

Stories from school: dyslexia and learners' voices on factors impacting on achievement

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Students with dyslexia often experience low self-esteem and, linked with this, low academic achievement. Our research, commissioned by the Higher Education Academy, was carried out by academics in two universities, one in the south-west of England and one in the north-west, over 2009–2010. It set out to address 'transitions and questions of "access" to higher education for students with identified disabilities'. While we accessed interesting material in this area we were also impressed by the wealth of material provided by our respondents with dyslexia on their school experiences, in particular factors that had impacted on their self-esteem and academic achievement. Thus this article, while not an intended outcome from our work on matters of transition to higher education, emerges as a story telling a rich and illuminating tale of student success and failure and lifting the curtain on factors impacting on self-esteem and academic achievement for students with dyslexia at school.

Key words: dyslexia, self-esteem, access, academic achievement.

Introduction

Literature suggests the need for teaching and learning research in higher education (HE) to adopt a more extensive and integrated approach to understanding disabled students' experiences as learners (Fuller *et al.*, 2004). Research has called for studies to support HE institutions in adopting informed, monitored and regularly evaluated policies that reflect the inclusive aims and objectives of Government policy (DfES, 2001; Holloway, 2001; Rose and Shevlin, 2004; DCFS, 2010; May and Bridger, 2010).

This article emerges from a study that endeavoured to address the above need. The researchers were brought into the lives of five first-year education students who provided them with rich tales of their school days and first year of university. Of these five students, four had a recognised diagnosis of dyslexia and one of cerebral palsy. It is the

purpose of this article to highlight significant findings, primarily from those students with dyslexia, on their experiences of school.

It is suggested that there exists a strong connection between student self-esteem and academic achievement (Rhodes and Nevill, 2004; Pollak, 2005). As Rhodes and Nevill suggest (2004, p. 190):

'Self-esteem has been found to be a significant determinant of student motivation and in turn poor motivation . . . to contribute to poor academic performance'.

Burke (2002), in her research with 'non-traditional' students, draws on their use of the word 'intimidating' to describe experiences of education and fears of going to college. She draws on Morley's portrayal of the internalisation process some 'non-traditional' students go through, resulting in self-perception as an unworthy learner and thinker. This is connected with Freire's work on 'cultures of silence' (Freire, 1985) and Freud's theories on subordination where, it is suggested, individuals take on board 'the negative characteristics that their oppressors have projected onto them' (Burke, 2002, p. 83). Our work attempts to address this projection, to understand diverse learners' experiences of education, by locating in our findings stories that illuminate learner 'intimidation', 'negative self-perception' and 'low self-esteem'.

Shah, Travers and Arnold (2004), in their work addressing factors related to high-achieving disabled people, draw the reader's attention to the lack of life history research on learners' education experiences impacting on academic success or failure. Pollak's (2005) work connects with Shah *et al.* (2004) and in examining the student with dyslexia's experience at HE suggests the tendency for much research on dyslexia to stem from a neuropsychological viewpoint which, in his view, potentially negates the wisdom of the individual experience. He argues:

'There is very little literature which sets out the dyslexic person's point of view . . . certainly not a great deal about adults and even less about HE' (Pollak, 2005, p. xvii).

Goode (2007) has produced material drawing the reader's attention to matters of self-esteem, achievement and the

need for research to come from the users' perspective, that is, to access in an ethical and meaningful manner the voice of the students themselves. Linked to this is MacConville (2007) whose work is steeped in theories of emancipatory research method (Chappell, 2000; Kitchen, 2000) and Gibson (2006) who, drawing on Freire, suggests the existence of a 'culture of silence' in education as linked to dominant social discourse. The argument regarding the need for free, open and critical dialogue as explored in Gibson (2006) connects with Evans and Lunt (2002) and Armstrong (2005).

The work of the researchers and authors above suggest the need for education practitioners to develop a fuller and more critical understanding of disabled learners' education experiences, to access a richer knowledge of the elements of 'non-traditional' students' education that serve as negative and/or positive in relation to self-esteem and achievement and to do so with a critical eye on their own practices. In sum their work promotes the need for a more thorough understanding and meaningful application of critical pedagogy in our education institutions. While much research and linked policy has endeavoured to do this, promoting a social model approach in understanding disability, institutional disablism as linked to the continued existence of a dominant culture continues (Burke, 2002; Madriaga, 2007). Madriaga (2007, p. 400), drawing on the work of Oliver (1998), offers a clear and accessible definition of institutional disablism:

'The disproportionate number of disabled students in higher education can be credited as living in a disablist society... in which everyday practices of society members, including those in education (i.e., both staff and learners), perhaps unbeknown to them may perpetuate oppressive structures upon those who identify or are categorized as being disabled'.

