ten cases, there were oral assessments during their studies. For some more often, and for others less frequently. To a question about pronunciation, the subjects said that they had no problem with that. Regarding the course of the oral examination, the feedback

was that the teacher let them explain the material according to their own logic and only asked questions when necessary. Only in a few cases did specific question-and-answer situations occur.

Lastly, the subjects were asked which type of assessment they preferred. The answers were quite surprising, as it was expected that every student would prefer oral assessments over written ones. Five people (B, C, E, F, I) clearly preferred to take oral exams, *"I prefer oral exams a 1000%, even the teacher knew that it would be better for me"* (I) – even though the teacher knew this, they were not given oral options more often during their studies, out of habit and laziness, they explained. Three of the subjects (A, D, J) clearly liked to solve tasks in writing. One person (H) felt there was no difference between the two possibilities, and one person liked written assessments better, especially if they had the opportunity to add to it orally at the end. They considered this the best solution.

In conclusion, it is becoming more and more evident that every dyslexic and dysgraphic person is unique, everyone wants something different, and there is no uniformly acceptable solution for everyone. It is clear that if the students hide their condition or if the school does not want to recognize the individual's problem, they cause more harm than good. A lot depends on the class and the teachers, but also on the students and parents themselves, and how they approach the question. The best way to help the students is most possibly open communication, and to treat the student in a way that suits them. As the study shows, some people preferred the oral examination method, while others preferred the written exam in order not to stand out from the class. In any case, both opportunities should be given for the students to get the most out of them and for the students to feel supported and not pitied.

## The history exam

As the final part of the interview, the subjects were asked about their own history graduation exam experiences, focusing on how they evaluate their own high school graduation. While asking the questions, it was kept in mind that the main goal of the new high school graduation exam, in addition to subject knowledge, is to convey norms, develop skills, emphasize competencies in the subject, as well as interpret and apply the correct use of resources in space and time (Fischerné Dárdai 2010).

The first question was how the subjects felt about their graduation exam in history. The answers were mainly negative: *«I was very afraid of it"* (A, B); *"I had mixed feelings, a little disappointed, it didn't work out as I would have liked, but it did not turn out bad"* (C); *"Stressful and tiring"* (E, I). But there were also a few subjects who recalled positively *"Good feelings"* (F); *"I was proud of myself"* (H); and *"I'm as good as a normal person"* – referring to the result (B). The study deals with whether the experiences were related to the degree of the exams of the subjects. In the study, five participants took middle-level exams (A, B, C, D, G), and five participants who took advanced-level exams (E, F, H, I, J), the two groups were therefore equally represented. It is important to make a distinction between the two

levels because the middle-level graduation exams are written by those who will no longer want to be related to the subject in any form in the future, while the advanced level is written by those who will presumably still deal with the field in some form in higher education. A significant difference is that the advanced level places emphasis on the expressiveness of interpretation and thinking operations, not on lexical knowledge (Kaposi, 2006 pp. 11–38; Kaposi, 2015). Based on expert opinions, several subjects would have had the opportunity to take two oral exams in history, so the focus was put on this in the following questions. Here, we have to look at the advanced and intermediate-level exams separately. The main reason for this is that there is a more complex essay in the advanced-level exam, and because of the intention to further study history, the score the student achieves is much more important. Only two out of five people (A, B) took the intermediate-level exam, both in written and oral form. There was a subject (A), who wanted two oral exams instead, but the school management refused him, probably due to the lack of expert opinion, but he did not address this in detail during the interview. Two people (C, D) who graduated “during the Covid pandemic” only took written exams, while another student who graduated during the pandemic took two oral exams (G). Three of those who passed the high school diploma took both oral and written exams (H, I, J) and two took only oral exams (E, F). According to subject (F): *“If you have the opportunity, you definitely should take the two oral exams, because you will be able to experience how stressful it is to take the state exam.”* In one case (I), the interviewed student was not informed about their options, so the next question focused on whether the subjects were informed about their options by the school management or class teachers. Six people clearly said yes, they were informed, three did not remember it, and in one case the subject had to manage everything for themselves and did not receive any help from the school. Eight out of ten students took advantage of the extra time for the graduation exam. Seven people took both written and oral high school exams, and here the question arose as to how their spelling was evaluated: in all cases, it was not taken into account.

