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Creating Inclusive Universities for Different Abilities

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Abstract

According to research by AHEAD (2021), students with specific learning difficulties are accessing third level education in greater numbers than ever before. Within the body of research conducted few have focused on the overall experiences of students with dyslexia studying in third level education. My study addresses this gap in knowledge as it provides an insight into how students with dyslexia navigate third level education. Ethnography was used as the principle method of research in this project, and 17 participants took part.

My research found that when students identify dyslexia as a limitation, it becomes a barrier to successful learning and has a negative effect on their identity, which impacts them socially and academically. However, an easier pathway to success is achieved when viewing dyslexia as a difference and this dissertation asks what their specific experiences are and what does it mean to study in third level education with dyslexia. This approach enabled my participants to achieve academic success, not despite their dyslexia but in partnership with it. This research and its findings are therefore relevant to several stakeholders such as policy makers, third level education institutions, disability support staff and teaching staff.

Creating Inclusive Universities for Different Abilities

Introduction

Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty (EDA & DAI, 2022), under the umbrella term of neurodiversity (Singer, 1999) and a person with dyslexia is viewed as having a disability. People with dyslexia may experience greater stress and frustration as they endeavour to learn, resulting in heightened anxiety, particularly in relation to education (Nalavany, Logan & Carawan, 2018). Exploring dyslexia as a difference rather than identifying it as a deficit helps to unravel what society can often perceive as the complications surrounding dyslexia and how identifying with a diagnosis of dyslexia can carry cultural and societal expectations and perceptions. This often can then identify (Alexander-Passe, 2015) you within our society as having a deficit in your thinking or your brain functioning and can label you as a less intelligent person. However, identifying as I do with dyslexia as a difference and viewing dyslexia through a neurodiverse approach does not lessen dyslexia and/or its affects, it helps to conjure up very different societal perceptions and expectations.

The findings of this research illustrate the negative impacts a student with dyslexia can experience on their 'self' when asked to engage in front of peers. They also highlight the problems associated with attitudinal and institutional barriers, discourse, behaviour and cultural expectations around school, difference, and literacy. Therefore, it is important to consider how students with dyslexia navigate Higher Education (HE), the struggles they face and the barriers which are encountered. Dyslexia is often viewed through an ableist lens (Campbell, 2009), and this became the motivation to challenge and, thus alter fixed mindsets, prejudices, and society’s expectations of students with dyslexia in HE.

Looking at dyslexia without internalised and externalised ableism enables us to advocate on behalf of people with dyslexia using this new lens, which positions dyslexia in the realm of difference and encourages people with dyslexia in education to use a growth mindset (Dweck, 2012), build resilience, make use of the supports that are available and develop strategies that work for them. This research will highlight how adopting the ideas above and using a neurodiverse approach has paved the way for academic success for all the participants. Having dyslexia and being in HE is experienced in many ways and influenced by many internal and external factors: therefore, using the metaphor of a prism is a perfect way to imagine the complexity of the experiences. This 'prism' also became a tool in the hands of the research participants, who, after years of struggle, learned to analyse their own experience as multifaceted and many-shaded, involving not just ordeals and shame, but empowerment and self-discovery also.

This paper thus shows how students experience dyslexia through multiple 'selves' and identities, in terms of other aspects of difference. It highlights the experience of dyslexia from the inside out and challenges the notion that 'difference is a binary system comprising rigidly dichotomous entities' (Slesaransky-Poe and García, 2009:204), arguing instead that it is 'multifaceted, complex, always changing, and infinitely sociocultural' (*Ibid*). Hence, this research has explored cultural understandings of dyslexia and how my research participants navigate and identify with dyslexia within HE. Although this research moves across multiple themes, it is concerned primarily with the formation of identity and collective identity and how this negative identity can be transmitted within social groups and become part of the social 'legacy the individual acquires from their group' (Geertz, 1973:4).

Methodology

This research was conducted using ethnography as the primary mode of enquiry using 17 participants who have dyslexia studying in four different, HE institutions. All methods performed were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of and were reviewed and approved by the ethics committees of Maynooth University, Kildare. Informed consent was acquired from all the individual participants in this project.

Research Questions

How did they experience and navigate HE education in Ireland?

How did they understand their dyslexia in the context of an environment so heavily reliant on text-based learning and assessment?

What does it feel like to negotiate the disclosure process, the discourse surrounding dyslexia and the cultural perceptions connected to dyslexia in HE?