While primarily interested in matters of transition to university, topics of academic achievement, success and self-esteem at school were popular stories told by all of our respondents with dyslexia. The stories told provided critical insights into continuing practices of institutional disablism along with insightful suggestions by our respondents on practices and ways in which critical educationalists might counter this. Thus the school experiences of our respondents became a story which, upon reviewing our findings, the literature and liaising with our respondents, we felt needed to be told.

Methodology

In keeping with our particular academic and political views on disability and education we adopted an emancipatory approach to our research methodology (Chappell, 2000; Goodley, 2004). As asserted by MacConville, (2007, p. 2):

'An emancipatory approach entails engaging with several key issues which include establishing relationships with

Table 1. Semi-structured interview schedule

<i>Exploring transitions and questions of 'access' to higher education for students with identified disabilities</i>
<i>(Opener):</i>
Can you tell me about your particular disability and how it impacts on your everyday life?
Linked to the previous question can you tell me about positive education experiences at school/college? Could I ask you to tell me about positive experiences you have had in your education community's (school, lessons, classes or otherwise) responses to your particular learning needs?
Can you tell me about negative education experiences at school/college? Could I ask you to tell me about negative experiences you have had in your education community's (school, lessons, classes or otherwise) responses to your particular learning needs?
What kind of attitude/s do you think your friends/peers in school/college had towards your disability? Did you feel able to discuss your particular needs with your peer group?
Can you tell me about how your particular needs were assessed in school/college?
Can you tell me about how your particular needs were assessed upon your acceptance of a place at university?
With regard to your transition to university life and undergraduate learning can you highlight positive and/or negative education experiences?

those with disabilities, listening to their voices and asking how the knowledge and skills which emanate from the inquiry can be employed to improve their situation'.

We responded to both universities' research ethics protocol procedures and official guidelines, ensuring that our research project was approved in full prior to any contact with students. At the end of the first term, 2009–2010, a letter setting out the project's aims and methods was sent to all first-year students on one particular education degree course. We received consenting replies from five students with a recognised, diagnosed and disclosed disability, three from one university and two from the other. For the purpose of our study all five participants were given pseudonyms.

Two individual semi-structured interviews were carried out with each student, one in the middle of term two and the second, a more informal meeting, at the end of the academic year.

Table 1 sets out the semi-structured interview schedule used in our first interview. We made it clear to our respondents that the questions were there as a guide and they did not have to answer all or any if they so wished. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and after transcripts were completed time was spent analysing the material.

The results

We made use of a thematic data analysis approach, extracting themes from the interview transcripts which were then sent to our respondents for feedback and confirmation. For the purposes of this particular article, with its focus on factors in school impacting on the self-esteem and academic achievement of learners with dyslexia, five of these thematic findings, as noted in Table 2, are explored.

Table 2. Thematic findings

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- (1) Setting and differentiated teaching practices
 - (2) GCSE subject choice
 - (3) Teachers' attitudes and student diagnosis
 - (4) Peers and relationships
 - (5) Feelings of failure and self-esteem
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Setting and differentiated teaching practices

Our respondents had noteworthy experiences in academic setting practices, particularly when they found themselves placed in bottom sets. There was a 'resignation' of being unable to move to a higher set: this, it seemed, impacted upon self-esteem and motivation. Respondents shared the expectation that, upon being placed in a lower set, one would not achieve beyond an average C grade in related GCSE subjects:

Susan: *'I was in the bottom sets for like maths and English and they just thought that I was like, not dumb but not as clever as everyone else and I just like had no motivation to do anything or and I didn't really want to try, but then obviously I did and when I went to college it was much easier.'*

Zoe: *'I was told in Year 9 after my SATS that I would never get above a C in science, I mean, how can they say that, you know, kids change over the years, but I went to all the lunchtime clubs and after school clubs and because science was quite practical and no other bugger wanted to turn up to any of these classes, you know, I wouldn't get home until 5 o'clock at night, it was literally one to one tuition, they taught me in a practical way . . . I believe that is why I got where I am.'*

These findings suggest that although placed in lower ability groups these pupils had the potential to achieve, as indicated by their subsequent transitions into higher education. Hall (2009) makes a point that needs consideration by those working with learners who have dyslexia, that their academic achievement profiles can be inconsistent. This was clearly the case with our respondents.