In the following, the study examines the seven people who took the written exam, and how the exam went for them. The history paper has two main parts: a test and an essay section. First, they were asked about their experiences with the test section. In five cases, due to a lot of practice, the tasks did not cause any particular problems, they did as they expected. Two, on the other hand, thought they were stronger in terms of tasks and for some reason, it did not work out, they did not know why. It was suggested that the material was not mastered properly, or that certain types of tasks were more difficult. During the graduation exam analysis, László Kojanitz concluded that the assignments contain a large number of pictorial or textual sources from specific ages, for which the related instructions do not require critical thinking. Reminder sources only expect retrieval operations from students, the task is made more difficult in some cases by the fact that the text source is longer (Kojanitz 2022).



The following experiences were made in the second essay part. Several subjects noted that their writing of essays has improved and developed over the years and through a lot of practice. Previously, for example, the inclusion of sources caused a big problem. One person had no problem with formatting the text. One person was lucky because they got their favorite topic as a long essay, and it also helped a lot that they first wrote their thoughts on a sketch pad, just as their teacher had suggested before. There were two cases where the subjects made an error in essay matching, but in one case they were able to correct it by using the extra time. In three cases, however, the students encountered more serious difficulties. "It always had been difficult for me, I had problems with the wording of the text, what to write, what is important, so I practiced a lot" (B); *"I wrote a lot, but not the information that was needed"* (C); *"Because of my handwriting, the end of my essay was not legible and got no scores (...) my hands were tired, I couldn't concentrate, and I couldn't write anymore"* (I).

During the study, it was clearly visible that in several cases students had a serious problem with formulating the essential information in writing, and their bad handwriting was also a significant issue. In such cases, the problem was not with learning the material, but the "symptoms" of dyslexia and dysgraphia appeared. In these cases, the teachers, after consulting with the students, should have clearly recommended the two oral exams, so that the final exam could reflect their real performance. It is clear which of the subjects received sufficient attention and support from their history teacher and school and who did not. A positive example is that one student (G) did not have good handwriting and could not determine in writing what was important and what was not, so they could only take an oral exam. A negative case is that although the same difficulties existed for another student (I), they had to do both oral and written tests at an advanced level. Although the experiences could be similar, they received different treatment from their school.

The study continues with the three people who took two oral exams, and an expected scenario happened. In the source analysis discussed above, there was one person (E) who did not deal with the provided supporting materials at all. The oral exam also has resources and "I've lost the most points there," stated the subject (E). It is also clear from this that it is not a helpful solution if the teachers do not analyze sources with their dyslexic and dysgraphic students, or only written sources are not analyzed because the sources come up even if the students take two oral exams. In the other two cases (F, G), they experienced the two oral exams positively and had no problems, they were able to present their real knowledge.

At the end of the interview, the focal point was the matter of whether the subjects had received specific help or any suggestions from their history teachers regarding what to focus on in the graduation exam. The majority of respondents said that the teacher provided advice to the students at the class level, and there were no specific recommendations for students with dyslexia and dysgraphia.



## Conclusion – Overall impression of the interviews

Although the number of participants in this study is small and the sampling is non-representative, it is still possible to derive insightful conclusions regarding the average experience of students with disabilities in history education. The interviews revealed a wide range of cases and perspectives, which were analyzed and summarized at the end of each section.

One key finding was that all participants expected some form of support from their history teachers, although the type of assistance varied significantly. Some students preferred to keep their difficulties private, while others were comfortable with their challenges being known. Respecting the individual preferences and needs of each student is essential to providing effective support.

Regarding exam tasks, no single type of assignment was universally problematic. Instead, challenges often arose in individual cases, which could be addressed through collaboration between the student and teacher. Tailored development plans were identified as a viable means of improving outcomes.

Essay writing emerged as the most significant challenge for students, owing to multiple factors. Writing long texts often led to fatigue and reduced concentration, and integrating sources proved particularly difficult. Additionally, emphasizing key points and avoiding misinterpretation posed substantial obstacles. To address these challenges, it could be beneficial to provide students with sample essays during practice sessions. Teachers could then highlight and discuss what earns points in such tasks and what aspects require special attention, preparing students for high-pressure exam situations.