By answering these questions, I provided a greater understanding of how learning is experienced by those operating within an environment and culture that champions the very issues that hinder people with dyslexia, such as reading, writing, short-term memory retrieval both in an oral capacity and in final written examinations.

Settings

I conducted fieldwork in lecture theatres, small group tutorials, cafés, and public spaces within the universities my research participants attended, observing how they approached teaching, assignments and managed their workloads. I also conducted small passive participation, shadowing some participants in their interactions in group work and lectures which were of a very varied nature and included modules that were both of an applied and theoretical design. This was a deliberate decision, as some modules require more participation than others.

Participants

The research was carried out in four different HE institutions during two academic semesters in 2018. There was a total of 17 participants, of which 14 identified as female and three as male. There were four participants from the 40+ age range, three from the 30-40 age group and the rest, ten, were in the 19- to 30-year-old age range. I sent out an expression of interest in my project via four HE institutions access offices. The disability services officers sent out an email about the research project to all their students who were registered with them as having a diagnosis of dyslexia. This email contained an introduction, a brief overview of the research project, and what their role as a participant would entail for them. No specific variable arose, or no rationale was discovered for the very low participation in the project by the male student population, as the only inclusion or exclusion to participation was having a diagnosis of dyslexia and being registered with the access office in your institution.

I met with the students to gain an insight into their educational journeys. They were informed of the nature and the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw before a specified date. It was agreed that I would send them a copy of their transcript to allow them to confirm what was said and gain their consensual participation. In order to protect their identities, real names would not be used or any material which could identify them.

Field Work

The methodological tool I employed was participant observation and interviews, as it aims to describe life as it is lived, 'by a people, somewhere, sometime' (Ingold, 2017:21). Each participant was shadowed for at least one two-hour lecture and/or an hour tutorial at minimum once a week, as well as their bi-weekly group work sessions, I also took field notes which were used later during the writing-up process. I then conducted interviews which took place in 'natural settings' (Creswell, 2012) chosen by the participants. A recording device (LiveScribe pen) was used to ensure all data was saved and documented and these were transcribed later. This enabled me to read and re-read the transcripts several times to tell the stories of the participants.

The questions asked were around family history of dyslexia, brief experiences of formal school and how they experienced HE with dyslexia in terms of teaching, learning, assessment and supports. They were also asked about how they understood their dyslexia and how they thought others understood it, what the disclosure process was like, the discourse and identity experienced, and the cultural perceptions and prejudices surrounding dyslexia. The data collected from this research is a small snapshot of the population with dyslexia studying in HE, which is a limitation for this project.

Literature Review

Dyslexia Through Time

Dyslexia falls under the umbrella term, Neurodiversity (Singer, 1998), which is a range of different neurological challenges (Clouder, et al, 2020). It is recognised that like a person's fingerprints, no two brains, not even those of identical twins, are exactly the same (DeMello & Gabrieli, 2018), indicating there is no normal standard brain that exists to which all other brains can be compared to. The word 'Dyslexia' originates from the Greek word (dɪsˈlɛksɪə) meaning 'difficulty with words' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). However, dyslexia's appearance in society

is by no means a recent phenomenon and was identified as early as the 19th century (Kussmaul, 1878), as word blindness, which was first replaced with the word ‘dyslexia’ a decade later (Berlin, 1887).
Dyslexia is also regarded as a neurological condition that is genetic: a child with an affected parent has a risk of 40–60% of developing dyslexia (Hudson, Heigh & Otaiba, 2011). Dyslexia affects approximately 1 in 10 people and occurs on a spectrum with some people mildly affected and others more severely (DAI, 2022). Therefore, dyslexia is not an illness or disease that can be treated medically, nor is it something that comes and goes. Everyone with dyslexia is different but there is a commonality of difficulties with reading, spelling, writing, related cognitive/processing difficulties, memory retention and articulating information verbally or in written form. Nonetheless, dyslexia continues to be linked with the medical model and this can engender ableism, however, this research advocates on using a neurodiverse lens to view dyslexia also.