Research into the reading experiences of pupils with dyslexia within withdrawal groups and the impact of differentiated reading schemes suggests that the reductive texts used can result in low learner motivational levels and are unlikely to result in significant academic progress (Anderson, 2009). This is clearly illustrated by comments from the following respondent:

Caroline: *'I remember being in like the lower sets for primary school as well, because in Year 5 or 6 and then we would get split up into our maths and English sets and I remember being*

always one of the bottom ones. I think I was in one of the lower reading groups, you know, the bands, my mum complained and I ended up being put up at a level that everyone else was at and I quite enjoyed actually reading proper books instead of the band ones.'

One of our respondents made quite a profound observation which reflects the work of many academics who argue for a social model of disability to frame teaching practices in education (Gibson and Blandford, 2005; Ainscow, 2007; MacConville, 2007). In discussing her experiences of being placed in the lower curriculum set and the lack of challenge in the learning materials used, she felt her learning difficulty, the label she prefers to use, was made worse because of teaching styles and the inability of her teachers to respond directly to her particular needs as and when they became apparent:

Zoe: *'I was diagnosed when I was at university, but I have struggled all my life and looking back over all my primary school reports and secondary school reports, we can see the theme throughout all of it which is quite interesting, although I call it a learning difficulty I am quite passionate about the fact that it's been created because of the education system.'*

Interviewer: *'Could you tell me a little bit more about that?'*

Zoe: *'The one way street and how they teach, because, well I had, basically I have been a workaholic all my life, I used to study even under the duvet with a torch at 3 a.m. to try and get information in my brain because I knew I was struggling. Teachers were telling my parents that my grades were absolutely fine, I was heading for Cs and Bs in GCSEs and not to panic. They told me that I had work overload and stuff but they didn't understand my frustrations that it took me so long to get to where I was and the only way I managed to get through my GCSEs and get really high grades was because I went to all the extra-curricular classes on every single subject after school, lunchtime classes, break-time classes, the same with my A levels, because no one else turns up to do those classes it was one to one tuition.'*

Her astute reflections on the low motivational impact of setting upon pupils and her subsequent desire to achieve suggests that Zoe's personal drive, while leading to physical exhaustion, resulted in her academic success. It seems that this cannot be attributed to her school experiences or solely the support of her teachers but primarily to her particular

drive, dedication and desire to be a high achiever regardless of the internal and/or external barriers presented. This connects with some of the arguments raised in Shah, Travers and Arnold (2004).

GCSE subject choice

Our respondents discussed how, because of setting practices, subject choice for GCSE was restricted. In one case it was noted that pupils in the lower set were not able to take formal qualifications in modern foreign languages or science but instead were encouraged to choose vocational qualifications such as BTEC.

Interviewer: *'Did you learn a foreign language at school?'*

Susan: *'Yeah, but then I got put in Year 10, it was like they thought the thickest students had to do BTEC in like sports and not do a modern language and I had to drop science as well, so I had to do like a science BTEC in Year 9 and then in Years 10 and 11 did a sports BTEC.'*

Interviewer: *'Did you want to do a language?'*

Susan: *'Yeah I did, I wanted to do science as well but they stopped me and others in my year. They like completely dropped me on science. I didn't have a choice on that and then I had to do like a BTEC which made me feel like even thicker because everybody knew who was doing the BTEC and they said that people who do BTECs are dumb and stuff.'*

In this particular case it is clear that student voice and opinion are not being listened to, that the view of the professional is seen as best and it is more about ensuring a manageable timetable for the school community than supporting individual and diverse learners in their subject choices. This is a debatable area which connects to the work of Ainscow (2001) and Brownlee and Carrington (2000) on their arguments regarding mainstream school cultures of effectiveness acting as a challenge and a barrier to meaningful inclusive education practices.

Teachers' attitudes and student diagnosis

Respondents discussed issues of negative teacher attitudes, lack of support and the low expectations they felt teachers had. Interviews with all respondents highlighted that none had a formal assessment or confirmed diagnosis of dyslexia until they left school and went into further education or university; however, on review of our findings, each student

exhibited difficulties throughout their primary and secondary education that were 'typical' of a specific learning difficulty.

Zoe: *'I think is because I really wanted to succeed and get good grades and I found it hard and nobody would listen because the teachers kept saying either I was lazy, my grammar structure was poor, to, she is doing too much, she has to stop, she is absolutely knackered. I think it is my determination to do well and it was trial and error on how do I learn because I knew I didn't learn the same as anyone else, I couldn't even absorb the teacher in the front of the class just speaking.'*

'My English teacher told me I would never get above a D to a C in Year 10 coming into my GCSEs, she said she does not have this capability, she's never going to get above that, so I did everything, I walked away with an A, but I worked solidly.'

