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The [DIS] Advantage of Studying Higher Education (HE) with Dyslexia

Keith Murphy

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Abstract

Contemporary discourse and literature surrounding dyslexia is often dominated by notions of disability, deficit, lack, vulnerability, and social expectancies around achievement in education. This paper explores 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, leading to vicissitudes, voice suppression and what I term, academic imprisonment. Accepting dyslexia as an integral part of the self and viewing it through a prism of difference as opposed to a deficit, are emerging themes for students with dyslexia to help achieve, while studying in Higher Education.

Keywords

Dyslexia; Higher Education; Vicissitudes; Voice Suppression; Academic Imprisonment; Trauma

Introduction

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 you within our society as having a deficit in your thinking or your brain functioning and can label you as a less intelligent person and thus, view dyslexia through an ableist lens. This new idea positions dyslexia in the realm of difference and encourages people with dyslexia in education to use a growth mindset, build resilience, make use of the supports that are available and develop strategies that work for them. This paper highlights how adopting these ideas above and using a neurodiverse approach has paved the way for academic success.

Disadvantage can often be described as an unfavourable circumstance or condition,¹ or if you are put in an unfavourable position in relation to someone or something else and this can reduce your chances of success. For the purposes of this paper, disadvantage is used to describe when a person is studying in a Higher Education Institute and has a psychological diagnosis of dyslexia. This often can put a person at a disadvantage as dyslexia, among other deficits may induce higher rates of anxiety, increased chances of dropping out of school, and decreased chances of pursuing higher education/ college.² Dyslexia is described as a learning difference that can cause difficulties with learning and work.

Although everyone with dyslexia is different, there is a commonality of difficulties with reading, spelling, and writing and related cognitive/ processing difficulties. It affects approximately 1 in 10 people and it occurs on a spectrum with some people mildly affected and others more severely. Dyslexia is not a general difficulty with learning, it impacts specific skill areas. With the right understanding, accommodations, and support people with dyslexia can achieve success in education, the workplace and in wider society.³ Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty, and a person with dyslexia is viewed as having a disability. This comes under the term Neurodiversity, which is an umbrella term for a range of different neurological challenges. These can be referred to as specific learning difficulties and development disorders which can include dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyscalculia, autistic spectrum, and Tourette syndrome. Dyslexia can then lead to what can be viewed as a disadvantage to you and impact your participation and success while studying in higher education.

Disadvantage can arise within higher education from a lack of participation or achievement in formal education and students are often disadvantaged through disability, literacy, health difficulties and poverty, to name just some. In higher education two models of disability are prevalent, "disorder" and "difference", which each differentially conceptualise dyslexia and the nature of supports required.⁴ Griful-Freixenet *et al.*, in their research

¹ "Disadvantage," Cambridge Dictionary, accessed October 5, 2023, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/disadvantage/>.

² Anila DeMello, and John Gabrieli, "Cognitive neuroscience of dyslexia," *Language, Speech & Hearing Services in Schools* 13, no. 4 (2018): 798-809, https://doi.org/10.1044/2018_LSHSS-DYSLC-18-0020.

³ "Dyslexia Association Ireland," accessed October 5, 2023, <https://dyslexia.ie/>.

⁴ Ciara O'Byrne, Caroline Jagoe, and Margaret Lawler, "Experiences of dyslexia and the transition to university: a case study of five students at different stages of study," *Higher*

found that students with disabilities fall significantly behind grade-level peers in terms of academic success, as they have double the risk for academic dropout compared with students without disabilities.⁵ Nonetheless, through the provision of supports, higher education tries to create a level playing field for students identified as disadvantaged. Studying in higher education and having dyslexia can not only lead to a perceived disadvantage, however, the impacts of this on the “self” can lead to the person suffering trauma.

Trauma can be as a result of experiencing a very stressful, frightening, or distressing event, and develop lasting emotional responses resulting from these events. It results from exposure to an incident or series of events that are emotionally disturbing or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual well-being.⁶ Experiencing a traumatic event can harm a person’s sense of safety, sense of self, and their ability to regulate emotions and navigate relationships which in turn can play a leading role in a student studying with dyslexia in higher education, experiencing trauma and feeling at a disadvantage.