Problems with the Medical Model

The medical model treats disability as defects in need of treatment and in ‘doing so, it reinforces the able body as the norm and perpetrates stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities’ (Guevara, 2021:275). Society has tended to communicate with people who have disabilities through messages that their bodies/minds are defective, that they need to be fixed or cured, and that their inability to participate fully in society is imputable to them and to their disability (Gill, 1987; Oliver, 2013; Munzer, *et al*, 2020 & Guevara, 2021). Within HE the medical model is prevalent also, with dyslexia being treated as a disability which requires standardised supports for students with dyslexia to succeed. This model links a disability diagnosis to an individual and supposes that with medical intervention, or in a neurodivergent case, a psychological diagnosis a disability can be diminished or corrected through curing or managing the disability.

Dyslexia is also regarded as a neurobiological condition that is genetic in origin (EDA, 2017 & DAI, 2018), thus, reinforcing the use of the medical model. Dyslexia as a neurobiological disorder is associated ‘implicitly or even explicitly, with a ‘medical condition’ or ‘psychiatric condition’ or ‘psychopathology’’ (Protopapas and Parrila, 2018:4). This can allow for assumptions and ableism to develop that someone with dyslexia has a deficit and needs fixing in comparison to those who do not have dyslexia (Martin, 2012 & Hanebutt & Mueller, 2021).

Ableism

Ableism is a perspective on disability which assumes that disability is inherently abnormal; it is a perspective which leads to various forms of discrimination based on ability. It operates from a belief system revering 'a particular kind of self and body, which is portrayed as the perfect, species-typical, and therefore essential and fully human' (Campbell, 2009:5). This concept portrays disability as a diminished state of what it means to be a 'human being' and ableism can also be rooted in the medical model as it highlights this diminished state whereby the person needs to be fixed. This idea of the dyslexic brain 'needing to be fixed' to be more like the non-dyslexic brain or what some consider the 'normal' brain is relative to what McRuer (2006) theorises in his 'Crip' theory.

Crip Theory

Around 1971, a street gang emerged in Los Angeles called 'The Crips' due to their use of canes while walking. However, in the context of my research, I use the term 'Crip' as adopted by McRuer in 2006, which emerged within queer/disability studies as an adoption of the word 'Cripple'. There is still contention around the word 'Crip' for obvious reasons as Crip is an abbreviation of Cripple. In conjunction with my research, Crip theory is used in an attempt to raise awareness of the actual lives of students with disabilities, highlight the supports needed for them to experience third level education to its fullest and seeks to 'challenge constructions of able-bodiedness and be politically generative through the fracturing of key systems of oppression' (Bone, 2017:1297).

According to McRuer (2006), Crip theory argues that we should view disability as an important identity variable that should be recognised through an intersectional lens with all other identities, especially those that have historically been excluded or oppressed within larger society, as well as within disability culture itself' (Hanebutt & Muller, 2021:4). As stated already, instead of framing disability under a deficit or medical model of disability, which requires treatment, intervention, or a cure, my research posits that we align with how 'disability studies and Crip theory allow for a more critical and expansive look at disability as an aspect of identity and culture' (Hanebutt and Mueller, 2021:5). My research argues that both Crip and neurodiversity theories have important impacts on the theory and practice of education, as both can work to simultaneously critique and change dominant perspectives of disability in education and in academic theoretical spaces (McRuer, 2006 & Hanebutt & Mueller, 2021).

Using these theories can challenge third level educational institutions, curriculum, and policy makers on the current models of education within third level education. This will enable these two concepts of inquiry and practice to reshape, challenge and develop towards a more just sense of disability and more inclusive educational institutions. Crip is in the process of being reclaimed by people with disabilities and identifying as 'Crip', for many reasons. It can be to show pride in one's disability, raise awareness of disability and neurodiversity, advocate for inclusion and to avoid the ranking of disability.

Crip theory and practice entails sustained forms of coming out, and this is applied within my research when we see how my research participants engaged in this 'coming out' process, which will be discussed in greater detail in the findings chapter. It also highlights that another more accessible world is possible in which disability is no longer experienced as oppression and exclusion, or something to be ashamed of or hidden away (Schalk, 2018). Consequently, developing a new meaning for the word Crip as an insider term within disability rights movements to provide liberation, freedom and to support the notion of 'coming out'. Identifying as Crip is used to highlight the struggle for rights, equality and to resist ablism and oppression. It also allows us to move away from disability hierarchy and ranking and is valuable in disempowering the term, disability, of its historical pejorative usages. The use and reclaiming of the term Crip is not universally accepted by all people with disabilities. Others object to using it because Crip and cripple can still be used as a slur (Sherry, 2013). However, Gupta (2019) suggests that continuing to use the term Crip 'continues to put people with disabilities in relation to able-bodiless' (:2) and this, it is argued can maintain harmful views of people with disabilities.