During the graduation exam, special instructions should always be provided to the students, for example, instructing them to read the assignment several times, in written sources to focus on the questions and look for the answers to them in the text, to highlight the main points. Let us support them with information in advance so that they can get the help that could be given to them based on expert opinions and use them in tough exam situations. If it is possible for someone to do two oral exams, then let us talk with them about the advantages and disadvantages. Consider what our experience was with them, whether they were able to express their thoughts better in oral testing, or whether they had no problems in writing during the previous years. The argument in favor of the two oral exams is that there is no need to worry about the appearance of handwriting and misinterpretation. Moreover, if the student goes into a different topic orally, the committee can tell the student to reconsider. However, the student must also be informed that if they have two topics, it can be just as favorable as unlucky for them. While the written test covers all eras, the two oral exams are more specific, and it can easily happen that the student has to give an account of his knowledge only from their “stronger” or only from their “weaker” topics. Moreover, having an oral exam twice in a row could take a fairly long time, even if there is a short break between them. Here, I (Zsanett Hont) would like to share my personal experience. I took an advanced history exam with two oral exams. The examination took a very long time, I was inside the exam room for several hours, but my history teacher prepared me for this. This did not put

me at a disadvantage as a history major, there is no need to be afraid of this based on my own experience. Looking back, it was a good decision that we decided on the two oral exams (by Zsanett Hont).

In this study, a wide spectrum is apparent. Ten students with dyslexia and dysgraphia who were admitted to the University of Pécs were randomly selected. We can see the extremes in the analysis. There were times when the school did not even care about the student, did not even want to acknowledge, and even denied their difficulties (I). However, there was also a student who went to a special school and was provided with an environment where they received maximum support (J).

Listening back to the interviews, it is fairly surprising how two people who “struggled” with the same difficulties can take such different paths. The reason for this lies in the attitudes of the school management, the class teachers, the history teachers, and the classmates. In addition, it is to be found in the inconsistent quality of the education system, which is influenced by several factors, for example, the quality of education can only increase if competent and capable teachers teach in the school in the long term (Sági – Varga 2011, 295). In addition, the location of the school is also important, since parents who belong to the middle class can send their children to higher quality schools further away from their place of residence, thus some schools are becoming more and more segregated while others can teach at increasingly higher levels (Neumann 2018, 148–151).

These factors can influence the student's life in an extraordinary way, as well as the family's mentality and acceptance. Perhaps the most crucial factor is how the students experience the whole situation, and if they dare to ask for support, or if they even want their history teacher to give them a helping hand.

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## Appendix - Interview questions

### 1. Path to History Assessments

#### 1.1. Task Types in History Lessons

What types of tasks did you commonly work on during history lessons?

Were there any tasks involving complex diagram analysis? How successful did you feel while completing these?

What kinds of questions did your teacher ask? How diverse were the teacher's questions? Did they tend to ask more open-ended or closed-ended questions? (For example: open-ended – *Describe the causes of World War I*; closed-ended – *When did World War I start?*) Which type was easier for you to answer? How successful were you in completing these?

Did you encounter crossword puzzles? How successful were you in solving these? Sentence-completion tasks are common in history lessons. How did you handle these?

How successful did you feel when working on multiple-choice questions?

Were essays assigned? How did you perform on these?

How frequent were the following task types in your history lessons: matching tasks, timeline-based tasks, and term definitions? How successful did you feel in completing these?

#### 1.2. Problematic Task Types in Assessments

What types of tasks did your teacher typically use during assessments?

Among the tasks mentioned earlier, did any pose significant challenges for you?

Were these included in your assessments?

During written assessments, was differentiation applied to accommodate your dyslexia and dysgraphia? Did you receive alternative types of tasks?

If yes, how did you experience this?

While writing tests, how nervous were you? Did you feel additional stress because you had to demonstrate your knowledge in writing?

During written assessments, how would you evaluate tasks that required writing the names of foreign cities, people, and terms? Did the teacher accept phonetic spelling?

Were oral responses conducted in front of the class or in a private setting?

During oral assessments, how challenging was it for you to pronounce the names of foreign cities, people, and terms?

During oral assessments, did your teacher allow you to elaborate on your thoughts, or did they interrupt or ask continuous questions?

Did your teacher primarily use supportive questions during your responses?

How did you perceive your teacher's supportive attitude during your answers?

Which type of assessment did you prefer and why?

Did the preparation for assessments depend on whether a particular topic was discussed and understood over multiple lessons?

## 2. Graduation Examination of History

How do you feel when recalling your history graduation exam?

What level of history graduation exam did you complete?

Did you take both a written and oral history graduation exam?

How well did you perform on the tasks and essays in the written exam?

Did your history teacher provide specific guidance on what to focus on for the exam?

Did writing essays cause any difficulties for you?