Dyslexia, Studying and Trauma

Receiving a psychological diagnosis such as having dyslexia or any other neurodiverse difference, can be a traumatic event with lasting emotional affects and can impose sanctions on the self. This can lead to difficulties in an educational setting and other environments which can become what Carrithers describes as a vicissitude, which is a moment in life when a change in circumstances is encountered which is typically unwelcome and generally has an unpleasant outcome.⁷ This concept examines the idea of human expectations, and the ruin of expectations through this vicissitude, which initiates trauma and leads to a disadvantage. Murphy found that this occurs when a student encountered an unexpected event in education around

Education Research & Development 38, no. 5 (2019): 1031-1045,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1602595>.

⁵ Julia Griful-Freixenet, Struyven, Katrien Verstichele, Meggie Andries, and Carolin Andries, “Third level education Students with Disabilities Speaking out: Perceived Barriers and Opportunities of the Universal Design for Learning Framework,” *Disability & Society* 32, no. 10 (2017): 1627-1649, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1365695>.

⁶ “Disadvantage,” Cambridge Dictionary.

⁷ Michael Carrithers, *Culture Rhetoric and the Vicissitudes of Life* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 122.

academic performance and/or their dyslexia and other similar conditions, and how that has affected them across their academic experiences.⁸

This is because an ordeal of language occurs when one's voice is affected by powerful others.⁹ This can happen when there is a change in a student's circumstances in their educational experience, which is unexpected, unpleasant, and unwelcome, this event happens and ruins the expectations of what is expected of you in that moment. A lecturer might ask a student with dyslexia a question in a lecture hall or tutorial room and the student is expected to articulate their work in the "expected academic" manner. If the student does not meet these expectations, this can initiate voice suppression, shame, fear, and embarrassment from the ordeal and the vicissitude, and the student may never speak in front of their peers or educators again.¹⁰

Ordeals, Vicissitude's, and Academic Imprisonment

Rodriquez and Webster¹¹ discuss how an ordeal of language occurs when one's voice is affected by powerful others and if this results in a "sense of a severely difficult or painful experience that tests a person's character or endurance,"¹² it initiates voice suppression, and this creates a moment of what Carrithers describes as vicissitude.¹³ A vicissitude is an unfavourable event or situation that occurs by chance, a fluctuation of state or condition or a difficulty or hardship usually beyond one's control, according to Carrithers. The net of vicissitudes is cast very widely, across different societies and different scales of adversity. However, we are concerned with how this vicissitude arises within higher education, such as when a student with dyslexia is encouraged to answer a question in front of their peers, or articulate information when becoming under pressure in an educational environment.

This ordeal becomes a moment, unanticipated and beyond routine, and invokes what Basso terms as voice suppression. To be, or to imagine one's

⁸ Keith Murphy, "Studying with Dyslexia and achieving in partnership with it, A review of Inclusive Education and Employment Practices," *The AHEAD Journal* 15, no. 5 (2022): 23-30, <https://doi.org/10.21427/SRA1-HC78>.

⁹ Ellen Basso, "Ordeals of Language," in *Culture, Rhetoric, and the Vicissitudes of Life*, ed. Michael Carrithers (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 125.

¹⁰ Keith Murphy, "Experiencing Dyslexia Through the Prism of Difference" (Unpublished PhD diss., Maynooth University Press, 2021).

¹¹ Juan Luis Rodríguez and Anthony K. Webster, "Ordeals of language: essays in honour of Ellen B. Basso," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 68, no. 3 (2012): 305-314.

¹² Basso, "Ordeals of Language," 126.

¹³ Carrithers, *Culture, Rhetoric*, 122.

self as being under surveillance, triggers mechanisms of self-suppression and silencing, according to Meek and Rogers,¹⁴ and this results after an ordeal and vicissitude within a higher education setting and causes real trauma for the student which in turn can create a disadvantage for them. For the person or student with dyslexia involved in this moment, the “self” belief of doubt, fear and shame sustains this and transforms them from a well-developed student into a state of high anxiety and initiates what I term as academic imprisonment.¹⁵

This idea of academic imprisonment through voice suppression, is further illuminated through Basso’s concept of “ordeals of language”¹⁶ which involves conflicts between private and public voices. Suppressed voices result from self-censorship, the idea that what others think of one is more important than one thinks of oneself.¹⁷

This is a site of complicated interpersonal realms of activity between the public realm and private realm. The idea of your feelings, emotions and subjectivity in the private realm and the interactions in lecture halls and tutorial rooms with their embodied cultural and social norms, in the public realm. In our private realm we remain convinced that whereas we know what to say, the subconscious intervenes with the traumatic memory to protect, and this allows the inner voice to advise on saying nothing. This self-suppression of their voices allows students with dyslexia to manage the ordeals of language, vicissitudes and voice suppression and the trauma experienced, thus never allowing it to happen again and remaining in their form of academic imprisonment.