The binary between disabled/able-bodied as a construct is contentious, as the disabled persona helps construct the boundary of what constitutes normal: 'Both constructs revolve around the dialectic between the "normal" and "abnormal", albeit with a certain difference in focus' (Mårtenson, 2013: 413). It is only possible to identify as 'normal' through not crossing these boundaries into the realm of disability. ‘Nearly everyone wants to be normal. Who can blame them, if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant or not being one like the rest of us’ (Warner, cited in McRuer, 2006:90). Kafer suggests that ‘deconstructing the binary between disabled and able-bodied/able minded requires more attention to how different bodies/minds are treated differently, not less’ (Kafer, 2013:13). Crip theory also exemplifies experiences of disability as it can help to ‘jolt people out of their everyday understandings of bodies and minds, of normalcy and deviance’ (Kafer, 2013:15). Nonetheless, Crip can help students with disabilities develop a model of resistance for themselves and others in order to develop a more neurodiverse educational environment.

My research argues that both Crip and neurodiversity theories have important impacts on the theory and practice of education, as both can work to simultaneously critique and change dominant perspectives of disability in education and in academic theoretical spaces (McRuer, 2006 & Hanebutt & Mueller, 2021). The neurodiversity movement argues that certain diagnoses concerning the brain, do not reflect neurological disorders, but rather neurological diversities. They also lie at the ‘intersection of culture, mind, and brain as mind/brain discourses are taken up as cultural practice used in individual and collective identity formation as well as social and political action’ (Kirmayer et al, 2020:14). This paper argues for a paradigm shift in how we approach and view neurodiversity and dyslexia. People everywhere admire honour, and encourage diversity in animals, nature, and our biosphere. Therefore, all cultural diversities and differences such as neurodiversity should receive the same recognition. This research also argues that we need to start enabling people with neurological differences to be accepted for themselves to discover and celebrate their strengths. The idea should not be to try to ‘cure’ people whose brains work differently, but to embrace them as being part of the mainstream. There is no normal standard brain that exists to which all other brains can be compared to. Therefore, the range of differences in individual brain function and behavioural traits should be regarded as part of a normal variation in the human population and viewed as having a brain that is wired differently (Clouder *et al,* 2020 & Murphy, 2021).

Disability pride also promotes visibility and mainstream awareness of the positive pride felt by people with disabilities in their communities. It marks a break from traditional concepts of disabilities as shameful conditions. ‘Viewing disability as a deficit within a person which needs fixing, immediately positions the individual as ‘other’ in the sense of being ‘wrong’ in comparison with the majority (Martin, 2012:15). Examining the social and cultural construction of dyslexia is also important to appreciate the origin of disability and how it has evolved over time. In many cultures, this perspective can affect how disability is perceived.

Dyslexia and Culture

Macdonald (2019) suggests research in the field of dyslexia has begun to use a range of models to interpret the social experiences of people living with this condition. In some countries, ‘conditions such as dyslexia are not recognised as disabling, whilst in others, they are considered to be a mental disability suggesting that disability is culturally determined’ (Clouder *et al,* 2020:759). This highlights how dyslexia can be culturally embedded within thought and language and is an example of the intersection between language as an evolved behaviour and literacy as a cultural invention (Pennington and Olsen, 2005). Dyslexia as a social construct depends on socially generated interpretations as ‘society through language and its use continues to construct people, especially those perceived to have a lack or disability’ (Leshota & Sefotho, 2020:6). This is mediated by sociocultural factors and how ‘various social actors interpret and then define their academic abilities’ (Kabuto, 2016:301). Dyslexia is not obvious to society, as it is a hidden disability, however, the difference between someone who has dyslexia, and its characteristics are exposed within the cultural settings of HE and its assessing methods. Neurodiversity views 'disability' as the result of the interaction between people living with impairments and an environment filled with physical, attitudinal, communication and social barriers. It also identifies that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference. Neurodiversity posits that these are ‘caused by the way society is organised, rather than by a person's impairment or difference’ (Scope, 2016:509).