Susan: *'Some of the teachers gave me a little bit of extra help but everyone else just kind of said, get on with it, what is wrong with you?'*

Caroline: *'My maths teacher was a joke because he told us about two weeks towards the exam that none of us were going to get a C grade. I think he hated us because he thought we were just a bad group really, bottom group, even though I got on with my work.'*

This clearly links to the work of Avramedis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) and Garner (2000) on practitioner attitudes toward special educational needs (SEN), alluding to the impact negative practitioner expectations can have on diverse learners. Not all of the students interviewed had negative learning experiences. In one case a respondent discussed the very positive learning opportunities she was given by practitioners who embraced working with diverse learners.

Lauren: *'In secondary school I always remember it, especially in my French classes that after every essay or something they would set us, I would always go to my teacher and she would always know I would be coming to her . . . she would always know it was me coming to ask her about the essay or something, it was the same with other teachers, especially English, they would always know that I would come and see them and they were always really happy to sit with me and talk about it, and sometimes my English teacher would bring something like tea and coffee because she knew that I would come.'*

Interviewer: *'So that kind of adult relationship, making time for you and giving you space to address your particular needs was important?'*

Lauren: *'Yes, it made me feel really better, I never felt self-conscious or anything, they were always more than happy to help me and it was really nice actually to sit down with my teachers sometimes and just let it sink in as well.'*

This of course connects with much of the current research on the need for learners with special educational needs to be valued by their teachers and to be given adequate and appropriate time to address their learning needs. In this particular case we see clear inclusive educator practices as described by Gibson and Blandford (2005), in particular the implementation of the Acknowledge Understand Provide (AUP) model of teaching.

Linking teacher attitudes to practices of formal assessment, one can make the argument that if formal provision is not given, if there is lack of knowledge regarding the learner's particular condition, this presents a barrier to teachers. Knowledge is power and in all cases none of our respondents held a diagnosis of dyslexia before entering further education or university. In the case of Lauren, she, like our other respondents, did not have a formal assessment of her learning needs during her school years but certainly exhibited 'classic' symptoms of a specific learning difficulty. She discussed how her primary schoolteachers suggested to her parents that they suspected dyslexia but the school did not carry out a formal assessment:

Lauren: *'It was just in primary school that my teachers noticed. I think it was in Year 1 that they noticed my dyslexia and sometimes when I was writing, I would stop and start. I would read a sentence thinking, that's wrong and I remember saying to my teachers that 4 and 7s looked the same and then after I said it, I thought, 4 and 7s aren't really the same and I even contradicted myself but my teacher asked if I generally got confused when I read numbers. So they noticed and they brought my mum in then. They focused on my work, they looked through it and they noticed I had a lot of trouble with spellings and grammar. After that I had someone come and help me every now and again. I just got on with it.'*

Not only does a delay in diagnosis impact on practitioners' abilities to support diverse learners but, as shown in the work of Ott (1997) and Solvang (2007), it can result in negative learner self-esteem. As shown, low self-esteem and ongoing confusion regarding learning barriers result in longer-term problems with learner academic achievement (Humphrey and Mullins, 2002; Pollock *et al.*, 2004).

Peers and relationships

Respondents had experienced verbal abuse within their peer groups but no physical bullying. The following accounts explore this further:

Zoe: *'I remember in our school we had, the transition of having support assistance, or they were teaching assistants coming in to the classes and we did have one in most of our classes and I got told by my peers that I was a workaholic, I was a bum sucker, I was, you know, everything under the sun because I used to go and sit with the one to one support but that's how I got through my lessons. They were a godsend to me because at that time they weren't there for a particular student it was just generally there.'*

Interviewer: *'Was there any negativity from your friends at school?'*

Susan: *'No, not my friends because they were like, they all helped me but people who weren't really my friends weren't very nice. They just used to say that BTECs are dumb and that I was thick and stuff which obviously made me, I didn't feel very good about myself then and stuff.'*

Caroline: *'Like, my best friends they were really good, they always stood by me and everything and never said anything like that would hurt my feelings about being dyslexic but I know that some of my friends were not like, I don't know, I don't know why I hung around them really because they just seemed to take the mickey out of me sometimes... they were really good when they were on their own but when they were together they like, they used to bang off each other and just say things... They would just laugh like because I didn't understand what they were going on about.'*

These stories confirm much of the research into peer relationships and bullying in secondary schools of pupils who have a disability. While we see some positivity regarding the benefit and strength found in close and supportive peer relationships we can also see the negativity caused by lack of awareness and knowledge of diverse learning styles by peers. This connects to the work of Rosenthal (2001) who writes about the need for schools and education communities to raise awareness and understanding of disability in attempting to normalise what is perceived negatively as 'other'.

