*Critical dyslexia: The discursive construction of dyslexia in higher education*

A thesis presented by

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Critical Dyslexia: the discursive construction of dyslexia in higher education

Abstract

The disparate ways in which dyslexia can be constructed in discourse in the higher education context have implications for the students who have been given the dyslexia label and for those in the wider learning community. The current study is an in-depth, two-level discourse analysis of two focus group conversations between university students with an identification of dyslexia. The study aimed to identify the discourses of dyslexia constructed during the focus groups; to explore the related subject positions students took up, offered or resisted (after Davies & Harre, 2001) and to consider some of the implications of such positionings; and finally to identify the wider discourses and ideologies reproduced in the texts (Willig, 2008; Gee, 2005). The researcher identified (co-constructed) the following key discourses of dyslexia in the texts: dyslexia as desirable, as innate deficit, as an excuse for stupidity or laziness, as difference, as disability, as social construction, and as identity. The researcher identified the following key subject positions taken up, offered or resisted in the texts: being intelligent/ able, being a survivor, being ‘just who I am’, being a hard-worker, being worthy/ deserving, being disabled, being a fraud, and being deficient. The researcher named four ideological threads active within the conversations: education and literacy; neoliberalism, meritocracy and the individual; health, morality and medicine; and positivism, cognitivism and biological determinism. The analysis suggested that particular subject positions encouraged or denied participants certain ways-of-being as learners. Analysis also suggested that these subject positions were tied to particular discourses of dyslexia, and to particular ideological positions. This thesis considers the implications of the identified discourses and ideologies in full and suggests how this knowledge can be used within higher education and within critical psychology to raise awareness of how and why talk which constructs psycho-educational types of learner matters.

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Introduction

This work is an exploration of the ways in which dyslexic students construct themselves and each other as learners, the ways they conceptualise dyslexia, the ways they deal with conflicts between different discourses of dyslexia, and the ways these constructions open up or close down certain actions and ways of being in the educational world they are a part of. It is also a discussion of the discourses students reproduce in sharing their stories and perspectives of education and a discussion of the ideologies from which such discourses are built. The work is based upon discourse analysis of two focus group discussions between myself and dyslexic university students.

Having worked as a specialist teacher for university students with labels of specific learning difficulties for many years, I became interested in why students varied so much in their understandings of what dyslexia meant, the degree to which they felt dyslexia was a part of their learning identities, and the ways their understandings appeared to influence how confident they were in their academic abilities, what support they took up, and how they compared themselves to their peers. I also became interested in my own part in producing and reproducing particular discourses of learning and dyslexia. I should say, to begin with, that I am not attempting in this thesis to answer the question of the existence, or not, of dyslexia. This question is a fashionable one, but in my opinion, not a helpful one. I do, however, certainly question the assumption that cognitive science has unrivalled access to the ‘truth’ about dyslexia; indeed I would question the right of any single field to be judged capable of producing a neat definition relevant to all contexts and times. What I do not doubt, though, are the specific difficulties some students seem to experience in communicating ideas in written form, under timed conditions; in reading; and in processing and remembering what they have heard and read. The reason a label like dyslexia is useful here is because these difficulties become disabling in an education system which makes such skills and abilities central in its teaching and assessment.

It is also important to say that my work has been only with adults who have achieved a high degree of educational success. All of the participants in this study were students enrolled at a Russell Group university and all were doing ‘well’ academically. The ways these students constructed their identities depended upon their histories, their educational journeys, the local context, their interaction with space, peers and ideas as well as the discourses available to them. The availability of the same discourses to a dyslexic child who is ‘failing’ in school would be unlikely to help produce identities which were identical to those the students in the current study constructed. One question that might be asked of my work is why I chose to undertake research with ‘successful’ university students rather than, perhaps, with a more socially marginal group. My answer is that, although the university students I work with are often doing alright, they are particularly vulnerable to doubt about their own intellectual abilities, feel as though they have something to prove, and unless they make use of the supports available to them and push hard for additional adjustments, they are not as able as others to show how much and how deeply they understand what they are studying. It would seem unfair to argue this group does not deserve attention simply because other groups ‘suffer’ more.

There is a practical purpose to this work. My position is that, with a greater awareness of the ways we reproduce particular ideologies when we talk together about learning (differences and difficulties) and about education, and with an understanding of how we (inadvertently) use these ideologically laden discourses to construct ourselves and each other, we may learn to have a greater say in who we are (how we ‘be’). By we, I am referring to us all, to humankind. Recognising how we help to produce our identities through talk would be a vital step in resisting the power of particular discourses (for example individualism and neoliberalism) to play us like puppets blind even to their strings, let alone the puppeteers. My intention is to use this work in future training of teachers in specific learning difficulties in post-16 education. I am constructing just such a course as I write this. At minimum I would like trainee teachers to be aware in their own practice of how they position their students during their specialist teaching, and to take note of how students position themselves. I would like them to feel able to open up a conversation about how their students built the ideas they have of themselves as learners with a label, how these conceptions interact with their ways-of-being in higher education.

The aims of the studies discussed in this thesis are as follows:

* To identify conceptions or discourses of dyslexia the participants (including myself) in this study construct while taking part in the focus group.
* To better understand the subject positions or identities that these conceptions and discourses offer and to better understand the implications for the participants in taking up such identities/ subject positions.
* To identify the relevant wider discourses and ideologies drawn upon by the participants from which the conceptions of dyslexia, subject positions, and related identities have been constructed.

My research questions are as follows:

1. Which conceptions or discourses of dyslexia are constructed during the focus groups?

2. What positions are taken up/ offered by participants in relation to these

constructions or discourses?

 3. What connections are there between constructions of dyslexia, related

positionings, and explicit or implicit ways of being and ways of doing? That is,

how do constructions of dyslexia help to open up or close down certain

possibilities for feeling and behaviour?

4. How are certain constructions drawn upon and positions taken up within the

conversations?

*5. Which relevant wider discourses and ideologies are drawn upon (implicitly or explicitly) in the conversation and how do these interact and co-construct*

*participants’ identities as learners in higher education?*

6. What are the implications of drawing upon the named discourses and

ideologies for the participants (and others) within higher education?

Research questions one to four are addressed by the analysis and discussion in chapter four; research questions five and six are discussed in chapter five. Research question five (italicised) may also be considered the overarching one.

This thesis contains six key chapters plus appendices. Chapter one explores the literature around traditional scientific conceptions of dyslexia and retraces the emergence and solidification of dyslexia as an examinable discrete thing (an in-the-head deficiency). This chapter also considers the scientific conclusions about dyslexia in the social and political contexts in which they were constructed and considers the contradictions between some of the theories. Chapter one was the first chapter written and reads now as somewhat anti all cognitive science. My position here softened as my work progressed, but I have kept the original sentiment intact in this first chapter because, although it is aggressive, it is persuasive, and I wanted to preserve some of my own theoretical journey rather than hiding ideas which I more recently came to adjust. I hold that scientific facts are socially constructed. However, this should be considered alongside my positioning as a critical realist (see chapter three). While this chapter, and chapter two (discussed below), in part fulfil the role of the traditional literature review, they also comprise a discourse analysis of the texts they are discussing. This means that these chapters are written in the style of a discussion section of a paper; that is, less apparently neutrally, and more argumentatively. This is a conscious choice and one I felt was in keeping with the overall ethos and practice-driven aims of the research.

The second chapter explores the literature and media for alternative conceptions of dyslexia and looks more closely at the research into the experiences of students with dyslexia or specific learning difficulties in post-16 education. There are many such conceptions available across the internet, in the newspapers, and on television. Constructions of dyslexia as a middle-class myth, an excuse for laziness, a strength, as difference, as well as in-the-head deficit are all in wide circulation. This chapter also considers any suggestion in the literature that taking up these conceptions might have implications for students’ wider self-perspectives, approach to study, and other patterns of action. Finally, it considers the degree of choice people with specific learning difficulties have in shaping their own identities within education and the extent to which they may be able to resist discourses which co-construct less helpful ways of being. Chapters one and two, therefore, offer an in-depth discussion of what we ‘know’ about dyslexia and dyslexic people, how we have come to know this, and how this knowledge has changed over time. They consider also the implications of the various conceptions of dyslexia for people so labelled as they pass through western educational systems.

Chapter three is a description and discussion of my philosophical and methodological approach, ethical considerations and personal reflections. This chapter justifies my use of a specific kind of discourse analysis which makes room both for locally produced and fleeting realities constructed within the conversation and for external, historical and material ‘realities’ which limit what can be said. Likewise this approach makes use of a linguistic analysis, after authors such as Norman Fairclough and James Paul Gee, which recognises that English language rules have some consistency across time and place, even though individual contexts and individual histories will shift potential meaning, sometimes dramatically. However, this chapter also explains why linguistic analysis is not primary in the current research and why social meaning, personal and wider histories and narrative are. In addition, this chapter tries to answer some of the ethical questions raised through my work. The subsection entitled ‘reflection, positionality, limitations’ is retrospectively written. It considers what is meant by ‘science’ and ‘mind’ in the current research, discusses the contradictions within my analysis, and offers a detailed discussion of critical realism. This section is key to understanding the thesis.

Following chapter three are two chapters which combine analysis and discussion. The first of these is a full analysis of subject positions taken up or offered by the participants in the focus groups (including me). It begins with an identification of the different conceptions of dyslexia students construct in conversation, and then identifies the various subject positions made available by these discourses. Finally, this chapter analyses the ways in which certain subject positions are linked to certain ways of being, certain wider identities, and certain actions. Chapter five is a four-part analysis and discussion of ideology in the data. Each part considers how a particular ideology or group of ideologies speak(s) through the participants. The subsections are as follows: ideologies of education and literacy; neoliberalism, meritocracy and the individual; health, morality and medicine; and positivism, cognitivism and biological determinism. In each of these sections I talk about how these ideologies manifest in the text and how this appears to interact with the students ‘choices’ in positioning themselves and others as dyslexic learners. I discuss how these ideological voices may be sometimes damaging, sometimes freeing and everything in-between. My concluding chapter is brief; it draws together the key threads of the research and focuses upon the implications of this work for practice (my own and others’). It also suggests directions for future research.

There are a number of appendices which I refer to at points throughout the thesis. There are two tables, one for each focus group, which detail the constructions of dyslexia students produced in conversation, related subject positionings and actions/ feelings. There are also a number of diagrammatic representations of the focus groups and links between the different analytical layers. These are not essential to understanding the thesis, but represent points in my journey during which sketching diagrams was an aid to my own thinking and focus. They are included merely for interest. The transcripts themselves will not be included as appendices within the thesis in order to uphold confidentiality of participants.

Chapter 1: History and ‘science’ of dyslexia

*Introduction*

*When I talk of the ‘science’ of dyslexia in this chapter, unless stated otherwise, I mean the construct of science underpinning mainstream cognitive psychology. Later in the thesis I broaden the notion of science to include other kinds of investigation and knowledge production*.

Dominant scientific theories of dyslexia are brain or mind-centred. Whether they focus upon particular regions of the brain, or upon cognitive processes, these theories generally conceive of dyslexia as innate biological or neurological deficiency. There are disagreements over its definition and about where specifically the deficiency originates; how prevalent it is; whether the condition is unitary or sub-typed; how dyslexia is identified; and what the precise implications are for policy and education.

Research in dyslexia is mainly undertaken in the disciplines of cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and education, and has become an industry in itself; one which has generated an array of dedicated journals, profitable organisations and a good number of ‘experts’. Scientific conceptions of dyslexia direct educational policy and practice (for example, in the way psychological ‘diagnoses’ inform the construction of students’ individual learning plans, or in the way references to processing speed or working memory difficulties are used to justify the policy for dyslexic students to have additional resources at university); they also affect the lives of those identified with dyslexia both practically (for example, additional support in education), and psychologically (e.g. being presented with a ‘disabled’ identity – see the work by Pollack, 2005). Those who undertake research into dyslexia therefore have a particular social responsibility to examine the language they use, their motives for undertaking research, the social and political contexts in which research is conducted, and the assumptions implicit in their research questions; and to be as transparent as possible with regard to these. This chapter, therefore, involves a discussion of the literature relevant to our understanding of how ideas about dyslexia and ability have come to exist, but it also comprises a critical analysis of this literature. It is different from more traditional literature reviews in that it goes beyond a presentation of literature as recognition of what has been done before for justification of a proposed study.

In this chapter, I tease out some of the cultural and historical drivers of psychological and neuroscientific research into individual human differences as part of the discussion about how science came to shape our understanding of individual differences like dyslexia. I will focus on the last one hundred or so years of Western science and society, with some reference, where appropriate, to older developments and ideas (such as those of Descartes) which precede modern science, or to highlight particular cultural and philosophical paradigm shifts. As part of this discussion, I will follow the separation of science from philosophy and theology, and the coming of the idea of natural (rather than divine) endowment of human characteristics and abilities. Following this I will consider how social changes arising from industrialisation, capitalism, colonial power (and vulnerability), and educational change interacted with science’s growing interest in ‘man’ as a subject of study, ‘his’ genealogy; and how this contributed to the separation and expansion of psychology as an independent, but insecure discipline; an insecurity which was partly responsible for psychology’s alignment with the pure sciences, and for its reliance upon numbers and mental testing for its credibility (see Gould, 1981; Danziger, 1997; Rose, 1999 among others for rich discussions around this topic).