Dyslexia in Higher Education

Although HE institutions vary worldwide, one set of practises which can be seen globally are assessment accommodations (Nieminen, 2021) and their validity is rarely questioned. Griful-Freixenet *et al,* (2017) suggested research within HE focuses on accessible and inclusive teaching practices, yet researchers and educators rarely contest assessment accommodations and if they ‘work’ and are inclusive. Notwithstanding, Nieminen (2020) posits that HE research has ‘identified assessment and grading practices as the weakest link in how assessment supports learning, because students are positioned as passive objects of assessment’ (2020:2). These accommodations are tied into the medical model and require medical documentation from students with a disability to gain compensation (Järkestig Berggren *et al,* 2016). A comprehensive reframing of assessment-related accommodations is needed (Bould *et al,* 2018). Continuing with the current model which includes structural, institutional, and attitudinal barriers, alongside staff who need more supports and training, only leads to what Basso (2009) terms as voice suppression.

This idea of academic imprisonment through voice suppression, is further illuminated through Basso’s (2009) concept of ‘ordeals of language’ which involves conflicts between private and public voices. This creates a moment of what Carrithers (2009) describes as vicissitude and can tie into issues of shame around dyslexia. When the relationship between a person and their dyslexia brings about ‘shame’ and ‘shaming’ relations (Wundt, Frazer & Freud), it invokes ‘self-suppression of voicing’ and shame.

All these aforementioned theories are relevant to adopting a more neurodiverse approach to how we view dyslexia. They all represent and advocate for dyslexia as difference and advocate for the awareness, acceptance, empowerment, and inclusion for people with dyslexia. Therefore, the aim is to expose, analyse, and eradicate ableism, which is the discrimination in favour of non-disabled people. Disablism emphasises discrimination against people with a disability whereby the belief can be that people with a disability are inferior to those without a disability or what can be perceived as ‘the normal’ people. The notion of prioritising what is perceived to be ‘normal’ while excluding what is thought to be ‘abnormal’, is challenged by Crip theory (McRuer, 2006), critical disability theorists and my research.

Findings

The following section shares participants experiences of having dyslexia while studying in HE.

Awareness of Dyslexia

One of the main issues identified by participants was the lack of knowledge around dyslexia and how it affects their learning. The deficit view and discourse (Rappolt-Schlichtmann, *et al,* 2018) they encountered around dyslexia was described as loaded and confusing and centred around constructions of able-bodiedness (Bone, 2017). Crip theory (McRuer, 2006) argues that we should view disability as an important identity variable that should be recognised through an "intersectional lens with all other identities, especially those that have historically been excluded or oppressed within larger society, as well as within disability culture itself" (Hanebutt & Muller, 2021:4).

> I think people's perception on dyslexia is so different. People don't know how to handle it (Kitty Kat). If anyone has got dyslexia, they kind of look at them as if they are stupid (Joy).

This allows for dyslexia to be then viewed as a deficit or 'something wrong with someone' as opposed to, nothing is wrong, it is just a difference. The deficit view can then create a certain perspective or allow a particular attitude to develop and thus, a barrier is created. This enables the creation of institutional and attitudinal barriers and ableism. Currently, there is very little research on 'lecturers' awareness of dyslexia and of their attitudes towards and opinions about dyslexic students' (Ryder & Norwich, 2019:162). Students with dyslexia pose a particular challenge to academic staff because their difficulties are hidden, according to Pino & Mortari (2014). These findings also highlight the need to provide adequate training for HE education staff around dyslexia as the research highlighted how some teaching staff identified major problems in recognizing dyslexia, estimating the severity of the disability, and uncertainty about what would be the best form of support (Schabmann *et al,* 2020:275).

> Yeah, I think there are intolerant lecturers that I've found very difficult, I was a stranger to them, and they didn't know I was trying or things like that (The General).

The knowledge lecturers had on dyslexia, and it impacts appeared to come from personal experience of family, friends, or students with dyslexia. When teaching staff had any awareness of dyslexia, with this awareness it usually connected to a more positive experience for students with dyslexia and created a learning environment more willing to accommodate them.

> I don't know if they had a good knowledge, but they really went out of their way to make my learning, my life a little bit easier (Heffo). Most the lecturers, they seem to know about it [dyslexia] already like (Ali).