Studying in Higher Education with Dyslexia

An educational setting is one of the few places where dyslexia can be marked and negotiated by other people such as academic staff, other students, and institutional structures. Having dyslexia can also be something that needs to be explained, resourced, and supports negotiated for, and the diagnosis and existence of dyslexia, defended. There is the range of differences in individual brain functions and behavioural traits, regarded as part of normal variations

¹⁴ Maria Rogers and Fiona Meek, “Relationships Matter Motivating Students with ADHD through the Teacher Student Relationship,” *Perspectives on Language and Literacy* 41, no. 1 (2015): 21-24.

¹⁵ Murphy, “Experiencing Dyslexia.”

¹⁶ Basso, “Ordeals of Language,” 126.

¹⁷ Basso, “Ordeals of Language,” 126.

in the human population.¹⁸ Being dyslexic or having other similar conditions, simply means having a brain that is wired differently and the differences it presents in people should be respected, not feared, or belittled. A dyslexic person is someone differing in mental or neurological function from what is considered typical or normal.

Dyslexia and Neurodiversity through time

Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist, coined the word “neurodiversity”¹⁹ in 1998 to recognise that everyone’s brain develops in a unique way. It is recognised that like a person’s fingerprints, no two brains, not even those of identical twins, are exactly the same. The word “Dyslexia” originates from the Greek word *δυσλεξία* (*dis'leksia*) meaning difficulty with words. However, dyslexia’s appearance in society is by no means a recent phenomenon and was identified as early as 1878 as word blindness. In 1879 dyslexia was first used, and in 1887 the term “word blindness” was first replaced with the word “dyslexia” while in 1896 the first research was published using the word dyslexia.

How it Happens

Dyslexia is also regarded as a neurological condition that is genetic in origin and is hereditary, a child with an affected parent has a risk of 40–60% of developing dyslexia.²⁰ This risk is increased when other family members are also affected and 50% of people with dyslexia can have another neurodiverse difference also. Therefore, Dyslexia is not an illness or disease that can be treated medically, nor is it something that comes and goes; it is a cognitive difference and can be inherited through genes and DNA.

What is it and how it impacts

As mentioned earlier, Dyslexia is a neurodiverse difference, is viewed as having a disability, a learning difference which affects approximately 1 in 10 people and occurs on a spectrum with some people mildly affected and others more severely.²¹

¹⁸ Deanne Clouder, Mehmet Karakas, Alessio Cinotti, Maria Ferreyra, Genovena Fierros and Patricia Rojo, “Neurodiversity in third level education: a narrative synthesis,” *Third level education* 80 (2020): 757-778, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00513-6>.

¹⁹ Judy Singer, *Neurodiversity: The Birth of an Idea* (London: Amazon, 2017).

²⁰ Roxanne Hudson, Leslie High, and Stephanie Otaiba, “Dyslexia and the Brain: What Does Current Research Tell Us?,” *The Reading Teacher* 60, no. 6 (2011): 506-515, <https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.60.6.1>.

²¹ “Dyslexia Association Ireland,” <https://dyslexia.ie/>.

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 written. These difficulties are generally considered to be the necessities to be a “good academic.” However, with the right understanding, such as dyslexia is not related to intellect, accommodations, and support, people with dyslexia can achieve success in education, the workplace and in wider society.

Nonetheless, in spite of all this evidence and research, old cultural perceptions, and prejudices in relation to dyslexia been related to intelligence still exist within our society. In higher education, this can be where the DIS is placed into advantage and [dis]advantage is born.

Dis-Advantage of Studying with Dyslexia

Research Overview

The findings of my research²² illustrate the negative impacts which can emerge for students with dyslexia while they are studying in higher education. Some of these include: attitudinal and institutional barriers, discourse, behaviour and cultural expectancies around education, difference, and literacy. It also highlights the impacts a student with dyslexia can experience on their “self” when asked to engage in front of peers. Therefore, my attention was drawn to how students with dyslexia navigate higher education, the struggles they face and the barriers which are encountered. This became one of the motivations for this research, to challenge and thus, alter fixed mindsets, prejudices, attitudinal and institutional barriers, and societies expectations of students with dyslexia in higher education.