Intelligence testing, in particular, helped to raise the profile of psychology as a new and robust science of people. A look at the development and use of intelligence tests helps to show the connections between the social motives of those in power and the growth of an apparently neutral science of the individual. Mental testing has been described as the ‘raison d’etre’ of psychology (Manicas, 1987). Psychometric testing, including tests of IQ, played a key part in conceptions of perceived mental or moral ‘deficiency’, including (historically) descriptions of idiocy, imbecility, and feeblemindedness, madness, criminality, and social deviancy (Valencia, 1997; Gould, 1981; Goddard, 1913). IQ has also been integral to modern ideas about cognitive difference including specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia. For these reasons, I will talk about the mental testing movement, from its arguably more innocent early aims (e.g. those of Binet *et al*, 1916) to its rapid and blatant use in support of eugenics, and racism, (and sexism to a lesser degree) (e.g. in the various works by Galton, e.g. 1896, 1892/2000, 1883; Burt, 1937/1961, 1946; and Spearman, 1904).IQ testing is one example of a great urge to place individuals (and then groups) into a natural hierarchy according to fixed ‘hereditary’ traits. Darwin’s theory of natural selection, and Mendelian genetics were used to support the hierarchy’s rigidity, so that racism, sexism, and control of ‘abnormal’ people could be presented as science, ‘objective’ and ‘accurate’, and therefore unchangeable (Galton’s chapter on the inheritance of intelligence, 1869, is a good example of this, as is Goddard’s 1913 work). People placed into the category of dyslexia have similarly been construed as ‘abnormal’ simply by falling apparently outside the arbitrary limits constructing the ‘normal’ range of variation in ability (see, for example, DeFries et al. 1991).

I will also cover more briefly the impact that neuroscience had upon the study of (specific) learning disability. The focus on the brain as the centre of thought and ability, and the growing belief in a modular brain with localised functioning each played their part in the focus upon language areas in the brain, and upon investigation of differing hemispheric roles (e.g. Geschwind & Galaburda, 1987). Technological advances that permitted the counting and examinations of neurons allowed more detailed comparison of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ brains; as did the arrival of PET scanning and fMRI. All of these techniques have been employed in dyslexia research and have influenced scientific theories of dyslexia.

Although there has been much change within psychology and neuroscience in the last hundred years, and despite a huge amount of literature which criticises the idea of a unitary, measurable intelligence, the legacies left by certain individuals and movements within psychology have affected the way we perceive of specific learning disability today, not least as IQ testing is still central to its ‘diagnosis’. It is vital that we (researchers, dyslexic students, educators, public) recognise that science is socially driven, and that it cannot credibly claim to present a reality unaffected by the social context in which it is produced (Latour, 1987). And for those people with an interest in dyslexia, as a result of their own identification as such, or involvement in the field, it is essential that their approach to dominating scientific conceptions of dyslexia is critical.

A brief discussion of (the problems of) definitions of dyslexia

Following are a number of widely cited definitions of dyslexia (also called Specific Reading Disability, and a Specific Learning Disability):

1. ‘[A] disorder manifested by difficulty in learning to read despite conventional instruction, adequate intelligence and sociocultural opportunity. It is dependent upon fundamental cognitive abilities which are frequently of constitutional origin.’

(World Federation of Neurology. Critchley:1970)

1. ‘Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with very great difficulty.’

(British Psychological Society,1999: 64)

3. ‘Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.’

(International Dyslexia Association: 2002)

Defining dyslexia has been hugely problematic for scientists and educators. Definitions may focus upon behavioural ‘symptoms’, or underlying cause, or both. A person identified with dyslexia may experience a range of difficulties (and strengths) that differ from another person identified with dyslexia. Definitions also alter depending on the criteria used for ‘diagnosis’ (e.g. discrepancy of certain test scores with *IQ* score) and whether dyslexia is considered to be primarily of educational, medical, or scientific relevance (Miles & Miles, 1990). How an individual is ‘diagnosed’ will also affect who is chosen for participation in research (e.g. Valtin, 1978-9), and if criteria are not consistent, it is obviously difficult to compare conclusions and find consensus on definition. The methods used in research studies which help to build definitions are further complicated by arguments about whether dyslexia is one thing, or many (Grigorenko, 2001), and if it exists on a continuum then the question is raised of where the cut-off point for identification should be (Fletcher *et al.*, 1999).

The World Federation of Neurology definition presented above (1) has been particularly criticised for failing to specify the meaning of ‘conventional instruction’ and ‘adequate intelligence’; and for excluding those from poorer backgrounds (Rutter, 1978). ‘In the face of logical analysis’ wrote Eisenberg (1978) of this definition ‘the entire concept [of dyslexia] collapses so totally that one begins to wonder just how a distinguished group of neurologists came to agree on a non-definition of a non-entity.’ (31). We can see attempts to deal with the problems of the WFN definition in the definitions offered more recently by the British Psychological Society (2) and the International Dyslexia Association (3), but it is still far from straightforward.

I will return later to some of the specific reasons for the difficulties in defining dyslexia, and how the definitions we do have come to be. I will also later consider the power of categorisation in producing kinds of people (Hacking, 2002). However, I want first to talk about the main scientific theoretical conceptions of dyslexia, so that then I may logically turn to the first part of the discussion about the origins of these theoretical explanations and the resulting formal definitions.

*An outline of scientific theoretical conceptions of dyslexia*

Nicolson and Fawcett (2008) usefully group theoretical conceptions of dyslexia into ‘cognitive level explanations’ and ‘brain level explanations’. This division is helpful because it tells us something about the starting points and perspectives of the theories involved. In their ‘cognitive-level explanations’ are included the phonological deficit hypothesis, the double deficit hypothesis, and (Nicolson & Fawcett’s preference) the automatization deficit hypothesis; while under ‘brain-level explanations’ they have the cerebral cortex hypothesis, the magnocellular deficit hypothesis, and the cerebellar deficit hypothesis. I want to outline these hypotheses briefly before we turn to a historical and social analysis of their content and origin.

The phonological deficit hypothesis (Snowling, 1981) is well established and has a good deal of support in the literature (e.g. Ramus, 2003). The idea is that dyslexia is a particular difficulty in identifying graphemes or clusters of graphemes with corresponding phonemes (discrete sounds), and vice versa. This would explain difficulties in learning to read, or slow speed of reading later on. It does not directly explain some of the other characteristics of dyslexia, such as poor temporal sequencing and visual confusion (Stein & Walsh, 1997). This hypothesis does not comment upon why there is a phonological deficit; it only relies upon the circular definition that dyslexia indicates a phonological deficit, and a phonological deficit indicates dyslexia (Vellutino, 1978); thus, it is arguably insufficient as a theoretical explanation (Nicolson & Fawcett, 2008).

The double-deficit hypothesis (Wolf, 1999) argues that there are distinct groups of dyslexic people: those who have a phonological deficit (as described above), those with a slow naming speed (or slow processing speed) and those who have the ‘critical blow’ of both deficits (13).

The more recent automatization deficit hypothesis (Nicolson & Fawcett, 2008) refers to ‘a specific deficit in the procedural learning system’ (19). This means that people with dyslexia have a difficulty in automaticity or automatic learning; that is, certain skills may not become automatic, as they are likely to for non-dyslexic people after a degree of practice. Instead, these skills (such as reading, though others will be included also) will remain effortful. Declarative memory may be relied upon to compensate (Thomas, 2005). Nicolson and Fawcett (2008) consider there to be a strong link between this cognitive-level hypothesis and the brain-level cerebellar-deficit hypothesis (see below).

The cerebellar-deficit hypothesis is based upon evidence for differences in the cerebellum between dyslexic and non-dyslexic people, in neuroanatomical structure (Finch *et al.* 2002), and in biochemistry (Rae *et al.* 1998; 2002). It is argued that the cerebellum is involved in automatization, and that deficiency in the cerebellum may therefore be responsible for difficulties in procedural learning in dyslexia (Nicolson & Fawcett, 2008). However, the original hypothesis has been heavily criticised for weakness of evidence (Beaton, 2002).

The magnocellular-deficit hypothesis (Stein, 2001; Stein & Walsh, 1997) argues that a proportion of the instances of dyslexia may be explained by a problem with the visual and auditory magnocellular pathways in the brain; that is, problems in processing visual and auditory information. The cerebellum is again likely to be involved here (Stein, 2001). It is proposed that ‘unsteady binocular fixation’ (Stein, 2001: 12) or ‘defective oculomotor control’ (Stein & Fowler, 1981: 77) are present in many cases of dyslexia. The magnocellular-deficit hypothesis has been heavily criticised by Skottun (1998) for apparently ignoring the many studies which did not find reduced contrast sensitivity in dyslexia.

The final group of hypotheses introduced here are those based upon the evidence for hemispheric differences between the brains of people with dyslexia and those without dyslexia. While most human brains are more likely to have hemispheric asymmetry, with left-hemisphere dominance (Geschwind & Levitsky, 1968; and see also controversial work by McGilchrist, 2009, on the implications of such left-hemispheric dominance upon our lives in the present day), it has been argued that brains of dyslexic people are more likely to exhibit symmetry of the planum temporal (Morgan & Hynd, 1998), and to show other specific neuropathology (for details, refer to post-mortem work on the brains of a small number of apparently dyslexic individuals: Galaburda & Kemper, 1979; Galaburda *et al*., 1985; Humphreys, Kaufman & Galaburda, 1990). Galaburda’s research in this area was extensive, but his focus upon the study of a particular set of brains for a significant part of his work has been criticised because information about additional possible pathologies of the brains used was not present, because the sample size was so small, and because the technique of averaging across brains may have led to misleading results (Beaton, 1997:2002). Further, Grigorenko has argued ‘there has been no one brain structure for which findings have been replicated consistently’ (Grigorenko, 2001: 97) and prefers the idea that a number of different brain regions may act in concert. More recent research into hemispheric differences has found, among other things, anomalies in the left temporo-parietal lobe in studied dyslexic individuals (Shaywitz &Shaywitz, 2005; Rae *et al.* 1998) and in the left inferior occipito-temporal lobe (Pugh *et al.* 2001). Moreover, the brains used by Gallaburda and his colleagues in the 1970s (bear in mind Beaton’s criticism about the use of which) have been re-examined by Finch, Nicolson and Fawcett (2002) using more up-to-date techniques, and have been shown to have a larger proportion of large neurons, and smaller proportion of small neurons in the posterior lobe, anterior lobe, and inferior olive; as well as differences in a part of the cerebellar cortex.

These conceptions are not all mutually exclusive. They generally overlap in a number of ways: firstly, they agree that persistent reading difficulty is a central ‘symptom’; secondly, explicitly or implicitly, they consider dyslexia to be an innate deficiency, one that is of biological or neurological origin (though there was argument about the assumption of a neurological basis in the 1970s and 80s – see Dorman, 1985; Rutter, 1978), though the phonological deficit hypothesis is fairly quiet on this front; and thirdly, they recognise the need for educational remediation of some sort. There is also some agreement that dyslexia has a strong hereditary component (for summary of studies into dyslexia and genes, see Fisher & DeFries, 2002). There is general consensus that dyslexia is quantitatively measurable, and that it manifests at different levels of severity.

On the other hand, the hypotheses outlined above attend to different aspects of deficiency. At times they also disagree on where specifically the deficiency lies – whether in one particular locality in the brain, whether multiple regions acting together are responsible, or whether the focus is placed more on behaviour, or cognitive process rather than brain structure. There is further disagreement on whether dyslexia is unitary or sub-typed: Castles and Coltheart (1993) identified ‘surface’ and ‘phonological’ subtypes of developmental dyslexia that corresponded to similar categories of acquired dyslexia, though doubt has been cast upon this by Stanovich *et al.*  (1997) who argued that surface dyslexia was unlikely to be more than developmental delay, possibly partly due to environmental factors. Other divisions of dyslexia into, for example, ‘visual’ and ‘auditory’, ‘deep’ and ‘surface’, also have their followers (see Miles & Miles, 1990, for an overview of ‘splitters’ and ‘lumpers’: 103).