Feelings of failure and self-esteem

Susan was identified as dyslexic in her first year at college after tutors noticed that essays submitted were showing considerable errors, with words being omitted within sentences and poor spelling consistent with dyslexia. This possibility had not been formally picked up during her time at school and, in her view, this impacted upon how she perceived herself in relation to her academic abilities and peer group. As Hall (2009) acknowledges, not only does dyslexia impact upon pupils' academic work but also their self-confidence. When Susan and Zoe were asked how struggling with learning in school made them feel, the following responses were noteworthy:

Susan: *'I just felt like I was thicker than everyone else because everyone else seemed to be like getting As and stuff and I was still getting Ds, it just made me feel like I just didn't want to do it any more. Like emotionally, I just like, I never used to cry about it but I used to get upset about it because everyone else was talking about what they got and then I just didn't want to tell anyone either because I just thought it was like not a very good grade to get.'*

Zoe: *'I didn't even know what the term dyslexia was then, it didn't come to light until the end of secondary school, the last year into my A levels. I didn't know what it was, I thought I was thick. I used to cry quite a lot because I used to get frustrated because no one would understand. I mean it was the case I remember my friend just reading out a simple sentence in a science study and I kept flipping what the results were. I didn't know why and it was funny to start off with because when I had to repeat it back to her, I was not repeating it properly for the first five to ten times, it got really distressing, even one sentence or something like the force of gravity or about Newtons or something like that, we had done, back then it would take me two, three, four, five weeks to understand it yet everyone else in the class would get it by the end of the class.'*

Our respondents' reflections on the impact of failure connect to the work of Humphrey and Mullins (2002) who, as noted, discuss negative self-perception and its impact on achievement.

Discussion and implications

Dyslexia, recognised as a specific learning difficulty that can present in different forms (Hall, 2009) and impact upon an individual's learning and social and emotional well-being (Long *et al.*, 2007; Hall, 2009), is noted in the Code of Practice (DfES, 2001, 5:11) as needing early identification:

'The importance of early identification, assessment and provision for any child who may have special educational needs cannot be over-emphasised. The earlier action is taken, the more responsive the child is likely to be'.

Although Frederickson and Cline (2002) acknowledge that early identification and appropriate interventions can reduce potential difficulties within education at a later stage, they advise caution when undertaking early screening, suggesting that some children may be wrongly identified. Hall (2009) draws attention to the fact that teachers have a duty to identify any barriers to a child's learning under the SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001); however, it is not realistic to expect all teachers to be experts in the area of dyslexia or other SENs. However, the class teacher is expected to identify and assess children who are not making similar progress to peers. We would suggest that more needs to be covered and further research carried out in the field of teacher education and continuing professional development (CPD) specifically relating to inclusion and meeting the educational needs of all learners.

In this study, the students interviewed had not received a diagnosis of dyslexia until they entered further or higher education. The consequences of not having a 'label' and the appropriate support were clear in relation to their feelings of failure within the school education system. The data presented in this study support the findings of Glazzard (2010) and Madriaga (2007) that when pupils are given an early diagnosis of dyslexia they have a reason for the difficulties they experience and, as a consequence, become more confident in their own abilities. We suggest, in light of this and the evidence provided, that identification and formal assessment of learning needs must come early and be carried out in a positive environment where the voices of the learners are genuinely listened to and their views acted on (May, 2005; Gibson, 2006).

Pavey, Meehan and Waugh (2010) discuss the issues of late identification and suggest that although the individual has an explanation, it comes with consequences in terms of understanding the characteristics of dyslexia, adjustment to the new-found knowledge, impact upon self-perception and reaction of friends and family. Similarly, Ott (1997) suggests that adults certainly experience a wide range of responses to being diagnosed with dyslexia, ranging from relief to anger, disbelief and denial.

The attitudes of teachers impacted upon our respondents; some had positive experiences and others did not. This links with Humphrey (2003) and Riddick (1995, 1996). Long *et al.* (2007) suggest there is a need for teachers to identify and address not only the academic needs, but also the personal, social and emotional needs of a young person with dyslexia.

To conclude, it appears that although we are 16 years on since the first Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) and there are clear statutory guidelines on inclusion linked with academic

expectations for all learners, the lived education experiences of some pupils with special educational needs highlight discrepancies. We suggest that research needs to go further, looking more deeply at teacher education, teacher expectations, schools as social systems and ways we can address 'disability' and 'SEN' as labels in need of becoming positively normalised as opposed to negatively ostracised.

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