Voice Suppression

For my research participants, internalising doubts about their academic ability manifested as a fear when in a lecture hall or tutorial class, notably around when they were asked a question or encouraged to articulate their thoughts on a particular topic. This developed into a fear of appearing a bad academic or unintelligent, or 'looking stupid' (General) in front of one's peers and lecturers. This becomes what Carrithers (2009) describes as vicissitude, which is an unfavourable event or situation that occurs by chance, usually beyond one's control. This ordeal becomes a moment, unanticipated and beyond routine, and invokes what Basso (2009) terms as voice suppression. To be, or to imagine oneself as being under surveillance, triggers mechanisms of self-suppression and silencing and this can then create 'self'-oppression through fear, shame, and experience, arising out of a moment and thus, initiate what I term as academic imprisonment. For participants, this moment occurs as a 'performance' in an educational setting and/or involving peers and educators:

> Whenever I was asked a question in class, I just froze (Smithwicks). No, no, I wouldn't answer questions in class, no way (Calloway). I overthink it and then I panic, like I know the answer, then I just sit there (Turbo).

Voice suppression (Basso, 2009) inhibits the learning experience and initiates internal conflict between the individual in their private realms, whereby in their mind they know the answer to the question, and public realms (Carrithers, 2009) through lecture halls, whereby they cannot when asked in front of their peers to answer the question. Conflict can then occur between one's own thoughts, feelings, emotions, and subjectivity and the lecture halls and tutorial rooms and this brings shame and introduces a humiliating relationship between the student and their dyslexia.

> Even though I know I want to say it I just cannot say it, even if I have the right answer, I just don't say it and I just sit [in lecture hall/tutorial room] there awkwardly while everyone stares at me (Ali).

The 'Self'

A host of emotions were used by participants to describe their educational experiences with dyslexia including disappointment, frustration, embarrassment, shame, sadness, depression, anger, and low self-esteem.

> So, I don't know if I have this ingrown thing that I think being dyslexic is awful (Summertime). I am afraid to tell people that I am dyslexic because the horror of being thought of as stupid (Winehouse).

Participants views and construct of the self were often not based on actual performance but upon perceived performance and these can influence their construct of self and impact on their experiences in HE. When students developed a negative association with their dyslexia (Gee, 2014) the challenge is then to dis-identify with the developed limited sense of self. This can in turn affect confidence on every level, which leads to students with dyslexia often using this persona of their 'self-esteem' for judgements of their self and self-worth. When participants identified and made a connection between a positive view of dyslexia and a positive identity with self-esteem, it helped to improve their cognition about their dyslexia which led to improved perceptions of self. One strategy developed by participants was leaving behind the concept of a fixed mindset and engagement with the concept of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2012). When participants recognised the concept of a fixed mindset and understood that intelligence is not fixed, they were able to embrace all the positive outcomes from using a growth mindset.

Discourse

Many informants remembered negative discourse and being called or made to feel stupid by teachers and peers. Many of my participants internalised this discourse and unconsciously carried the effects.

> For me, in terms of when I was growing up, it was looked upon as being stupid (The Driver), people always said I was stupid (Ali), teachers just said that I was stupid (General).

Nevertheless, these experiences helped the participants to develop and build resilience alongside a positive attitude towards their dyslexia. The participants in this research use both person first language and identity first language in self-determination and daily use, highlighting our need to be diverse when conversing about dyslexia. Using this identity language, a picture emerged of my participants, labelled, yet still finding their way through third-level education by immersing themselves in discourse to justify their choice as to how they self-identify.

Identity

The theme of identity recurs in this research and my participants reported through discourse and disclosing dyslexia, they became labelled as belonging to a social category which often has links to negative connotations. Accepting dyslexia as a part of one's identity is a huge step in moving forward both in your personal and social life. It will also help to foster a healthier relationship between one's identity and the institution one has attended or is currently attending. My participants showed that when you are accepting of your dyslexia and identify dyslexia as being intrinsic to your makeup and an essential and absolute part of your 'self' and 'being', it can lead to a more positive educational experience.

> I would really strongly identify with it [dyslexia] because I think it shapes a lot of who I am, (The General). I've got lots of different parts and one of them parts is dyslexia (The Driver).

To call someone a disabled person is to use IFL and it foregrounds the disability. To say that they are for example a person with dyslexia, puts their personhood first, and their disability as just one element of their whole personhood. This also underlines how discourse can shift people's positions and influence identities with respect to the question of PFL versus IFL debate within the field of disability (Vivanti, 2020).

Getting Over These Barriers

These findings reflected on how traditional teaching and assessment methods can create barriers for students with dyslexia and how they can penalise neurodiverse students. That said, and in spite of all the barriers that can be in place for students with dyslexia, my participants all succeeded in completing their academic journeys.