Another key disagreement centred around whether or not people with dyslexia were a distinct, anomalous group, who form a ‘hump’ at one end of the spectrum of ability (Rutter & Yule, 1975) or whether dyslexia was part of the normal continuum of reading disability (e.g. Shaywitz *et al.* 1992). This issue is partly bound up with ongoing disagreements about the use of IQ discrepancy criteria in the ‘diagnosis’ of dyslexia. This issue has been a major one in dyslexia research. Until recently, dyslexia would be identified only when there was a significant discrepancy between overall score on an *IQ*  test and scores for a number of other subtests which were intended to measure certain aspects of literacy, phonological awareness, working memory, and/ or processing speed. It was considered necessary for the IQ score to fall in the average or above average range for a diagnosis of dyslexia to be made. Use of IQ discrepancy criteria in dyslexia ‘diagnosis’ was still widely accepted following the work of Rutter and Yule in the 1970s, despite apparent lack of strong support for this approach (Fletcher *et al.* , 1999). However, this use of overall IQ discrepancy criteria to identify dyslexia has much less support currently, following sustained criticism from researchers such as Stanovich (1991, 1996,1997) – but the fact that these criteria were used for identifying research participants for a significant amount of time, means that many of the conclusions drawn about the nature of dyslexia, and its prominence in the population will have been based upon studies which are now seen to have used inappropriate methods of selection. As I write, debate over the way dyslexia is identified is again in the mainstream media following the publication of Julian Elliott and Elena Grigorenko’s book ‘The Dyslexia Debate’, which questions the meaning of the word from the scientific perspective, and asks whether we might be better off without it (2014).

I have so far looked briefly at the current scientific conceptions of dyslexia, at some of their similarities and at areas where they disagree, but I will turn next to the origin and evolution of these conceptions. Where did these hypotheses come from? Why did interest in this field develop and why was it maintained? Where from and how did the disagreements arise? The arguments within the field of dyslexia are as interesting as the consensus as they point towards the different historical influences upon dyslexia research over the last hundred and fifty or so years. These influences are to an extent hidden from immediate view, and in the following sections I attempt to make them more apparent, and to consider the degree to which we should question the assumptions of the scientific understandings of dyslexia that currently dominate.

*Cognitive science and research into dyslexia*

Mainstream science and scientific method are presented as systematic, rigorous and empirical, and the findings as objective. Over the last one hundred years, research into dyslexia has been led by the disciplines of psychology and neuroscience which subscribe to such scientific method. Most dyslexia research has progressed with the following set of assumptions: that dyslexia is a fixed phenomenon; that it is innate; that it is a deviation from the norm; that it exists independently of time and culture; that it may be measured quantitatively and linearly; and that the evidence for dyslexia, its characteristics, prevalence, relevance and remediability have been realised with motives only of improving lives or pursuing scientific understanding of the brain and mind. Although such scientific conceptions of dyslexia are hypothetical, they are discussed as though they were fact, and I argue they have a powerful influence upon educational practice and government legislation, and upon how the public conceive of specific learning disabilities like dyslexia. I will consider the development of these particular ways of viewing dyslexia, and argue that these views are not context-independent, but subjective and socially determined.

The high status of mainstream scientific knowledge is a relatively recent phenomenon: it was only in the 19th century that ‘science’ outdid philosophy and the divine as the preferred route to ‘facts’ in the western world (Danziger, 1990). Driven partly by modernism and as part of the ‘quest for essence’, pure sciences focused their examination upon the smallest particles of things in a systematic attempt to discover the true nature of objects and how they functioned (Gergen, 1991, p. 32). According to Gergen (1991), fields like physics came to be ‘”knowledge factories”, generating objective truths like so many sausages.’ (36). How differently one might have perceived the world and ‘truth’ one or two hundred years earlier.

Although the basis for a scientific method in sensory experience and deductive reasoning was arguably present in the work of Aristotle in around 350BC (Aristotle, c.350BCE /1931), it was in the late 17th and early 18th centuries that these ideas were more broadly taken up by the British empiricists such as Locke (e.g. 1700, bk.II, ch.33), Hume (e.g. 1751, essay 2), and Berkeley (e.g. 1733). Here, the kind of rationalism expounded by Descartes is opposed by the contemporary empiricism which focused more upon sensory experience and reflection rather than inner reason. Empiricism was to dethrone plain inductive reasoning, and by the end of the 18th century, empirical science had to a large degree become separate from philosophy (Manicas, 1987).

While the authority of the church would eventually be replaced by the authority of science (Rose, Lewontin & Kamin, 1984), in the 17th and 18th centuries, empiricists and rationalists were both often concerned with God in their science. Descartes argues carefully for the existence of God (1642) and attempts to find a place for God and the soul in his machine-like man (Descartes, 1664); Francis Bacon, though in many ways he resembled modern scientists in his recognition of natural cause and effect, was emphatic in his belief in divine knowledge (Bacon, 1605). Berkeley, an empiricist, also required God to be central despite the lack of empirical evidence (Berkeley, 1733, section XLIII). In the 18th century God commonly filled in the gaps that science could not. Modern science as a discipline was later to be under less pressure to deal with the existence or location of God and the soul, but in the 18th Century and before, philosophy and science, bound up as they were with social and cultural environments that were still scaffolded by religion, perhaps could not have left Him out of the picture.

By the beginning of the 19th century, however, the status of science and scientists had grown. What had begun as a desire to catalogue, and taxonomise God’s plants and animals in the 18th century had developed into an interest in their inner functions and structure (Foucault, 1970). Empirical scientific methods used in the pure sciences were transferred to other fields so that ‘the world could be liberated from all that was mystical, erroneous, tyrannical’ (Gergen, 1991: 29). So, science could cut through the mystery, and perhaps through religion and superstition also. But if God and folklore were losing their hold by the end of the 19th century along with the ‘sacred…unseen forces’ of the romantic era (Gergen, 1991: 19), something else was needed to fill the holes they left – and that was nature, or natural endowment; that is, the way things naturally are. And these ideas about nature were to have a profound effect upon how the world was interpreted. While God was wont to intervene, often unpredictably, in the world of Man, Nature was not so flexible. An ‘idiot’ by fate of nature was doomed only to be educable to a predetermined degree before hitting his ceiling; unlike God’s idiot who, though it was unlikely, might find himself subject to a miracle or to redemption through ‘moral living’. This view of the supremacy of nature was cemented by Darwin’s work, which ‘relegated’ the position of God in human lives to a ‘dim primordial principle’ (Rose, Lewontin & Kamin, 1984: 49).

*The turn to man and the rise of psychology*

‘Man is an invention of recent date’.

(Foucault,1970: 387)

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, empirical philosophy turned to scientific methods to examine people and society (Gergen, 1991) and in doing so created man as an object of study one could analyse and reconstruct. This built upon Descartes’ idea of man as machine (Descartes, 1664/1824): something that could be taken apart and investigated to understand how the whole functioned (reductionism - Rose, Lewontin & Kamin, 1984).

There were a number of reasons for this new focus which were arguably connected to the particular cultural and social climate that emerged from industrial capitalism and colonialism. Growing cities drew masses of people together in factories where labour and profit could be optimised. Factories functioned as great machines made up of smaller human ones; each human ‘appendage of the machine’ as Marx put it (Marx & Engels, 1848/ 1973) was part of the operation of the whole and so they needed to be efficient, correctable, and docile, qualities that according to Foucault were achieved by tight regulation (Foucault, 1995). Specifically, this regulation was enforced through ‘enclosure’ of individuals in institutions such as factories, schools, and the army; ‘partitioning’ of individuals into their particular place so that they may be more easily supervised and analysed in ‘functional sites’; and by placing these individuals in a ‘rank’ (143). Attention to the regulation of individuals in these ways according to Foucault was to ‘transform the confused, useless or dangerous multitudes into ordered multiplicities.’ (1995: 148). Ranking of people according to class, race, gender, and ability increasingly pervaded ordinary life: in the family, and in the institutions people were corralled into. The education system was particularly vociferous in its adoption of ranking methods and systems of control. Determining who should fall into which categories became a vital element of the industrial system – and psychological science was required to attach its stamp of approval.

In addition to the political need to regulate the populations of the industrial world, there was a drive to maintain and justify empire and slavery. Science helped to rationalise the behaviour of the West by hypothesising that inequality was part of nature, that all races were not at the same stage of evolutionary development (Manicas, 1987) or civilisation (Simpson, 2007). ‘A savage will be reported to have no moral or religious feeling if his actions shock the observer unduly’ wrote William James, insightfully, in 1890 (loc 3957). Scientific support for the idea of a natural hierarchy of persons according to race, gender, ability, and class, was very welcome to those fearful of a disintegration of empire and change in balance of power (Dubow, 1995) . Polygenists went so far as to present different peoples as different species (Gould, 1997). Conclusions from craniology (e.g. Morton, 1840) and phrenology (e.g. Gall, 1825) likewise supported the view that individuals and races were not natural equals. By adapting ideas about heredity and natural selection from Darwin, scientists helped to replace the idea that God decided an individual’s place in life with the idea that the individual’s position was evolutionarily decided – fixed and innate (Danziger, 1997; Manicas, 1987). In Britain, these ideas were publicly circulated by the growing national press which upheld the nationalistic view of white superiority and fear of foreigners (Feldman, 1994) and through a number of popular contemporary novels (Simpson, 2007). We can understand, therefore, the perceived relatively sudden socio-cultural and political need for attention to ‘man’ as an object of scientific enquiry, and for certain people and groups to be categorised as outside the norm.

The apparently unproblematic turn to man as a focus of science catalysed the creation of a new discipline: psychology. Today psychology dominates research into dyslexia; it has invented the psychometric tests used to ‘diagnose’ dyslexia, and it produces the majority of experts in testing. Psychology overwhelmingly considers dyslexia to be a deficit within the individual, and deviation from the statistical norm. Arguably, dyslexia is understood as it is today in part because of psychology and psychology’s interaction with other aspects of cultural change in the West in the past century and a half. Therefore, unpicking scientific concepts of dyslexia today means a journey back to the beginnings of modern psychology and why it took root.

One of the earliest experimental psychologists is considered to be Wundt, who transferred some of the methods used in physiology to the study of sensory processes in individuals (Danziger, 1990). Wundt, through his Leibzig laboratory, fought to free experimental psychology (as distinct from folk psychology) from philosophy and physiology to achieve its conception as an independent science (Manicas, 1987). However, it was Francis Galton who hugely expanded the domain of psychology and applied its methods to investigate the differences between individual’s abilities which he believed were biologically decided and hereditary (Galton, 1869; 1883). His mathematical and statistical approach was highly influential, and supported the alliance of psychology with the natural sciences (Galton, 1981:76-77; Venn, 1998:130), and his belief in eugenics and pursuance of psychology to this end is apparent from his forward to the second edition of Hereditary Genius in 1892 (Galton, 1892; note, however, that this approach to psychology was not without resistance: writing around the same time as Galton was William James who was highly critical of psychology’s use of huge statistical data sets to present certainty. He accused psychologists of the time of ‘diabolic cunning’ in their pursuance of reductionism of the mental and obsession with quantification, 1890: loc 3935).

After Galton, ‘apostle of quantification’ (Gould, 1997:75), investigation into individual differences between people soon became the fashionable focus in the young psychology. It was too-tempting an opportunity to apply respected quantitative methods of measurement to identify ‘natural’ human types – at once establishing psychology as a first-class science equal to physics (‘the method of psychology is much the same as the method of physics’ wrote Titchener, 1910), and justifying control by ranking of different people and sections of society to maintain the direction of power, wealth, and status in the Industrial west. Fears of losing control were palpable; fear of political and class revolution leading to social degeneracy (Pick, 1989; Foucault, 1970), of the pollution of Anglo-Saxon racial stock (Dubow, 1995); and of the proliferation of feeble-mindedness among the population due to the unchecked fertility of people in this category (reflected in, for example, Lapage & Dendy, 1920). Institutions were set up to house those who were considered in some way degenerate; and so were created ideal locations for the focused psychological study of these individuals. Psychology used medical as well as scientific language to describe the deficiencies it came across, and psychologists presented themselves as both doctor and experimenter. They had become the objective scientific observers of the human subject.

Psychology ‘identified’ some new categories of person, but it often simply took on culturally pre-existing categories of people thought to be particularly gifted, deficient or otherwise marginal, and scientised them (Rose, 1985; Danziger, 1990). Distinct labels were introduced to describe natural variations in intellectual ability – quantitatively measured via ‘expertly’ delivered psychometric testing. Phrenologists, craniometrists and other ‘experts’ likewise diagnosed racial inferiority, degeneracy, low-intelligence, or criminality, though skull shape, facial features, and brain size (e.g. Lombroso & Ferrero, 1893/2004); Goddard, 1913). They added to the great raft of white, male, educated ‘experts’ rationalising the global status quo. Tests were standardised, norms and abnorms were constructed (Donnelly, 1983): ‘psychological knowledge of the individual was constituted around the pole of abnormality’ (Rose, 1985: 5). These norms, argue Rose, Lewontin and Kamin (1984), are mere ‘statistical artefacts; they are not biological realities.’ (93).

More recently, psychology has begun to measure, using further tests and scales, a wider variety of human psychological characteristics such as specific learning disability, depression, self-esteem, and personality, seen to form ‘a solid and enduring core’ (Gergen, 1991). The ‘constructive schemes’ of psychology have changed over time, and thus new objects and facts have been produced (Danziger, 1990). However, they still describe divisions between normal and abnormal. The category of dyslexia is no exception.