This research was conducted using ethnography as the mode of enquiry and was carried out with 17 participants who have dyslexia and were studying in a higher education institute in Ireland. 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, over two different semesters and I also took field notes which were used later during the writing-up process. I then conducted interviews which took place in “natural settings” chosen by the participants. Using ethnography as a mode of enquiry, exploring my research participants’ lived experiences of dyslexia, allows for insights into the experiences of living with dyslexia from the inside out. Likewise, ethnographic writing combines writing with a

²² Murphy, “Experiencing Dyslexia”.

personal touch in combination with a scholarly responsibility, while calling for accessible styles.²³ Ethnographic methods are diverse, and this enables us to utilise a range of approaches which are based on participation and observation, in-depth interviews, and detailed written analysis.²⁴ I conducted this 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.

People with dyslexia and other similar conditions may experience greater stress and frustration as they endeavour to learn, resulting in heightened anxiety,²⁵ particularly in relation to education. 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.²⁶ Often this can then identify you within our society as having a deficit in your thinking or your brain functioning and can label you as a less intelligent person. In the context of studying with dyslexia, this perspective offers us valuable insights into how beliefs built through societal pre-conceptions and prejudices can impede a student's learning and affect their sense of identity.²⁷ Students with dyslexia can internalise the limiting and negative experiences of having dyslexia and this can ultimately affect engagement and experiences in third level education.

However, identifying as I do with dyslexia as a difference and viewing dyslexia through a neurodiverse approach does not lessen dyslexia and/or its effects, it helps to conjure up very different societal perceptions and expectations. Consequently, when my research participants engaged in this

²³ Helena Wulff, "Writing Anthropology," In *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Anthropology*, ed. F. Stein, S. Lazar, M. Candea, H. Diemberger, J. Robbins, A. Sacher, and R. Stasch (2021): 1-19, <http://doi.org/10.29164/21writing>.

²⁴ Kathleen DeWalt and Billie DeWalt, *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002), 148.

²⁵ Karley Talbot, and Kimberly Kerns, "Event and Time-Triggered Remembering: The Impact of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder on Prospective Memory Performance in Children," *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 127 (2012): 126-143, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2014.02.011>.

²⁶ Rachel Hanebutt, and Carlyn Mueller, "Disability Studies, Crip Theory and Education," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* (2021): 5, <https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-1392>.

²⁷ Craig Collinson and Claire Penketh, "Idle Chatter and Alienating "Blah": Reviewing Literacy as a Site for Exclusion," *Journal of Inclusive Education* 17, no. 2 (2013): 143-155, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2011.629686>.

approach, began to view studying in higher education using a growth mindset lens and ditched the dis in disadvantage, they began to enjoy their experience more, engage more and strived to reach their full potential. Therefore, what happens if we flip disadvantage, ditch the DIS and just look at dyslexia as an advantage. It is quite hard to imagine this, as the negatives associated with studying with dyslexia and the cultural expectancies of what is needed to be an academic are often considered as binary opposites. This is because confidence, self-belief, and the good/bad academic binary are re-occurring issues that emerged for my research participants.

Consequently, this involved self-questioning themselves and their academic abilities which can lead to the suppression of their voices, and this can then become the unconscious norm for students with dyslexia in higher education. In relation to studying with dyslexia, 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 been 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.

Prism of Difference

Being neurodivergent and being in third level education is an experience that is very individual, 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. A prism can be described as a glass or other transparent object, triangular in shape, with refracting surfaces at an acute angle with each other, which separates white light into a spectrum of colours. The idea of a prism can be used to highlight both the clarification and the distortion afforded by particular viewpoints. Dyslexia also has many different facets which correlates with a prism through which one sees differently through its many angles and views. I identify dyslexia with a prism due to its multifaceted nature, with different angles and experiences, depending on how it is looked at and who does the viewing and especially, whether or not dyslexia is perceived as departing from what is normal, usual, or expected.

