Studying with dyslexia and achieving in partnership with it in higher education

Introduction

Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty, under the umbrella term of neurodiversity and a person with dyslexia is viewed as having a disability and to be vulnerable. Neurodiversity is an umbrella term for a range of different neurobiological challenges. These can be referred to as specific learning difficulties and developmental disorders which can include dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyscalculia, autistic spectrum, and Tourette syndrome (Clouder, et al, 2020). There is no normal standard brain that exists to which all other brains can be compared to. Therefore, 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).

When I was young, there were no opportunities for me to complete my leaving certificate course, let alone attend a third level educational institution. Nevertheless, this suited me fine as I loved learning but did not like how they taught me or labelled me. After acquiring a disability resulting from an accident in 2007, I returned to adult education in 2008 to complete a level 3 course. In 2010 I entered Maynooth University to begin my BA and I stayed to complete my BA, HDip, Masters and a PhD. As wonderful, empowering, rewarding and life-changing as this journey was, it was fraught with difficulties, self-doubt and what seemed to me as twice as much effort required, compared to my peers. In the first year of my PhD in 2016, I was diagnosed with dyslexia, and this became my light bulb moment and the catalyst to completely change my research topic, which has resulted in this research on 'Experiencing Dyslexia Through the Prism of Difference'.

Research Overview

The findings of this research illustrate the negative impacts of attitudinal and institutional barriers, discourse, behaviour and cultural expectancies around school, 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 (HE), the struggles they face and the barriers which are encountered. This became the motivation for this research, to challenge and thus, alter fixed mindsets, prejudices, attitudinal and institutional barriers, and societies expectations of students with dyslexia in HE.

This research was conducted using ethnography as the mode of enquiry and was carried out with participants who have dyslexia and were studying in HE in Ireland. 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 writing analysis. 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. An expression of interest with a project information sheet was sent to the Access Officers of the institutions. They in turn forwarded this on to students with dyslexia who were registered with them. following this participants self-selected. All methods used were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards

of and were reviewed and approved by, the ethics committees of Maynooth University and Technological University, Dublin. Informed consent was acquired from all the individual participants in this project. A questionnaire was used in which 273 students participated.

People with dyslexia may experience greater stress and frustration as they endeavour to learn, resulting in heightened anxiety, 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. 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. 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. However, 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.

Dyslexia is often viewed through an ableist lens, however, this research advocates changing to a neurodiverse approach to eliminate ableism. Looking at dyslexia without internalised and externalised ableism enables us to advocate on behalf of people with dyslexia using this new 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 research has highlighted how adopting these 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 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. 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 research shows how students experience dyslexia through multiple 'selves' and identities, in terms of other aspects of difference. 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. All the participants spoke about this process and the need for third level institutions to find and encourage safe ways for students with dyslexia to disclose. While attending university, participants stated that embracing their difference and telling others about it was an extremely difficult process; nonetheless, when they did begin embracing their dyslexic 'self', it was like a 'coming out'. AIB supported this notion when she told us she was ashamed of her dyslexia and never sought support, however, after her 'coming out' moment.

I had no issues as I wasn't ashamed of it [dyslexia] anymore Even my family said to me I literally went from one person to a completely different person when I left school and went to college (AIB).

It's about you as a person and how you deal with the situation out in the real life, who you tell. But it's fine (Heffo).

You know when you're having as I call it a dyslexic day. I find that difficult to get past and I often wonder what it would be like to have a non-dyslexic day, and I wonder what others think (Ali).

It's just, mentally I'm fine, emotionally I'm fine and physically I'm fine. Yeah. It's just not an actual disability, just a

different way of learning (Heffo).

This highlights the experience of dyslexia from the inside out and challenges the notion that difference is a binary system comprising rigidly dichotomous entities, arguing instead that it is "multifaceted, complex, always changing, and infinitely sociocultural" (Slesaransky-Poe and García, 2009). 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, one of the central themes is concerned 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).

I grew up not thinking that I was stupid because that was what I was told, but I was never thinking I was as clever as anybody else (Winehouse).

The Driver suggests that in his experience, his identity is being framed solely by his dyslexia and he feels he is pigeon-holed in education because of this identity:

I've got lots of different parts and one of them parts is dyslexia, so it's like that's all I am, I'm pigeonholed as dyslexic and that's how they [his university] identify me (The Driver).

Brief Overview of Findings

This research gave an insight into the research participants' experiences of the barriers encountered by students with dyslexia in third level education, the disclosure process and its effects and the discourse around dyslexia. Nonetheless, this research shows how, in spite of all these barriers, by using a neurodiverse approach and when the right inclusive learning environment is enabled and provided, students with dyslexia can achieve success on a par with their peers. The number of students attending third level education with disabilities is steadily growing according to AHEAD (2017 & 2021). However, the number of students with disabilities who obtain their final higher education degree does not match this increase according to Griful-Freixenet, et al, (2017). That research also 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' (Griful-Freixenet et al, 2017). Approximately 40 percent of undergraduate students with dyslexia achieve a 2:1 or above, compared to over 50 percent of non-dyslexic students, according to Richardson (2015).

Once again, highlighting the themes that emerged from the data analysis, these mainly revolved around institutional and attitudinal barriers, discourse, disclosure, stigma, effects and impacts on the 'self' and how voice suppression is invoked and initiates academic imprisonment. Nonetheless, dyslexia 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. The next section will highlight the implications for practice and how we can remove some or all of these barriers.