The way that mainstream psychology appears to have understood ‘science’, that is, from the perspective of positivism, is arguably partly responsible for the narrow and context-independent descriptions of individual differences it is known for. ‘Science’ is not necessarily synonymous with positivism, though it can appear so in cognitive and behavioural psychology. ‘Science’ once included knowledge based upon experience, as well as knowledge based upon experiment and observation; the meaning of science and of ‘scientific’ is not static (Williams, 1976). Harré blames the positivists for constructing psychological science solely as a narrow study of cause and effect, when in fact, the physical sciences did not progress this way: it is an irony, argues Harré, that psychology has based itself on ‘almost total misunderstanding of the nature of the method and metaphysics of the natural sciences’ (2012: 7). The reason for this misdirection was perhaps a consequence of the desire by new psychology to distance itself from other, more philosophically-rooted approaches to science for fear of being seen as woolly and unempirical (Klein, 2012). The following passage by John Shotter considers the way that positivism can deceive:

In the philosophy of positivism, and its associated spontaneous scientific consciousness, we tend to see the world as *if* it were itself constituted of facts. Facts, however, are not the cause of our perceptual processes, but their result. The mystification achieved is the transformation of the qualities which belong to them as *socio-historical products* into qualities belonging to them as *natural things.*  In other words, something which is essentially *made* is transformed into something apparently *found.*

(Shotter, 1993: 70)

And so it is for dyslexia – a condition or abnormality that, according to the positivistic perspective, has always been there (though not so visible before mainstream education took hold), and thanks to science of this type – it has been ‘found’. The ‘found’ knowledge about dyslexia justifies and enables the ‘helping professions’ (in this case, educators) to ‘interfere and intervene’ (Hacking, 1995: 360). Positivist psychologists may point to the statistics as persuasive evidence of this or that fact. However, statistical knowledge is always ‘open to reinterpretation and change’ and the related mathematical theories ‘are themselves the product of certain sets of social circumstances and political agendas’ (Parker, 2005: 9). Therefore, the ‘finding’ of dyslexia is open to question; and if the understandings of dyslexia produced by cognitive science are to be a useful addition to (rather than dominating) the discussion about what dyslexia ‘is’, a broader range of ‘scientific’ investigations of dyslexia must be given equal hearing (for further discussion around this issue, see subsection ‘reflection’ in chapter 3 of the current thesis).

The first known descriptions of dyslexia-type conditions emerged in the late19th/ early 20th centuries (for a general discussion of these see Anderson & Meier-Hedder, 2001), partly from interest in aphasias (see Kussmaul, 1877, who referred to ‘word-blindness’ following work with aphasic patients) and in left and right hemispheric roles (Miles & Miles, 1990). The ‘symptoms’ of dyslexia are also likely to have become more apparent in the general population at this time because of the rise in printed material/ regularisation of written English; being literate was increasingly common and increasingly necessary in the industrial west (Ong, 2002). These descriptions also arose at a time of great interest in individual intellectual differences and during a period of rapid development in neuroscience (Pickle, 1998); and followed other fashionable studies of particular individuals. A good example of such a study is Jean Itard’s study of the ‘wild boy of Aveyron’ (Itard, 1972 ) which, according to Rose (1989), ‘originated the mechanism by which philosophical doctrines concerning the nature of knowledge could be turned into instructions and exercise to enhance the capacities of individuals.’(179). The narrative style used by Itard in his descriptions of Victor is arguably reflected in later discourses of idiocy and race (Simpson, 2007). We can also hear these narrative echoes in the early descriptions of possible dyslexia: W.P.Morgan’s (1896) study of Percy, a fourteen year-old boy with difficulties learning to read despite obvious intelligence attributed the problem to ‘defective development’ of the left angular gyrus (1378). James Hinshelwood followed shortly after with various descriptions of instances of congenital word blindness for example in a ten and a twelve year old, also described as intelligent, with reading difficulties (1911, 608) and with problems likewise ascribed to ‘defective [cerebral] development’ (609). Hinshelwood was an eye-surgeon, and believed word-blindness to be a visual problem, and pathological (1917). Samual Orton, another key medical figure in the history of Dyslexia, argued that ‘congenital word blindness’ was not an appropriate label and preferred instead ‘strephosymbolia’ (Orton, 1937).

These individuals appeared to take great care in emphasising the clear intelligence of the individuals they studied, and the likelihood of improvement with appropriate instruction. These were medical men, and the language they used to describe the individuals they studied was infused with medical terminology. Their influence was significant: Orton’s work, for example, was the basis for the establishment of the *Orton Society* in the 1940s which is now *The International Dyslexia Association (IDA)* (IDA, 1996-2007), and the impetus for an annual bulletin, now an established journal *The Annals of Dyslexia*. A *Samuel T. Orton Award* was also invented in the 1960s (The Orton Society Samuel T. Orton Award, 1967).

However, the study of individual differences like ‘word-blindness’ spilled over into the growing psychology which would eventually take over the identification and classification of specific learning disabilities through its development of mental testing. Psychology retained the medical language of ‘diagnosis’, ‘treatment’ and ‘pathology’ in its research and also replicated the doctor-patient distance between experimenter and subject; in this way, psychologists gave themselves the power of medical experts, as well as objective scientists.

*IQ*

The early 20th century saw a rise in ‘experts’ in learning disability and about how much or how little ‘intelligence’ was needed to indicate particular levels of defect to be decided by psychologists (Digby, 1996). Here was a role for the *IQ*  test. The needs for psychology to strengthen its position and influence, and for psychologists to build their careers, were matched by the apparent needs of the military (Spring, 1972) and educational institutions to adopt categories of ability to improve efficiency and control (Foucault, 1995; Gardner, 1986); mental testing fulfilled all of these needs (Danziger, 1990; Soyland, 1994). It also apparently legitimised political moves to further the interests of particular social classes and racial groups (Rose, Lewontin & Kamin, 1984). Binet’s, arguably benevolently motivated (Foschi & Cicciola, 2006), test of ability in struggling school children was eventually ‘rolled out and adapted’ (Danziger, 1997: 78) to produce I.Q tests to measure all children, and which became a ‘means to segregate and separate the “subnormal” from the “normal”.’ (Digby, 1996: 12-13). Particular attention was paid to identifying grades of deficiency between ‘normal’ and ‘idiot’ according to these scores (Jackson, 1996), which included ‘imbeciles’ and the ‘feeble-minded’ (as described in The Mental Deficiency Act, 1913 – the same year that Goddard published his study of The Kallikak Family: a study in the heredity of feeblemindedness which links such ‘defective mentality’ with moral degradation). The category of ‘feeble-minded’ is likely to have subsumed a number of children whom we would now label dyslexic (see descriptions of children with reading problems in the early 20th century e.g. in Minogue, 1927, and McCready, 1925). Proponents of *IQ*  tests often had eugenic aims (see for example Burt, 1937; 1946 ; Eysenk, 1969 ). The tests assumed a unitary and fixed hereditary ‘intelligence’ – ‘g’ (see Spearman, 1904, and more recently, Jensen, 2002), a ‘thing’ in our heads - the measurement of which could be used to rank individuals on a linear scale (Gould, 1997) and in doing so arguably reconstructed the popular understanding of intelligence (Carroll, 1982). The following quote from Henry Maudlsey in 1870 sums up the attitudes about the existence of categories of people that the later *IQ*  tests were to numerically define:

‘Men differ, indeed, in the fundamental characters of their minds, as they do in the features of their countenances, or in the habits of their bodies; and between those who are born with the potentiality of a full and complete mental development, under favourable circumstances, and those who are born with an innate incapacity of mental development, under any circumstances, there exists every gradation.’

 (Maudsley, 1870: 326).

Who decides there are grades at all, who defines the grades, how they are decided, and who benefits from their definition are important questions, not least in the area of dyslexia research and practice.

The reification of intelligence and its means of measurement have been essential to the ‘diagnosis’ and definition of dyslexia, and research in dyslexia for a hundred years. Before the IQ, dyslexia did not exist as a quantifiable category. Psychometric testing, argues Danziger, created facts of personality, attitude, and intelligence that were not socially neutral (1990; 1997), but socially, economically and politically driven (see also Carroll, 1982). Categorising according to the results of *IQ*  tests allowed greater control over individuals: Rose writes, ‘in rendering subjectivity calculable it makes persons amenable to having things done to them – and doing things to themselves – in the name of their subjective capacities’ (1989: 7-8). In being categorised as dyslexic, this is arguably the case; their ‘condition’/ ‘syndrome’/ ‘disability’ is fixed, and makes those so labelled amenable to particular ‘treatment’ and exposed to certain assumptions about the limits of their abilities. The process of categorisation itself arguably produced people of particular kinds: to the degree, argues Ian Hacking, that people come in and out of existence through the ways we describe them (2002: 48).

IQ test results would also help ‘experts’ decide who was to be denied the label of dyslexia, and instead marked as generally retarded/ backward/ developmentally delayed (See Miles & Miles, 1990 for summary; Fletcher et al.1999). *IQ*  scores therefore helped to determine who was not eligible for ‘treatment’ and to impose a different set of limitations upon the people so labelled. The separation of these ‘types’ fuelled the arguments that dyslexia was a middle-class excuse, ‘a special problem so that [the parent] does not have to accept the child’s overall lack of mental potential and/or college inclination.’ (Klasen, 1972: 168).

So, what intelligence ‘is’, what tests are included, and how the data are presented, matter to dyslexia: for example, if ‘g’ is simply ‘equated with working memory capacity’ (as suggested by Kyllonen, 2002: 435), then many ‘dyslexic’ individuals would arguably receive a very low ‘intelligence’ score. The fact that many of the *IQ*  sub-tests are timed, a possible consequence of military requirements for speed (Danziger, 1997), also disadvantages ‘dyslexic’ individuals and affects their ‘intelligence profile’. Similarly, the ways the results of tests are presented can vary and can alter the picture of intelligence that is given (see Gould’s, 1997, criticism of Spearman’s use of factor analysis in supporting the idea of unitary intelligence; and Stanovich’s (1984) criticism of Jensen’s ‘oversimplification’ of intelligence). If, as argued by Rose, Lewontin and Kamin (1984), *IQ*  tests were said to measure whatever the testers wanted them to measure, that in fact psychometry is a ‘grand illusion’ and ‘a tool of a conformist society’ (92), then any ‘facts’ stated to exist on evidence of psychometric testing should be re-evaluated, or at least presented with acknowledgment of the social context in which they were created. The fault lies not with the statistical methods themselves, but with the ways they have been misused and misinterpreted (Hacking, 1999).

In the 1970s, 80s and 90s the objection to use of *IQ*  discrepancy criteria in the ‘diagnosis’ and definition of dyslexia became loud and persistent (for a useful background on the use of and objection to I.Q discrepancy criteria see Meyer, 2000). Doubts about what dyslexia was began to worry an increasing number of researchers in the area, particularly as there were implications for the validity and reliability of the conclusions drawn from studies with divergent hypothetical standpoints and different criteria for participant selection:

‘Research findings, albeit replicable, are determined to a great extent by the hypothetical constructs held by the investigators before studies are conducted. That is, the working hypothesis concerning the nature of dyslexia determines the selection of control groups, the definition of dyslexia itself, the measures to be obtained, and the overall research design and method of the data analysis.’

(Mattis, 1978, p. 45)

The use of *IQ*  tests and nature of intelligence also have real implications for those who are identified (or not) as learning disabled as a result (for an example, see Meyer, 2000).

If the assumptions about *IQ*  discrepancy and dyslexia were shown to be unfounded, then the results of years of research would arguably be undermined (Fletcher *et al.* , 1999; Stanovich, 1996; Dennis *et al.*  2009). ‘[N]o consideration’ wrote Kavale and Forness (2000) ‘is given to how or why intelligence tests measure intelligence’ (248), and why a discrepancy with I.Q score is therefore essential to dyslexia ‘diagnosis’. What the reading disability field has subsequently acquired is ‘an arbitrary sub-division of the reading-IQ distribution that is fraught with statistical and other interpretive problems’ (Fletcher *et al.*  1994: 20). Intelligence, according to Stanovich (1996), should have no place in the definition of dyslexia, and he refers to what he calls ‘intellectual slight of hand’ in the way *IQ*  has been used in dyslexia ‘diagnosis’ thus far (Stanovich, 1996). Stanovich earlier described I.Q as a ‘foundational concept’ for the idea of dyslexia (1991:16). If this is an accurate description then it is possible that our current scientific conceptions of dyslexia sit on shaky ground; though this is rarely acknowledged in much of the dominant literature. Shaky, also, may be the justification for the educational practices and ideas about educable capacity of individuals that have been built upon outcomes of intelligence testing (Digby, 1996; Rose, 1989; Danziger, 1997).