The prism approach likewise highlights the varied ways in which social difference affects the organisation and experience of dyslexia.²⁸ This “prism”

²⁸ Maxine Zinn, Pierrette Hondagneu-Soteio and Michael Messner, *Gender Through the Prism of Difference* (New York: Oxford Press, 2005).

can become a tool in the hands of the students studying with a neurodiverse difference, who can learn to analyse their own experience as multifaceted and many-shaded, involving not just ordeals and shame²⁹ but also empowerment and self-discovery. It shows how people 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 of rigidly dichotomous entities, arguing instead that it is multifaceted, complex, always changing, and infinitely sociocultural.³⁰

Dyslexia is often viewed through an ableist lens,³¹ however, looking at dyslexia without internalised and externalised ableism, enables us to use this less commonly presented idea and position dyslexia in the realm of difference and encourages people with dyslexia in higher education to use a growth mindset, build resilience, make use of the supports that are available and develop strategies that work for them. My own research has highlighted how adopting these ideas above and using this neurodiverse approach has paved the way for academic success for all the participants, especially when ditching the dis out of disadvantage and using a growth mindset.

Growth Mindset

The metaphor of using a telescope can help understand the view from a fixed and growth mindset. Looking through the smaller lens of the telescope gives a limited view, or a fixed mindset, whereas viewing through the bigger lens, or using a growth mindset, expands the world dramatically: The concept of dyslexia is a human invention; and like a telescope it can either expand and clarify our view of individuals who struggle to read and spell or, used “the wrong way around”, it can cause our view of these individuals to shrink.³² Therefore, understanding dyslexia through the lens of neurodiversity, we expand our view, help students to expand theirs, and move from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. This idea in operation, is witnessed within my research as we view the participants engaging in this process and seeing the success they achieved when they did.

²⁹ Basso, “Ordeals of Language,” 129.

³⁰ Graciela Slesaransky-Poe, and Ana Maria García, “Boys With Gender Variant Behaviours and Interests: From Theory to Practice,” *Sex Education* 9, no. 2 (2009): 201-210, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681810902829679>.

³¹ Shelley Tremain. *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press. 2017.

³² Brook Eide and Fernette Eide, *The Dyslexic Advantage* (London: Plume, 2012), 7.

One strategy being developed is leaving behind the concept of a fixed mindset and engaging with the concept of a growth mindset. Carol Dweck developed this growth mindset theory alongside her other primary research interests, which are in motivation, personality, and mindset development.³³ Dweck and Daeunstate that students with fixed mindsets adopt the idea that intelligence is fixed, feedback is criticism and understand intelligence and ability as static whereby success can only come from talent.³⁴ If a student thinks they have a perceived low ability and chance of success, Daeun states that this can evoke “learned helplessness,” which is a fixed mindset. However, the opposite happens when a student perceives they have a good proficiency in the task and they have a high chance of success when completing a task, this is known as a growth mindset.

If students with dyslexia remain in this fixed mindset, they will allow avoiding challenges, giving up easily and continue to view feedback and effort as fruitless, to become their norm and allow the success of others to threaten them. It can lead to the perpetrating of disablism by themselves and educators which can contribute to some students not being academically challenged and educators can perpetuate disablism by not academically challenging students.³⁵ Consequently, this fixed mindset can result in students with dyslexia having low expectations and aspirations, inhibiting their life choices.³⁶

A growth mindset is the opposite of a fixed mindset and can help a student with dyslexia in third level education to evolve away from a conceptually ableist and deficit-orientated attitude and mindset. When my research participants adopted a growth mindset it played a pivotal role in their student experience as a student’s belief about intelligence has important consequences for how they experience school and how they respond to setbacks and adversity.³⁷ Valorisation of one’s ability and the confidence

³³ Carol Dweck, *Mindset: How You Can Fulfil Your Potential* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2012).

³⁴ Daeun Park and Sarah Kim, “Time To Move On? When Entity Theorists Perform Better Than Incremental Theorists,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 41, no. 5 (2015): 736-748, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167215578028>.

³⁵ Manny Madriaga, “Enduring Disablism: Students with Dyslexia and Their Pathways into UK Third Level Education and Beyond,” *Disability and Society* 22, no. 4 (2007): 399-412, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590701337942>.

³⁶ Julian Elliott and Elena Grigorenko, *The Dyslexic Debate* (New York: Cambridge Press, 2014): 130.