What Did We Learn

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 support services has

risen by 226 per cent (AHEAD 2021). 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 (Ibid). 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 affects a student's educational experience and what can be done to develop a more inclusive classroom. Many of the research participants have spoken about how certain teachers had caused issues for them either through a lack of understanding of dyslexia and/or a teacher's embedded beliefs around dyslexia. In this research project, the knowledge lecturers had on dyslexia, and its impact appeared to come from personal experience of family, friends, or students with dyslexia. There was no evidence of any formal training or awareness campaigns around dyslexia from their institutions for academic staff.

Some of the barriers highlighted in my research are the impacts on the self, self-confidence, and self-esteem, which in turn have been shown to be inhibitors to successful studying.

Because of my low esteem I didn't even go there [to support service], I kind of juggled my way myself (Joy).

My research also highlighted the difficulties my research participants had with note taking, comprehension and memory recalling of specific subject-related academic language from lectures and tutorials. 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.

It was so weird that it was like, I had no support there. I had a laptop that they gave me, but I had nobody with me to help me use it (Kitty Kat).

I just wanted to bounce that laptop off the wall; it was pure hell engaging with it (The Driver).

I deleted it from my laptop, there is no easy way [laughs] (Rolling Stone).

I struggled with all the reading, writing and technology when I first went to university and trying to 'get it right (The General).

Smithwicks never used the assistive technology supports as knew she "would not be able to do it" (Smithwicks).

The classic accommodations given to students with dyslexia are precious and must stay: however, we need to assist students to receive the full value of these supports and maximise their usefulness. For this to happen, third level education needs to deliver training workshops and develop community-based links with external organisations which will assist with these programmes for students with dyslexia. External organisations such as the Dyslexia Association of Ireland deliver workshops, in-house training, and practise-based training programmes for educators to develop inclusive classrooms and resources for their students. Third-level educational institutions should conduct writing workshops for students with dyslexia on academic writing, referencing, structuring work, exam study and time management. Although these are provided at present in most third level institutions, and most education establishments cover these in the curriculum for most first-year undergraduate programmes, students with dyslexia need more than the hour-long lecture which covers so much at once. They could be offered as an extra resource for students and if time and funding constraints prevent this, a recorded version of the classes could be an option.

Several recommendations have arisen from my research and my participants' experiences around some of the teaching methods used in third level education and some of the rules surrounding assessment. Of specific interest was that the insistence on using particular fonts such as Arial, Times New Roman and/or Calibri for academic writing was found not to be inclusive or sustainable. I found that institutions advise us when writing up assignments to use font styles Arial and Times New Roman. 'All essays should be typed using Times New Roman… (Department of Anthropology, Maynooth University, 2020:4) and 'The font Times New Roman or similar… Arial, should be used' (Department of Humanities, TU Dublin, 2020:12). However, participating students found difficulties reading particular words in Times New Roman with lots of m's, commitment or w's, windows, they imagined those words as being in italics or a different font than the rest and they get 'lost' while reading (Wilkins, 2013, 2016, Le Floch & Ropars, 2017, Murphy, 2021). I conducted a survey with 273 students registered on a Level 8-degree course about these font styles and the results will correlate with this argument. The results confirmed that the two compulsory fonts were the least favoured. Due to the design of Verdana, it scored the highest favourite font amongst participants. Verdana was preferred by 78% of the students surveyed as their preferred font to read and the general comments were because it '**was easy to read**' and '**I never lost my place**' Whilst all three fonts are broadly acceptable for access, university preference cannot supersede the student's individual request for reasonable accommodations such as font choice. Institutions should review their disability supports to ensure staff and students are aware of this.

Another area of change that is recommended as a reasonable accommodation is teaching staff releasing material prior to lectures to ensure students with dyslexia (and all students) have ample time to study the material before class, thereby ensuring greater accessibility and participation. A learning strategy that negates affective learning for those with dyslexia is the notion of 'making' everyone speak or needing all students to 'make an attempt' to engage in lectures and tutorials. This can act as an exclusive practice rather than an inclusive one. My research shows how this creates unfairness, 'ordeals of language', and thus, invokes voice suppression and academic imprisonment.

The Universal Design Learning model which is underpinned by the three Universal Design Learning principles of engagement, representation, and action and expression (CAST, 2011; AHEAD, 2021) promotes an inclusive model for students of all abilities and provides high-quality individual supports for those students who need them. How all the barriers to learning and participation identified above can be removed should be considered during the process of adoption of this inclusive model. The UDL model is now adopted by HE in Ireland.

Some of the reasons provided in this research for not registering with access offices to explore supports were:

- **dyslexia supports appeared to be generic and not on an individual need basis**
- **a desire for independence,**
- **and/or reasons related to the perceived stigma experienced by some individuals engaging with support services after disclosing their dyslexia**.

We need to bring awareness of the negativity that is connected to disclosing dyslexia in education and begin to provide these safe and inclusive spaces. 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 about the language we use. This can be achieved through training on language and its effects and examining people's values, beliefs, and prejudices with regard to people with dyslexia. My research has highlighted how the discourse

around dyslexia can affect people and it has untold emotional implications and effects and imposes seen and unseen stigma. This stigma imposes restrictions on people with dyslexia whether they disclose or not, which leads to fears manifesting, which in turn, contributes towards imposing sanctions on the self. Suppression of one's voice is a sanction and thus impacts self-esteem and self-confidence. Embracing the current drive to improve technology in both the manufacturing and accessibility of these technologies is vital. Third level education needs to recognise and implement peer-led and reviewed research findings to enhance future teaching and learning environments for students as this will create more inclusive third-level education institutions for students with dyslexia.

Given the substantial rise in students with dyslexia now attending higher education, and perhaps more importantly, the number of students who do not seek support from the access office, even small changes can have a significant effect on the learning experience of students with dyslexia. 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.

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