*Neuroscience and technology*

Brain-based theories (see section 2 above) attempt to explain some of the behavioural characteristics of dyslexia. I want to consider briefly here the impetus behind these theories, and how the rise of neuroscience/ cognitive science may have influenced our current conceptions.

The idea that the brain contained particular areas for particular functions was proposed in the work of Spurzheim (1825) and Gall (1825), who were arguably motivated by a desire to rationalize ideas about racial inferiority and ‘natural’ differences in ability. Paul Broca in the 19th Century further established ideas of brain localization with his cranial anthropology (summarised and criticised by Gould, 1997: 117) and in his work with aphasic patients with localised lesions (1861). This work on aphasia was arguably an important step towards later work on dyslexia and particular areas of the brain (left hemisphere, angular gyrus) (Anderson & Meier-Hedde, 2001) and, it is suggested, shaped the course of future research into language disorders (Pickle, 1998; Critchley, 1970). Broca’s area and Wernicke’s area have both been named as abnormally activated in dyslexic subjects during certain tasks (e.g. Paulesque *et al.*  1996); and much investigation had been undertaken into the existence/ effect of lack of left-hemisphere asymmetry of the planum temporal in dyslexic individuals (Morgan & Hynd, 1998).

Greater understanding about the structure of the central nervous system and neurons was permitted in the 19th century through developments such as the Golgi stain and electron-microscopy (Pannese, 1999) and through improved methods of brain preservation and autopsy, which aided the further investigation of localized areas for language, learning and memory (Pickle, 1998). Phrenology had already posited the idea of localization (Rose, Lewontin & Kamin), and now there were the means for pursuing this idea more thoroughly. Theories of localized functioning have remained influential in the field of reading disability (e.g. Shankweiler & Crain, 1986), though they have been interspersed with gestalt theories of functioning, and superseded recently with the understanding that different brain regions ‘act in concert’ (Hynd & Hynd, 1984: 489) and that dyslexia may be the result of lack of ‘concert’. i.e. a disconnection between various regions (Pulesue *et al.* 1996). In the 20th century further investigation became possible with the use of fMRI and PET scanning, which have been used to identify brain regions involved in reading (e.g. Joseph *et al.*  2001), though these methods are not without their criticism (Aine, 1995).

The ‘progress’ of neuroscience and its influence on dyslexia research is not simply a result of improved technology, however. Neuroscience was closely associated with psychology, and subject to the same social circumstances and drivers as have been described in the previous section. For example, institutions allowed focused study of people with perceived brain damage (Pickle, 1998; Damasio, 2006) just as parallel opportunities allowed for focused study of institutional populations by psychologists (Foucault, 1995). The motivations of those who undertook research into the structure of the brain were also similarly shaped by the social climate and fears of the time, and so arguably, individuals were susceptible to directing their work in a politically or culturally decided direction (Gould, 1997). Influences of phrenology, for example, arguably, are still observable in neuroscience today (e.g. in Galaburda, 1991). Moreover, language may have received particular attention when studying brain localization simply because it was one of the easier areas to observe (Pickle, 1998). The point here is that the ‘facts’ we ‘know’ about brain functioning and dyslexia today exist in part because of the socially influenced direction that neuroscience took over the last several hundred years; and that, had the social situation been different, it is reasonable to assume that the ‘facts’ we have would be different also (Latour, 1987).

*Conclusion*

My argument is that the widely circulating scientific conceptions of dyslexia did not originate in a social vacuum, and that we should therefore not view them as doing so. The underlying theories, methods of measurement, presentation of data, choice of wording, use of particular scales, assumptions about location of ‘disability’, ‘categories’ of person, metaphors employed, and research direction were all strongly influenced, if not decided by, prevalent social, political, financial, and personal factors. Kuhn (1970) describes scientific research as ‘a strenuous and devoted attempt to force nature into the conceptual boxes supplied by professional education.’(5). We might ask, then, how much research into dyslexia was an attempt to do this.

Specific differences like dyslexia may have been framed in these narrow scientific ways because of psychology’s dominance (and earlier medical influence) in the field. As a result of this narrow ‘scientizing’, there has emerged what Gergen calls ‘a technical vocabulary of deficit’ which has fallen into public use (Gergen, 1991:14-15). This is apparent in the vocabulary of dyslexia – the ‘deficit’ ‘defect’ ‘abnormality’ of the characteristics – words used with little criticism by students, teachers, parents and psychologists – words with power. Popular ideas about science may suggest that it is cumulative, context-independent, and ahistorical, but this is not so (Kuhn, 1970). Current ‘facts’ about dyslexia may yet be overturned as other ‘facts’ are discovered, rendering current conceptions obsolete. Therefore, while cognitive science and neuropsychology have so much to offer our understanding of mind and brain in the area of specific learning difficulties, there is benefit in their critical appraisal – we must consider the wider contexts in which this kind of science is made and see the ‘facts’ of dyslexia as useful, valid perspectives among many. It is the aim of the next chapter to explore other recent/ current conceptions of dyslexia, to look at where and why these may have arisen, to ask how they have entered the public arena, and to consider the degree to which dyslexic students identify with these conceptions, and to discuss their comparative ‘reality’.

Chapter 2: Alternative conceptions of dyslexia, the work of discourses and the construction of identities

*Introduction*

In the previous chapter I investigated, the development of the dominant conceptions of dyslexia, that is, those that can be described as scientific from the point of view of the positivist paradigm. I approached this investigation with the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed, but that there exists a material world beyond our own existence and beyond discourse. In the present chapter I talk about some other conceptions of dyslexia that have recently been or are currently circulating in Britain and America. I look at the roots of these conceptions, examine them as discursive constructions, discuss how they become available to students, and consider how they are maintained. As in chapter one, the style of writing differs slightly from that one might expect in a traditional literature review because it contains an amount of discourse analysis itself. The literature is not seen as a straightforward window onto the world, but as a historically shaped discursive performance of knowledge.

I have collected the alternative conceptions of dyslexia that I have come across under a number of broad headings: dyslexia as another word for ‘stupid’ or ‘lazy’; dyslexia as a myth; dyslexia as normal variation; dyslexia as a gift; and dyslexia as created external to the individual, by poor teaching, for example. These conceptions do cross over, but they also often offer very different understandings of what it means to be dyslexic. I use the literature to give examples where students have drawn upon these different conceptions.

Having considered a variety of extant conceptions of dyslexia, I explore the implications of these for the students who draw on them at any given time. While it is not my position that any particular conception causes a set outcome, indeed the utility of the concept of cause and effect in this context is doubtful (for discussion on the existence of cause and effect at all, see Nietzsche, [1887], 1974), there do appear to be links between the adoption of (a) given conception(s) of dyslexia and certain wider self-perspectives and patterns of action. For example, students who conceive of dyslexia as a cover for stupidity are described as reporting related shame and stigma (Miles, 1993). This feeling is sometimes associated with certain behaviours, for example, efforts to hide their ‘shameful condition’, that is, their ‘stupidity’ from others by pretending to be ‘normal’ (Cunningham, 2001). At the other end of the spectrum, students’ referral to dyslexia as normal human variation, or as an advantage, seems to be more closely linked to openness about their ‘diagnosis’ with peers, for example, and a more empowered approach to arranging support within an educational setting (Pollack, 2005). Identifying with some conceptions of dyslexia more than others seems to have implications for the students’ understanding of themselves as learners, their approach to study, and their related behaviours.

The alternative conceptions of dyslexia that I discuss in this chapter did not simply pop into being of their own accord. Just as the ‘scientific’ conceptions were arguably constructed from the social, cultural, and political milieu of the past few centuries, so too were the ideas that dyslexia is a myth, or the idea it is a gift, and so on. Further aims of this chapter, therefore, are to explore the origins of some of the alternative conceptions discussed, to identify what might be described as the wider discourses from which these conceptions arguably arose, and to think about how these discourses are maintained in everyday life. It will become clear in this discussion that my approach sits within a social constructionist paradigm, while also considering social constructionism itself as a discourse that has been drawn on to give meaning to the label of dyslexia. However, I am not suggesting that there is no world beyond discourse, or beyond what we construct socially (please see methodology and reflection sections for more on this). At this stage there will be a brief discussion of what I mean by discourse, and how this idea of discourse has emerged from/ fits within the relatively recent post-modern approach to understanding the world and its people.

The final focus of the current chapter will turn to the concept of ‘identity’, and how this may inform our engagement with dyslexic identities. This is an important discussion to include, not only because there is a large amount of literature which has generated theories of identity, but because assumptions about fixed personal identity have been culturally and socially absorbed; this is evidenced in the ease with which we speak of our identity/ identities, socially, academically, or as people with specific labels like dyslexia, without critical reflection upon the power of the concept itself. Arguably in western culture there is a widespread acceptance that we have particular personalities, characters, self-concepts, self-esteems, ‘true selves’ existing within us, and amenable to measurement and description. I explore what may be useful or not about these assumptions of self-hood for understanding our lives in-the-world, and in giving meaning to our experiences. ‘Real’ or imagined, stable or inconstant, how do these identities come to manifest themselves in given situations? And importantly, do we have a choice in the identities and wider discourses we draw on when we interact with the social and physical environment we find ourselves in? The possibility of agency, that is, our freedom to choose what meaning we give to our actions and experiences, becomes a further crucial question.

I conclude this chapter by relating the discussions outlined above to the aims of my research as a whole; and by beginning to consider how the questions raised will inform my methodological approach, the focus of chapter three.

*Engagement with alternative conceptions of dyslexia*

In this section I look at the evidence from the literature that students/ other adults who have been identified as dyslexic draw on the various circulating conceptions of dyslexia. I begin with references to the dominant conception, that is, of dyslexia as cognitive/ neuro deficit/ malfunction, and following this, I present and discuss references to dyslexia as another word for stupid, dyslexia as a myth, dyslexia as ‘normal’ variation, dyslexia as a gift, and dyslexia as externally created (socially/ environmentally constructed). These are not exhaustive categories, nor are they necessarily discrete; but have been chosen because they appear to be relatively widely available, and readily drawn upon, and because each has aspects which are unique, and consequently distinct implications for meaning-giving in a range of situations.

References to scientific conceptions of dyslexia by those with the label are very frequent. Offered here are examples of such comments taken from a variety of studies. I hope that these help to build a picture of the ways students can interact with or interpret these dyslexia ‘facts’.

 *I’ve got a smaller clipboard than some people*

(comment taken from Pollack, 2005:115)

*my brain is back to front really*

 *It’s just like there is something in my brain that won’t click open*

(comments taken from Osmond, 1993:27,18)

 *My malfunctioning brain*

(comment taken from Pelkey, 2001:19)

 *holes in my auditory processing*

(comment taken from May, 2001:147)

 …*some areas of the brain of the neuropathways are jumbled,*

 *missing, in a mess, kind of stretched.*

 *…a technical problem in the brain.*

*…Brain is not programmed to process information like most people’s brains are programmed.*

(taken from Reiff *et.al.* 1993: 119, 119, 118)

Apparent in these comments is the language of cognitive psychology and neuroscience combined with the use of metaphor to make meaning. Metaphors here include the idea of a brain being ‘jumbled’ or ‘stretched’, being ‘back-to-front’, or not being able to ‘click open’, or reference to ‘programming’ probably indicative of the idea of brain as a computer. Arguably here, the individuals have taken aspects of scientific descriptions of dyslexia and made them their own, so to speak, with this use of metaphor. In doing so the scientific ideas may be easier to grasp, but they may likewise become more easily twisted, or oversimplified. The concepts of one’s brain being ‘jumbled’ for example, or, indeed, ‘back-to-front’ do not intuitively lend themselves to a positive view of one’s intellectual capabilities.

Dyslexia is commonly referred to by dyslexic research participants as another word for ‘stupid’, ‘naughty’, or ‘lazy’. The following are a number of examples of this which I felt were representative of this tendency.

 *I had assumed naughtiness was just something I was born with.*

*Deep down I still believe that I am a lazy, careless person in spite of all of the evidence to the contrary.*

(comments taken from Miles, 1993: 11)

*I firmly believed I was stupid, scatty and incapable of anything academic.*

*I just thought I was thick at school and it was my fault.*

(comments taken from Osmond, 1993:16, 33)

 …*[the dyslexia label as] an excuse for my stupidity.*

(comment taken from May, 2001:145)

The idea that dyslexia really means laziness is connected to the belief that dyslexia is a myth. By dyslexia as ‘myth’, I mean dyslexia as a fairy tale, rather than dyslexia as socially constructed (which may have more positive implications). Dyslexia as ‘myth’ includes references to the dyslexia label as an excuse/ or cover for something else – for example parental anxiety about their child’s apparent lack of achievement (Riddick, 1995); or a ‘convenient fiction’ for white, middle-class children who struggled academically (McDermott *et.al.* 2006). It also includes the idea that the dyslexia label intentionally perpetuated for institutional financial advantage (Soler, 2009). I have not found comments in the literature from adults with dyslexia which explicitly refer to this concept, but it is apparent in reported comments from teachers; for example, one parent reported an educationalist’s response to be ‘Rubbish…there is no such thing as dyslexia’ (in Riddick, 1995: 462). However, I would argue that this idea of myth is present implicitly in some of the comments made by dyslexic individuals in the paragraph above. In characterising dyslexia as ‘stupidity’ or as an excuse for stupidity, ideas of dyslexia as myth are echoed; dyslexia is framed as unreal, made-up, created as a way to make them feel better about their seemingly ‘true’ identity as stupid, incompetent, or lazy. The recent work by Julian Elliott (2014) ‘The Dyslexia Debate’ and his related publicity also risk perpetuating the oversimplified understanding of dyslexia as myth, even though Elliott’s message is much more nuanced.