³⁷ Carissa Romero, “What We Know About Growth Mindset from Scientific Research,” Mindset Scholars Network, accessed October 5, 2015, <https://studentexperiencenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/What-We-Know-About-Growth-Mindset.pdf>.

shown in students that they can achieve is a major bonus in a student's trajectory, especially at third level: When students believe intelligence is something that can be developed, they value learning and mastery.³⁸ The growth mindset perspective is important because it argues that in spite of the challenges confronting students with dyslexia, if we as educators can prepare them with the optimum mindset to better manage the demands of education, a better student experience happens, which in turn enables greater learning.

According to Paunesku *et al.*, it is possible to promote a growth mindset by teaching students about neuro-science evidence showing that the brain is malleable and gets stronger through effort, trying new strategies, and seeking help when necessary.³⁹ Consequently, this research would indicate that if a student with dyslexia in third level education can practice a growth mindset, this can enhance their learning experience. This is achieved through noting your improvements and creating positive feedback loops that encourage you to continue learning and improving.⁴⁰ A challenge for the growth mindset approach is the broad scope of the theory's applicability. Nonetheless, the growth mindset approach offers strategies beyond addressing feedback to promote well-being, resilience, and perseverance for all students (with or without dyslexia).

Some of the things we need to be aware of surrounding dyslexia

As discussed earlier, difficulties such as reading speed, note taking, spelling, proof-reading, data entry, mathematics, examinations, and memory retrieval are all common characteristics of having dyslexia. However, the individual with dyslexia equally presents outstanding practical strengths, such as problem-solving skills, spatial acuity, perception of overall picture or "outside the box" creative and visual thinking, teamwork, social skills such as empathy, compassion and patience, strategy development and end goal orientation.

³⁸ Romero, "What We Know About Growth Mindset," 2.

³⁹ David Paunesku, David Yeager, Gregory Walton and Carol Dweck, "How can we instill productive mindsets at scale? A review of the evidence and an initial R&D agenda," *Excellence in Education: The Importance of Academic Mindsets* (2013).

⁴⁰ David Yeager and Carol Dweck, "Mindsets that Promote Resilience: When Students Believe That Personal Characteristics Can Be Developed," *Educational Psychologist* 47, no. 4 (2012): 302-314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2012.722805>.

Some of these that emerged were, a need for education and awareness of dyslexia and neurodiversity to teaching staff, a review of some of our teaching practices, discourse used around dyslexia and the disclosure process and the impacts of these two things, stigma, pre-conceptions, associations and prejudices, emerged. The associations with labelling, 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, also emerged within institutions of higher education. Discourse is another and using a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis as an approach and the interactions of the three variables, namely Discourse, Power, and the Subject.⁴¹ The Discourse is the “dyslexic talk,” the Power is the hold the “dyslexic talk” has over people and the impact on self and the building of self-belief and the Subject(s), being the student who has dyslexia. Disclosure, who tells, who needs to know and what happens when we tell, the impacts on the self, confidence, belief, esteem, safe spaces. Supports, accommodations, prejudices, pre-conceptions, intellect, note taking, comprehension and memory recalling of specific subject-related academic language from lectures and tutorials, are others.

To Achieve this? What are some things HE Institutions can do.

A fundamental right in Ireland is that regardless of ability, everyone is entitled to a full and inclusive education. Over the last ten years in Higher Education in Ireland, students with disabilities registering with the support services has risen by 226 per cent.⁴² As a result, there is also a 45 per cent increase in the ratio of students per disability support staff member over the last eight years. Thus, the implementation of a state-wide awareness and educational campaign around dyslexia, neurodiversity and inclusiveness is recommended. University staff and academic staff need to be given continuous professional development on dyslexia and other neurodiverse differences, what they are, what they are not, how it presents, how it affects a student’s educational experience and what can be done to develop a more inclusive learning space. There was no evidence of any formal training or awareness campaigns around dyslexia from their institutions for academic staff.

⁴¹ Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace, *A Foucault Primer: Discourse, Power, and the Subject* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

⁴² “Launch of Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Third Level Education in Ireland 2019/20 Report,” AHEAD (Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press, 2021).