One of the hardest stops on this educational journey is the ‘coming out’ process or disclosing one’s dyslexia and deciding who to tell and when to tell them. While attending university, my participants stated that embracing their difference and telling others about it was an extremely difficult process; nonetheless, when they did begin embracing their dyslexia, it was like a ‘coming out’. I asked my participants to give one piece of advice to first-year students with dyslexia in third-level education and they all said to disclose as soon as they felt comfortable to, and to access the supports available.

One strategy developed by the participants was leaving behind the concept of a fixed mindset and engagement with the concept of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2012). When my participants recognised the concept of a fixed mindset and understood that intelligence is not fixed, they were able to embrace all the positive outcomes from using a growth mindset. Inclusivity and acceptance for neurodiversity in HE is increasingly recognised as fundamental for promoting inclusivity. Accepting who you are to yourself and using this as a motivator to succeed is also vitally important.

The findings show how accepting one’s dyslexia enables this ‘coming out’, taking pride in their dyslexia and then the ‘moving on’ moment. No matter how many negatives or difficulties my participants encountered on their journeys, or no matter how ‘broken’ or disabled the ‘self’ may appear to others, when the person with the disability accepts their ‘self’ as the best form of themselves, anything is achievable. My participants have shown that by using dyslexia as a motivator rather than a de-motivator, success happens.

According to Leshota and Sefotho, ‘culture shapes us into who we are, and we, in turn, construct culture’ (Leshota & Sefotho, 2020:4). Therefore, disability is a culturally mediated category, whereby the meanings of the disability are shaped by the norms of the culture in which they exist. It also highlights the need for people with dyslexia to move away from the barriers discussed and embrace new and emerging approaches such as a neurodiverse approach, which this research is advocating for. This research has highlighted how students with dyslexia felt as though they were being treated as someone “with special needs”. Nonetheless, I also wanted to alter what are sometimes negative societal connotations, cultural perceptions and how education can sometimes view and ‘deal’ with dyslexia. My research encourages a culture of full inclusivity within HE and the research findings supports this assertion.

Conclusion

This research project examined how students with a diagnosis of dyslexia navigated studying in third level education in an Irish context. The experience of being a student and the expectancy that brings, alongside the characteristics of having dyslexia and the issues surrounding this, were also explored. A large portion of the literature on dyslexia can tend to focus on the negative and what cannot be achieved in education, therefore suggesting that dyslexia is problematised and a person with dyslexia is perceived as a suffering 'being' in need of interventions and accommodations. Although I found this to be true, my research explored dyslexia using the metaphor of a prism and viewing dyslexia as a difference rather than a deficit.

My research discovered lots of barriers that were in place from the institutions where the participants studied, the imbedded experiences of having dyslexia and studying, perceptions, prejudices, teaching staff, peers, attitudes, and society's expectations of students with dyslexia were also explored. However, despite all these negatives, my research has proved that when the learners accepted dyslexia as an integral part of their self, developed a more growth mindset as opposed to remaining in a fixed mindset, and viewing dyslexia through a neurodiverse lens, success followed. Overcoming these barriers involves not only a mindset change by my participants, but a mindset change by teaching staff, policy makers and third level institutions. This research has highlighted how dyslexia can be likened to a prism, as dyslexia can be viewed as either a medical condition, a deficit or disability, a neurobiological condition, a sociocultural condition, a difference, or a neurodiverse phenomenon, depending on who is doing the viewing. The concept of a prism of difference also revealed that my participants have the possibility of developing multifaced intersecting identities and of experiencing third level education in a more positive way.

A vital part of this research is that it demonstrated how people with dyslexia can and will succeed in third level education, regardless of encountering the barriers that they confront. From analysing the data and my participants' personal experiences of studying in third level education, my findings show how one can succeed with dyslexia, not despite dyslexia but by adopting a neurodiverse approach. This will then increase the opportunities for people with dyslexia and enable them to become the experts that can teach us how to create a more inclusive and diverse learning environment. One of the challenges for students with dyslexia is to dis-identify with a fixed mindset which promotes a limited sense of ‘self’. This can be created by the destructive emotions associated with dyslexia and how it impacts on the educational experience. It is also imperative to work alongside disability advocates, disability study academics and disability activists to maintain awareness and to embrace the belief that there is nothing wrong with having a disability. However, what we always need to challenge is the notion there is something wrong with how people with disabilities are treated.

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