People with dyslexia do not always refer to dyslexia in ways that may be interpreted negatively. There is also a significant amount of research which frames dyslexia as a cognitive difference rather than deficiency (for a summary of this research see Che Kan Leong, 2002). Following are examples from the literature where people with dyslexia appear to have drawn upon this conception.

 *…not learning disabled, it’s learning different.*

*…normal variation of learning, of how people go about learning or communicating.*

(comments taken from Reiff, *et.al.,* 1993: 122)

One group of conceptions moves still further away from the idea of dyslexia as deficiency, which I refer to here as ‘dyslexia as a gift’. Some studies have presented evidence suggesting a scientific basis for considering dyslexia as linked to certain specific strengths: they argue, for example, that dyslexia is associated with enhanced global visuo-spatial ability (Von Karolyi, *et.al.,* 2003), entrepreneurial skills (Logan, 2009), artistic talent (chakravarty, 2009), and other ‘exceptional talents’ (Miles, 1993). There are examples in the literature where dyslexic students and their relatives have drawn upon these conceptions (for example, Burden & Burdette, 2005; Delpit, L, 2001). Specific comments from dyslexic individuals include the following:

*I’m a right-brained person.*

(comment taken from Pollack, 2005:115)

*You have an advantage over everybody else because you don’t see things the way they do.*

 *[I am good at] thinking up scientific ideas and building working models.*

(comments taken from Osmond, 1993:56,30)

The final group of conceptions of dyslexia build upon the idea that dyslexia is a consequence of thing(s) or person(s) in the student’s learning environment. This does not appear to be drawn on very frequently by participants in research studies, though Pollack (2005) notes an increase in the reference to such conceptions among students. Following are a number of comments from dyslexic people which reflect this conception:

 *My teachers and parents overlooked all the areas in my life where I*

 *Was succeeding and instead concentrated on my faults.*

(Delpit, 2001:160)

 *…not a learning disability but a teaching disability.*

(comment taken from Reiff *et.al.,* 1993:122)

The ways students construct specific learning difficulties or dyslexia depends upon the specific time and context in which they find themselves; and thus, it is not necessarily the case that their words as reported in the literature indicate an enduring dyslexic identity. Instead, local identities are not separate from the words being used to construct them. The words themselves, in interaction with others, with the environment and histories, produce the person in that instance. The aim of presenting some of the reported words of students above is to offer an idea of the varied ways dyslexia can be constructed. Presenting their words out of context is limiting, as each specific context in which these words were spoken would colour the utterances, as would each reader’s or hearer’s own history and experience. However, I am interested in the possibilities available to people when constructing their stories as dyslexic; why these possibilities? What implications?

*Interactions between particular conceptions of dyslexia and ways-of-being*

In this section I am going to look at some of the evidence in the literature which suggests that the conceptions of dyslexia adopted by students interact with their understanding of themselves, and their behaviour, particularly in educational settings. The view that definitions of learning disability can be powerful forces in people’s lives is suggested by a number of researchers in this area (Pollack, 2005 & 1995; Reiff *et.al.,* 1993; Burden, 2005), and is summed up simply by Pollack (1995):

 ‘[d]efinitions of dyslexia lead to discourses of it, which in turn

affect these people’s sense of self and identity. Internalising

such discourses shapes their affective and social responses to

the label’ (139).

Categories of person are not neutral, but powerful meaning-makers. When people are allocated to particular categories, argue Shakespear and Erikson (2001) ‘the possibilities of personhood change’ (198). Following this idea, it is likely that adoption of some conceptions of dyslexia more than others may offer different possibilities of being for those individuals. For Denhart (2008) some conceptions taken may be responsible for *impairment* becoming *disability* (though it is also important to recognise ‘impairment’ as socially constructed too – see Goodley, 2001); and this is echoed by Burden (2005): ‘those of us who possess characteristics considered to be socially undesirable will begin to perceive ourselves as undesirable or in some way wanting’ (196-197). In this sense then, even if the ‘reality’ of what the descriptions of dyslexia refer to may be questioned, the ‘real’ influence of these definitions upon people’s lives is less in doubt. In fact, the descriptions themselves arguably bring realities into being: ‘[i]t is enough to create new names and estimations and probabilities in order to create in the long run new “things”’, (Nietzsche, 1887/1974, ex 58:122). It is not my primary concern whether or not dyslexia is ‘real’ in any purely ontological sense; though at the same time I do not ignore ontology (see chapter 3).

I return now to the specific ways different conceptions of dyslexia may play a part in the lives of those so labelled. Firstly, for those who in a given context draw on the understanding of their dyslexia as a cover for ‘stupid’ or ‘lazy’, or who recognize that their peers hold this view, there may be the tendency to play the joker, or the naughty one; as one student put it ‘I clowned around’ as a way of creating a desirable identity and avoiding being seen as ‘stupid’ (Osmond, 1993:16); and another explained that she hid behind a ‘bad’ attitude (Cunningham, 2001). The strategies of *pretending* to be a certain way or *hiding* from some perceived ‘true’ identity seem to recur in the literature. Where students are teased for being ‘thick’ after being designated learning disabled (Riddick, 1995), or regarded by others in their educational institution as ‘intellectually inferior, incompetent, lacking effort, or attempting to cheat…’(Denhart, 2008: 484) then these strategies may be one means of escape. This also implies that such identities are relatively enduring, and may dominate over other less damaging identities. Lynn Pelkey, in telling her own story of her educational experiences explained ‘[w]e LDs [learning disabled] live a life of deceit – pretending to be like others – and shame – not wanting to be who we are.’ (Pelkey, 2001:25).

The second prominent perception which appears to be associated both with the conception of dyslexia as a cover for ‘stupidity’ and with scientific conceptions of dyslexia, is one of limitation. By this I mean the idea that one’s ‘potential’ is pre-capped due to inherent low ability (arising from ‘stupidity’ or from ‘neurological mis-wiring’). This perception is reflected in the following comment from a student with dyslexia reflecting back upon her experience: ‘I expected to fail, so I set no goals, believing my ability was set (I had none)’ (Pelkey, 2001:25). This comment makes clear links between perception (of lack of ability) and (reported) behaviour (not setting goals), and supports the argument for meaning-giving as a powerful shaper of action. Though of course this is part of the individual’s retrospective story, and how that story is told is also an important part of the teller’s identity in the context of the telling. Whether the connection is between self-construction and behavior, or self-construction and retrospectively constructed behavior, it is nevertheless significant for the speaker’s ‘being’ in that moment, and perhaps beyond. There are plenty of other comments which give the same impression: one adult explained that LD ‘prevents one from developing one’s potential’ (in Reiff *et.al.,* 1993:121); a student in another study said ‘I expect I’ll end up as a cleaner’, though he wanted to be an architect (in Osmond, 1993:31); and from the same study – ‘I kept being told, and concluded quite rapidly myself, that I was thick and going to lean on a shovel for the rest of my life’ (52). These comments are riddled with dominating ideologies of moral and intellectual worth, which we reproduce often unwittingly, and in doing so shut off other possibilities for being (see discussion section for more on this). Sometimes, this perception of low ability academically seemed to spread to other areas of life too: ‘I can’t even play football, I’m useless’ said one child to his parent in a discussion about his learning disability (Riddick, 1995:466). Scientific ideas of genetic limitations upon ‘ability’, and of the fixity of nature come through in the following student reflection: ‘I truly thought that if you were not *born* being able to do something, if it did not come *naturally* to you, then you were never going to be able to do it’ (Cunningham, 2001:88, italics added). In sum, the evidence from numerous studies appears to confirm the links between these conceptions of dyslexia and (reported) learned helplessness (for concept of learned helplessness see Seligman (1975), though here it might be more appropriately called ‘socially-created helplessness’): for example, in an overview of research (Chapman, 1988), it was noted that those children who perceived their LD as fixed had lower expectations of future achievement and were likely to give up more readily. In a more recent meta-analysis (Mugnaini *et.al.,* 2009) similar conclusions were drawn: ‘dyslexic children not only experience more suffering, but risk involving in vicious circles where failure, demoralization, poor metacognitive awareness and lack of interest for school duties go hand in hand.’ (258).

The power in believing one’s ability is limited in this way is evidenced also by the examples of students who continued to believe in their limitations despite academic success. In several studies, students with dyslexia appeared to attribute their success to factors outside themselves like good teaching, or luck, while blaming themselves when they performed poorly on assignments (Osmond, 1993; Humphreys & Mullins, 2002; Chapman, 1988).

In addition to lowering their expectations of achievement, hiding or pretending, and blaming themselves for apparent failures, some people with dyslexia appear to experience higher levels of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem in academic contexts (Mugnaini *et.al.,* 2009; Polychroni *et.al.,* 2006). It is problematic for me that the definitions of depression, self-esteem and anxiety are produced by the same psychology which produces dominating conceptions of dyslexia; but neither this, nor the ontological doubts I may have about these constructions makes their power any less insidious. Being depressed, to whatever degree depression is culturally constructed, exists as one of the truths of western contemporary society. ‘I believe I was taught to hate myself’ writes Pelkey, in her reflective chapter (2001:18); ‘Let’s not think about my self-esteem. I don’t think that even showed up on the scale’ writes Cunningham in her reflection (Cunningham, 2001, p.95). The reification of self-esteem as a discrete measurable object is quite taken for granted here, along with the authority of whoever undertakes the measuring. Unsurprisingly, it appears that students’ narratives around their abilities, deficiencies, limitations all of which are fed by psychology’s scaled constructs, influence what students actually do. For example, Pollack found that those who felt they were academically deficient were also less likely to take up one-to-one support (1995). I am interested in these kinds of interactions in the current study.

On the other hand, when some students with dyslexia drew upon scientific understandings of dyslexia, the response was not always negative. For example, there are some reports of the ‘diagnosis’ being a relief, a welcomed explanation for their difficulties which meant that they were not ‘just stupid’: ‘I’m glad I’m called dyslexic rather than lazy’ explained one student; ‘I’m not branded as thick now’; ‘I quite like it [the label], I used to wonder why I couldn’t keep up’ (comments taken from Riddick, 1995). Students in other studies also described their designation as dyslexic as a relief/ as a weight being lifted (Pollack, 1995:184; Osmond, 1993:24). While this might make space for more positive behaviour, McGrady *et.al.,* (2001) caution that the ‘comfort’ of the label may come with the assumption that one can be ‘cured’, and that this may not be helpful (178). Pollack suggests that students who drew on the deficit model of dyslexia were more likely to take up personal support in their institutions, as they categorized these services as ‘disability facilities’ (Pollack, 1995:126).

The next group of reactions and behaviours appear to be connected to the conception among some parents, educators, dyslexic people and other members of the public that dyslexia is a myth or a fairy tale. These reactions include a feeling that a student with dyslexia is somehow cheating by getting extra help that other students do not get. If the student himself feels that he may be cheating in the name of a mythical condition, there is some evidence that this student will be less likely to make use of accommodations that he is offered in an educational institution (Denhart, 2008; Marshall, 2001; May, 2001; Ferri *et.al.,* 2005). Following are student comments which indicate this link: ‘I have not and will not take full advantage of any of the accommodations that have been made for me [as this would be unfair]’ (Marshall, 2001:121); ‘I did not want to be a needy student who used his learning disability as a crutch’ (119); ‘[I felt that] anything I achieved at college would be invalidated if I were offered special treatment’ (May, 2001, 144). The idea that dyslexia is just a fairy tale supposes that different treatment of people with the label is unfair in a way that say, the scientific ideas of organic and ‘real’ deficiency would not. So here we have another possible example of the way conceptions interact with individuals and social contexts to make certain reactions and behaviours more likely.

One further reaction to the conceptions of dyslexia as an individual brain-based or cognitive deficit may at first be viewed as positive; that is, the pride expressed by some people with dyslexia because they have ‘survived’ their ‘condition’ and finally succeeded despite the odds. The example of Patrick, presented in a paper by Ferri *et.al.,* shows how his self-perception as ‘diseased’ turned into a feeling of personal survival and pride (Ferri *et.al.,* 2005). Other examples of people who have described themselves in similar ways are reported by May (2001:154) and in a study by Osmond (1993) in which a student says ‘I’ve come through a kind of suffering’ (60). It seems churlish to diminish the value of feeling one has defied the odds and succeeded, but at the same time, it is argued that this reaction fits in with the American ideal of the individual who succeeds with sheer effort and determination and does not ask for help (Dudley-Marling, 2004, 483). In terms of behaviour, this may mean that the student does not ask for help, for fear this will be perceived as weakness (ibid). A further warning is that this survivor rhetoric may lead to oversimplification and imbalance, by only promoting those stories where people have overcome the odds (Ferri *et.al.,* 2005). It is possible that the feeling of failure would be exacerbated in those individuals who felt they did not fit the ‘survivor’ profile, and could not weave a special success into their stories. This American Dream ideal is one thread within a powerful individualising ideology, the implications of which are explored at length in chapter five of the current research.