The Universal Design Learning model which is underpinned by the three Universal Design Learning principles of engagement, representation, and action and expression, promotes an inclusive model for students of all abilities and provides high quality individual supports for those students who need them. For students who are struggling with note taking, comprehension and memory recalling of specific subject-related academic language, one way to assist with this can be through companies like Livescribe, Google and Dragon, among others, who are all striving to improve technology for students with specific learning difficulties. Another important step would be to cease educating through a rote and memorising system and to embrace the technology available to us. We can type and avail of spellcheck in nearly all other aspects of our lives. However, we continue to disadvantage both neurodiverse and neurotypical students by insisting on mainly using written work as assessments. We also need to review our assessments methods and incorporate multi assessment methods to help students reach their full potential. Discourse is perhaps one of the areas where a lot of work needs to be done in relation to educating the general public, teachers, students, family members and friends around the language we use.

To Achieve this? What are some things students can do

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 been 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. The impacts on the self and the view that having dyslexia is associated to vulnerability was also explored. Interestingly, the everyday agency my research participants practiced altered this sense of vulnerability. These everyday agency practices helped them to build resilience and assisted in creating a more enjoyable university experience on a more level playing field. It also allowed a deeper meaning of my participants' experiences of having dyslexia in third level education to gain these personal insights.

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 also mindset changes by teaching staff, policy makers and third level institutions. I also examined how these relationships are perceived and highlighted how they

are changing (albeit at a slow process) based on processes of social stratification and universities' policies. These relationships were shown to be imbued with practices of reciprocity and exchange⁴³ and impacted on both students and others.

My research also sought to make the familiar unfamiliar, and the unfamiliar familiar, in order to assist us in gaining a deeper understanding of experiencing dyslexia through the prism of difference. Dyslexia is often portrayed as a negative and we have seen how this can create a self-image of being defeated, of not being able to do what other people can do, which often overshadowed the achievements of all my research participants, whose successes were interwoven with their "deficit". I also highlighted that when a person is willing to disclose their dyslexia and it is disclosed in a safe environment and free from negative outcomes, alongside a neurodiverse approach which embraces dyslexia as a different way of learning and not a life limiting disability, success is achieved. The data highlights that when my participants and I accepted our dyslexia as a unique and integral part of our being, viewed dyslexia as a difference rather than a deficit, and as several participants referred to it, experienced their "coming out", a great deal could be achieved.

One of the biggest things to remember is, "comparison is the thief or death of joy." Do not engage in it. This is something I have had to learn to live with and adapt too. This is because society has told us that there is a typical brain and a "right" way to learn and everyone now feels this is the "right" way. When you are neurodivergent, it is more difficult to learn in the way we are encouraged to, and we often think we are less and compare ourselves to others who might be more suited to that way of learning. As a result, neurodiverse people begin to believe that they have something wrong with them or have a deficit in their brain. It can then take the joy out of doing that thing they liked or even trying out new things. Instead of focusing on what is supposed to work or works for others, a tip is to focus on what works for you and to do that. When you have discovered what works for you, speak to people who might be able to help and advise you further with this and research what resources and supports are available for you also.

Reflecting on all of the above, my research⁴⁴ showed how, in spite of all these barriers, by removing the DIS from disadvantage and when the right

⁴³ Anne Byrne, and Lenòtin, Ronit, *(Re)searching Women: Feminist Research Methodologies in the Social Sciences in Ireland* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2000).

⁴⁴ Murphy, "Experiencing Dyslexia."

inclusive learning environment is enabled and provided, students with dyslexia can achieve success on a par with their peers. Therefore, that studying with dyslexia is not all bad and by moving out of a pre-existing fixed mindset to a more growth mindset will allow one to view dyslexia and studying in a new light and to do things in a different way: this is what being neurodivergent can lead to. Rather than promoting dyslexia through “rose tinted” glasses to promote that all is comparator, my research highlights that studying with dyslexia can be done and successful studying can be achieved.

Given the substantial rise in students who are neurodivergent now attending higher education, and perhaps more importantly, the number of students that do not seek support from the access office, even small changes can have a significant effect on the learning experience of students who identify as neurodivergent. Neurodiversity in education is a complex space; however, the research participants succeeded, not in spite of their dyslexia, but in partnership with their dyslexia and their unique strengths. Neurodiverse people can very often live in a world that is not always designed for them, which can generate a lot of struggles that are unique to them because of how people view being neurodiverse. If we all view neurodiversity in the same way as all cultural diversities and differences, it can then be used as a means of empowerment and to promote the positive qualities possessed by those with a neurodivergent difference. 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 are many people who have impairments, and it is society, culture and inflexibility that is disabling.