I am going to complete this section with a final set of behaviours which may be described as largely positive in terms of the benefits they appear to bring to the dyslexic student. Some of the conceptions of dyslexia discussed in the first section centred around the idea that dyslexia can be a positive, and can bring specific strengths. Pollack (1995) identifies a group of students with dyslexia whom he categorises as ‘hemispherists’ on account of their emphasis on their creative skills. Pollack noted that these students were not ashamed of their label during interview, they were confident, and were more likely to explore strategies based upon their strengths as a way of achieving success in their academic work (Pollack, 1995: 125-126). In my own experience as a dyslexia tutor in HE, I have worked with students who appear to view their dyslexic identity as almost wholly positive; something which helps them to have a different take on the world, something to bring up as an advantage in job interviews and group work, and, on occasion, something to proclaim to the world through humorous ‘dyslexia’ t-shirts or badges. This pride in dyslexia may also be fed by the popular conceptions of dyslexia as a gift, and as a condition experienced by geniuses, stars, and entrepreneurs; for example, in one study a dyslexic student is reported to have stood up to teasing by retorting ‘oh, Einstein dead thick, eh?’ (Riddick, 1995: 464). Without that discourse to draw on, what would that student have responded with? Would they have responded at all? However, some of this positivity relies upon oversimplified and misconstrued neuroscience myth (such as the right-brained person/ left-brained person constructs) or outdated understanding of psychological diagnoses of dyslexia only in people of average or above ‘intelligence’.

Thomas (2001) notes that the label of disability in HE can be empowering rather than stigmatizing. Pollack (1995) describes some students with a positive understanding of dyslexia, a positive self-view, and a sense of solidarity with others with the label. Those who acted on their beliefs by setting up support groups, and confidently approaching members of staff to talk about their requirements, were labelled by Pollack as ‘campaigners’ (125). This set of reactions and behaviours according to Pollack was linked to greater likelihood of taking up accommodations, and to active pursuit of social justice; this might mean being more ‘combative’ in requesting a review of their grades, and attempts to raise awareness of dyslexia among teaching staff (Pollack, 1995: 126). There is also, arguably, a danger that students will become unfairly demanding (Gilroy, 1995). One student was reported by Pollack (1995) as proclaiming ‘Dyslexics want the things when they want them, and they want them now’ (131). This reflects an ideal of self-advocacy, and power in action. It seems likely that such a stance is more likely to be linked to conceptions of dyslexia as difference, context-created impairment, or strength (or a combination of these) rather than as myth or stupidity. For students with a positive perception of their academic ability, the way to more personally useful behaviours is open; to those weighed down by a sense of shame, and personal limitation, the possibility of acting differently may not even have occurred, or if it has, may seem impossible. In addition, by joining together in support or action groups, people with dyslexia may have greater access to alternative conceptions of dyslexia that are more beneficial to them (French & Herrington, 2008).

The research I have referred to suggests, then, that there are many different ways of ‘being’ dyslexic as a student within higher education, some of which are more limiting than others. How dyslexia is constructed appears to be important because the wider discourses drawn upon when talking about dyslexia help to shape academic identities and possible actions and approaches to studying.

*Where do some of these alternative conceptions of dyslexia come from and how do they circulate?*

In this section I will begin to discuss the idea of discourse, and how this can be used to help understand the development of different ‘truths’ about dyslexia. A more thorough exploration of discourse will be offered in chapter 3 (methodology).

Parker (1989b) describes discourse as ‘a system of statements which constructs an object’ (61), and Reid and Valle (2004) as a ‘system of rules that defines *what can be said’* (466). Burr describes wider discourse as a ‘frame of reference’; ‘a conceptual backcloth against which our utterances can be interpreted’ (Burr, 2003:66). These definitions are sufficient for now. They suggest that discourse is something we use to make sense of our experiences, something that limits the positions we may occupy in the world, and something that creates objects. These different aspects may be further unpacked, but each is relevant to my discussion here. In chapter one, I argued that the dyslexic individual as an object had been created by scientific/ medical discourses, which led us to understand dyslexia as an individual, fixed, and organic ‘problem’. I also touched upon the role of academic/ educational discourses in the maintenance of categories such as dyslexia. In Western culture great value is placed upon literacy, and academic qualifications, so much so that, it may be difficult to have a positive self-concept if one’s literacy is perceived as poor; ‘we are likely to explain this to ourselves in terms of some enduring trait such as “stupidity”’ (Burden, 2005:197). Here, I want to look more at the role of, social constructionism in paving the way for the emergence of conceptions of dyslexia which diverge from or defy more traditional scientific/ educational ideas.

Vivien Burr (2003) has written a useful introduction to social constructionism which I am going to draw upon here to help provide a simple understanding of this standpoint. The idea is that knowledge is produced through social interaction, rather than pre-existing and awaiting discovery. Social constructionism also says that knowledge is specific to time and culture, and emphasizes the constructive power of language. Necessarily, this offers a very different understanding of truth and reality in comparison to scientific discourse; social constructionism allows for multiple ‘truths’, and gives a picture of a world in constant flux, of fluidity (perhaps too fluid, see Berman 1988). Not only is this social constructionist perspective one I will broadly hold methodologically speaking in the current research (chapter 3), it has itself also helped to construct the conceptions of dyslexia as fluid and open to interpretation. Where much official knowledge is still defined by scientists and academics, and distributed to the public, more recently, ‘the student, the academic, academic freedom and even the “University” [have] become fuzzy, contested, and open to multiple interpretations.’ (Barnett, 2003: 561). The power to define dyslexia is no longer seen to reside solely with the professionals; individuals with the label, parents, teachers, peers, and so on, have to some degree, helped to attach new possible meanings to dyslexia. And so, there is more room for a student with dyslexia to understand himself as ‘wacky’, ‘different’, ‘creative’ instead of, or as well as, ‘deficient’, ‘stupid’, or ‘disabled’. How much more room there is, and how much choice there is in what meanings are taken up, is a question I will deal with in a later section of this chapter.

Social constructionist positions have also arguably allowed greater criticism and questioning of previously taken-for-granted definitions of disabilities including dyslexia. Distinctions have been made between ‘disability’ and ‘impairment’ (Oliver, 1990) which place the disability as wholly socially created, and something that is unjust. Pollack (1995) notes the reference to this perspective by some of the dyslexic students in his study. He calls these students ‘campaigners’ (125). One such student is reported in this study to have said ‘I think dyslexia is very close to homosexuality; we’ve been discriminated against, we’ve been persecuted you can’t judge us from our skin…’ (131). This student has made reference to other social justice movements centred around issues of racial and sexual discrimination. Such language may not have been available for a dyslexic student to make meaning with until those ideas of discrimination and fights for equality had their own socially established vocabularies. But now they are available, these vocabularies can be used to ‘subvert the dominant discourse’ (Ferri, *et.al.,* 2005:65).

As well as providing some freedom to criticise conventional views of dyslexia, social constructionist views have arguably opened up a virtually infinite space for multiple, and conflicting perspectives. Reid and Valle (2004) present this multiplicity as beneficial to social justice because it moves us away from binary conceptions of people – that is understanding people with reference to what they are not. However, others are more cautious of this plurality: Artiles (2004), for example, considers problems of what he calls ‘incompatible paradigms’, which may be incoherent even within themselves (551). Even though it is likely, as Pollack (2005) suggests, discourses of dyslexia may be used as ‘coherence systems’ it does not automatically mean that a single definition is advantageous (though for an opposing view see Higgins, 2002). Different understandings may be suited to different situations; as with the teachers with LD in Ferri *et al’s* (2005) study, who drew on multiple discourses in making meaning of their label, ‘[t]o exist is to be in continuous dialogue with other people, other stories’ (Ferri *et al.* 2005:63). It may therefore be unrealistic, as well as undesirable, to work for a single definition of dyslexia.

Kenneth Gergen and R.D. Laing have presented a couple of interesting examples which show how a post-modern perspective may permit very different possibilities for the way a person can be defined. Gergen (1991) presented the example of Robert, who shoplifts. From a traditional perspective (modernist) Robert is morally deficient; from a post-modern view, Robert may be lacking parental love, wanting attention, may want to fit in with his friends, or might simply be going through an ‘adolescent phase’ (Gergen, 1991, 84). Laing (1965) reflects upon his experience as a psychiatrist and, as Gergen, notes the power of language to form the person. Laing finds the language available to him in describing a schizophrenic patient is largely of loss and lack, and that this virtually prevents presentation of alternative perspectives of the schizophrenic condition; yet these can be created – ‘the cracked mind of the schizophrenic may *let in* light which does not enter the intact minds of many sane people whose minds are closed’ (Laing, 1965:27). He sums up his point:

 *[E]ven the same thing seen from different points of view, gives*

*rise to two entirely different descriptions, and the descriptions*

*give rise to two entirely different theories, and the theories result in two*

*entirely different sets of action.*

(Laing, 1965: 20).

Alternative perspectives on categories of person may now be presented in some situations as having the same weight as traditional descriptions; and even though, in the field of dyslexia, scientific/ medical definitions still appear to dominate, there is greater possibility for the reclaiming of meaning-making by people outside the research, education and medical fields. Thus, we find that some students do reframe dyslexia as a gift, a positive difference, a fault of the educational institution (see examples earlier in this chapter).

I have argued so far that the various conceptions of dyslexia discussed have roots in wider discourses: scientific/ medical, educational, and social discourses (including political); but to be kept alive, these discourses continually circulate, and interact in the social sphere. ‘Information’ and ‘knowledge’ about dyslexia is generated in a variety of different ways, and through social interaction is continually transformed. Obviously there is a huge amount of literature covering the topic of dyslexia, including established peer-reviewed journals either whose primary focus is upon learning disabilities (for example, ‘Dyslexia’, ‘Annals of Dyslexia’, ‘Journal of Learning Disabilities’) and journals in other fields which frequently deal with dyslexia as a topic of interest (e.g. psychiatry, medicine, sociology, education). There are many dyslexia ‘experts’ whose careers are built upon dyslexia (Maggie Snowling, Rod Nicolson, Angela Fawcett, for example) who have produced books and chapters on the deficits of dyslexia, written tests for dyslexia, and spoken widely at conferences and even in one case (R.Nicolson), endorsed claims by a profit-seeking company that dyslexia can be cured (reported in Meikle, 2002). Books have also been produced which simplify some of the research for lay readers – particularly for parents and for adults with dyslexia. A number of books focus particularly on the strengths associated with dyslexia, such as Davis and Braun’s ‘The Gift of Dyslexia’ (2010), and West’s ‘In the Mind’s Eye’ (1997). There is also a new movement within cognitive psychology into ‘positive dyslexia’ currently being championed by Professor Rod Nicolson at The University of Sheffield (Nicolson, 2012).

While research papers covering dyslexia may not be widely read by students with the dyslexia label, their conclusions filter into the public and student sphere in a number of ways. The vocabularies of deficit, and references to ‘diagnosis’, and statistical (ab)normality, formulated by psychological research, arrive with the dyslexic student directly via diagnostic testing and psychological reports. The very process of psychological testing, argue Reid and Valle (2004), establishes dyslexic students as outsiders. Other reports in the literature support this view: the assessment process is ‘dehumanising, traumatizing, and violating’ (Ferri *et.al.,* 2005:76), and ‘invasive’ (Denhart, 2008:25). Meanwhile, students may interpret their reports with limited understanding of the meaning: ‘I didn’t understand what he put in the report, to be honest, because it’s quite – he uses technical terms’ and ‘here he was, really telling me that [these problems] would never go away…even if I get really well I’m never going to be able to read any better’ explained one student (in Pollack, 1995:176). Another individual with the dyslexia label explained that she visually processed information ‘like an eight year-old’ (May, 2001: 147) which suggests absorption of psychology’s fascination with age-levels and norms. The psychological assessment is taken as the evidence for the presence of ‘disability’ and is needed for the student to receive funding for additional support or resources in their educational institution. The psychological assessment can also be a powerful part in the process of deciding what is ‘wrong’ with a student, and what should be done about it (for an illustration of this power in producing student identities, see Mehan’s 1996 chapter, The Construction of an LD student). The student brings with him his own stories about dyslexia, and so interacts with the experience of being psychologically assessed; the meaning he takes from his experience will depend upon the related discourses he may have drawn upon up to that point.

One of the other major ways a student may interact with various conceptions of dyslexia is via their educational institution. Schools and universities rank their students according to perceived academic ability, which is usually measured through written coursework or examination. If one’s writing ability (and/or reading speed) is an area of weakness, as is often the case for dyslexic students, then they may be labelled by the institution and by themselves as mediocre or not very bright. This may be regardless of their understanding and engagement with the subject material and abilities to express this using other forms of assessment. Foucault argued that the examination ‘is a normalising gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish’ (Foucault, 1977/1995:184). Barnett (2003) has argued that universities have increasingly become places where students compete with one another, a consequence of capitalist culture; and places where students discover where they fit in the hierarchy of academic competence by comparing themselves to others (Renick & Harter, 1989).

The spatial organisation in an institution is also part of the ranking system, argued Foucault; this ‘helps to define and separate children, regulate, decide who is to be corrected, who is good and bad’ (1977/1995:182). This standpoint is taken up by Collins (1996) who argues that the use of testing to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and ‘high’ and ‘low’ standards is a way to maintain order (206). We might recognize attempts at ‘control’ and ‘correction’ in the provision of additional classes for dyslexic students at university, or in the sending of children in schools to what was informally referred to (in one reflection) as ‘the Retard Room’ (Pelkey, 2001:20); dyslexic students are also spatially separated from their peers during examination so that they may have extra time, arguably another way in which the ‘disability’ becomes visible. McDermott *et.al.,*(2006) argue that ‘LD comes into practical existence inside a school system designed to measure how much faster or slower various children learn’ (253). This is echoed by Dudley-Marling (2004): ‘the expression of LD requires the institution we know as *school’* (484), where the LD label helps to locate the learning problem firmly within the students.

In Illich’s well-known work entitled ‘Deschooling Society’ (1973), it is argued the power to decide who is schooled, and how children are educationally defined lies with the institutions. He wrote - ‘school reserves instruction to those whose every step in learning fits previously approved measures of social control’ (19). State institutions, he writes, define who is deficient, and they decide how the deficient are to be treated (30). The following quote from the same text demonstrates the vehemence of his position:

‘School is a ritual initiation which introduces the neophyte to the sacred race of progressive consumption, and a ritual of propitiation whose academic priests mediate between the faithful and the god of privilege and power, a ritual of expiation which sacrifices its dropouts, branding them as scapegoats of underdevelopment’

(Illich, 1973:49)

When considering this view within the discussion of dyslexia in schools and universities conclusions are not straightforward. That is, one could position the construction of dyslexic students as a negative one that tarnishes those students who do not fit the conventional academic expectations; however, the label, and the accommodations that go with it may also be perceived as genuine attempts to allow students to compete on more of a level playing field. Whether or not they are driven by the will to control and rank, institutions are nevertheless places where many people come to be defined as LD (Williams & Abson, 2001), and where those labelled are likely to be at a disadvantage in a context where their worth is measured via their reading and writing abilities, and other skills are not measured. By placing the disability within individuals, institutions can justify their allocation of resources to methods of correction or ‘treatment’ rather than to ways of changing the learning context to allow a greater variety of ways of learning and means of assessment. The power of the institutions over how students are labelled and ranked means, according to Mehan (1993), that labels like LD ‘stand poised to take their share from each new generation’ (272); that the label acquires the student rather than the student acquiring the label (ibid).

The way understandings of dyslexia come to be produced in educational settings may be understood historically (as discussed in Chapter 1), but they may also be constructed in the everyday social settings at school and university: in class, where strengths may be ignored (McDermott *et.al.,* 2005); in dialogue with teachers who may help students to build a picture of themselves (Pollack, 1995 & 2005); in daily interaction with peers whose understandings of dyslexia vary (Denhart, 2008; Riddick, 1995). Therefore, it is arguable that while conceptions of dyslexia circulate within our society as products of history, these conceptions are drawn upon in local interaction, sometimes reworked or altered by that interaction, and fed back to the wider world. Ivanic asks ‘whether people are positioned directly by institutional values, beliefs and relations of power, or whether they take on the discourse conventions of an institution and as a result unwittingly buy into its values, beliefs and relations of power’ and concludes that both of these may act together (Ivanic, 1998:256). In other words, the construction of a personal meaning for dyslexia may take place from the bottom up (locally) and from the top down (from wider social forces). I am interested in the local construction of meanings of dyslexia as well as the wider availability of discourses on which these meanings feed. This has implications for the way I will collect and analyse discourse data, to be discussed in the following chapter.

Continuing the discussion of where conceptions of dyslexia are created, and the ways in which they are maintained by wider discourses, I am going to talk next about the part played by the media and the web in circulating and contesting ideas about dyslexia. There is a huge amount of information on dyslexia available on the web; an amount that may be overwhelming to a student on a first-time search to understand the label. There are forums, and debates where people can discuss their experiences; blogs; reviews; comments pages; ‘support’ groups; resources; news articles…and so on. Dyslexia also receives attention in newspapers (tabloid and broadsheet), and on television. I am going to dip into some of this to give an idea of what a dyslexic student might take from a quick search in terms of the conceptions of dyslexia on offer and the allusion to wider discourse.

An initial search for dyslexia on the web currently leads the student to a Wikipedia page (Wikipedia, updated 20.6.10). Here, we are presented immediately with the various scientific conceptions of dyslexia, and in the first main section we see three of the commonly cited definitions of dyslexia, starting with The World Federation of Neurology’s definition which I discussed in chapter one. The student will then find information about the ‘symptoms’ and ‘causes’ of dyslexia. There is a short section on ‘controversy’, but other than this, there is no mention of alternative conceptions of dyslexia on this page. From pages like this, students may be directed to the web-sites of well-known organisations like Dyslexia Action (Dyslexia Institute Limited, 2005-2010) or the British Dyslexia Association (BDA, 2010a) where advice and support are offered, again with a focus upon scientific conceptions of dyslexia. Interestingly, there is also a list of famous people with dyslexia offered on the BDA website (BDA, 2010b) which fits in with the ‘survivor’ stories discussed earlier in this chapter. There is also a site where people with dyslexia can access talks on dyslexia by ‘experts’ like Maggie Snowling and John Stein (DysTalk, 2013). Students could also subscribe to Dyslexia Jiscmail to receive weekly e-mails from various subscribers sharing news and opinions on dyslexia. Here they may come across more proactive promotion of dyslexia by people with the label and from parents with dyslexic children. Various popular blogs also dot the web, some which set dyslexia in a positive light (e.g.Brother Wolf, 2013). Some of the alternative conceptions of dyslexia are presented in a ‘humorous’ manner at a mock-wikipedia site called ‘Uncyclopedia’ (Uncyclopedia, 2010); this site plays on the idea that dyslexia is an excuse for stupidity and laziness, and the very fact that it may be understood as funny, itself says something about the public conceptions circulating about what dyslexia ‘really’ is. On offer at another site are t-shirts with humorous slogans such as ‘dyslexics of the world untie’ (Lush T-shirts, 2013) which has also made it onto Facebook (Facebook, 2010).

The web also provides perhaps more profit-motivated advice for people with dyslexia. For example, the discredited Dore Programme claimed to be able to cure dyslexia (for a price) (DORE, Dynevor, 2009-10a) and referred to ‘mending the hole in the bucket’ as a metaphor for fixing dyslexia people (DORE, Dynevor, 2009-10b) the ‘hole’ presumably being the deficiency and the ‘bucket’ a person’s brain. Other ‘treatments’ for dyslexia advertised on the web include fish oil food supplements (Dyslexia Research Trust, 2010) or the cutting out of refined sugar from one’s diet (WDDTY, 2009). Or ‘light therapy’ (WDDTY, 2009). It may be difficult for people to decide which sites are more or less reputable or reliable; what the browser does find, however, are plenty of references to curing and treating deficiencies of dyslexia (see examples above). However, the kind of search words a student might type into Google, for example, and the path they take during a browsing session may again depend upon the conceptions of dyslexia they are already familiar with and the way they have experienced/ interacted with these.

Newspapers and television programmes also feature dyslexia as a topic relatively frequently. In the very different angles on dyslexia, even taken by the same newspaper, various competing discourses emerge. I am including examples here from *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* as representatives of left and right-wing orientated papers. Medical and scientific discourses are woven into the articles on the topic, quite explicitly; for example in the Telegraph’s ‘Clue to cause of dyslexia’ (Highfield, 2007) which uses evidence from brain imaging to show which parts of the brain might cause dyslexia, and refers to ‘treatments’ which might include ‘drugs’ or ‘remedial education’. This article presents dyslexia as neurological fact, and underpins its claims with reference to brain regions that the lay person is unlikely to recognise. By using the word ‘remedial’ this article is also arguably drawing on those discourses discussed in chapter one which describe and reify individual educational deficiencies of some individuals and the need to correct them. References to ‘neurons in the wrong place’ and ‘underactive brains’ of dyslexic people in a Guardian article (Sample, 2005) likewise emphasise (and oversimplify) the biological and in-the-person view of dyslexia. There is also talk of the role of chromosome six in the inheritance of dyslexia, mention of which endows the article’s ‘facts’ with an evolutionary-psychological glow. Rose and Rose (2001) argue that ideas of evolutionary psychology have ‘got into the cultural drinking water’ (3) via the popular press, television and school teaching, with little criticism; and that this rhetoric can be a powerful force for use by those with specific political agendas (8).

However, more attention appears to be given in these papers to the conception of dyslexia as a myth (see Elliott and Gibbs, 2008), an excuse for stupidity or middle class disappointment. Titles from the Telegraph such as ‘Dyslexia: complex medical condition, or myth?’ (Womak, 2007), and ‘Dyslexia “used to stop pupils being called thick”’ (Berry, 2007) refer to these ideas directly, and generate waves of heated commenting from the public, which are themselves fascinating beds of competing discursive constructions. News articles jump upon the opinions of professionals and politicians which are most likely to shock, and in doing so present to the public some of the more extreme conceptions of dyslexia circulating; for example, Daley (2009) paints a scathing picture of those who push for a dyslexia diagnosis:

‘A brave Labour backbencher has uttered the thought which few politicians would have dared to express – even though it is a common sense view held by a huge swathe of ordinary people. Graham Stringer has declared that dyslexia…is a convenient fiction.’

‘One in ten of the British population are incurably illiterate as a result of a brain disorder? Since when? Was there a similar proportion of hapless victims forty years ago?’

Here we have the ‘common-sense view’ pitted against the ‘science’, which perhaps reflects the post-modern possibilities of resisting the scientific hold on ‘truth’. However, the view of dyslexia as myth or fiction presented here suggests not only that the ‘disorder’ does not exist, but also belittles the experiences of people who have received or sought the label, and does not consider that a meaningful reality may come into being due to context as much as individual deficiency.

Conceptions of dyslexia are confounded in the press. An article in the Guardian, for example, with the title ‘The other side of dyslexia’ (Campbell 2009), though attempting to illustrate positive aspects, manages to mix in an array of vocabulary which derogates and patronises. It talks of dyslexia ‘sufferers’, and ‘victims’, normal and abnormal, suggests the inescapability of ‘nature’, emphasises the difference between dyslexic people and others, while at the same time proclaiming superiority in dyslexia:

‘Look inside our heads and you find our brains are abnormal. While the non-dyslexic brain has a larger left hemisphere, the dyslexic brain has identical hemispheres. In a world where bi-lateral symmetry is valued as a thing of beauty, perhaps we can rest assured that we are nature’s chosen ones’

The science here is oversimplified and based upon weak evidence even from the scientific point of view (e.g. Beaton 1997, 2002). The article also says that people with dyslexia have the benefit of a ‘high *IQ* ’, which is not only an out-of-date perspective, but also one which upholds the existence of a single intelligence which can be numerically measured. In a few paragraphs are observable medical, psychological, scientific, social constructionist, discourses, as well as discourses of surviving struggle, and fighting for social justice. Written by someone with the label of dyslexia, this article is a good example of the way multiple discourses may be woven into individual stories, and what a confusing experience this may be.

As one dyslexic student explained ‘there’s always stuff in the media about it [dyslexia] at different times’ (quoted in Pollack, 1995). ‘Stuff’ that is read by parents, teachers, students, politicians, anyone. It is likely that the conceptions of dyslexia many people interact with arrive through articles like these in papers and on the web, or in television programmes (such as C4’s documentary ‘The Dyslexia Myth’ based on work by Elliot, 2005). And in everyday life through conversations in various places and spaces the meanings attached to these conceptions are arguably rehashed, transformed, resisted, confirmed, without pause. When a student cites dyslexia as justification for an extension request on a piece of work, he interacts with certain conceptions of dyslexia; he interacts with a tutor’s response, peers’ responses, and recreates his dyslexia in each discursive space. When a student is granted a laptop as one of her accommodations for dyslexia, and talks about this with her friends, she is interacting with the discourses surrounding dyslexia, and perhaps justifying her need, and disadvantage to skeptical peers. When a student’s parent finally wins the right to have her son tested for dyslexia, yet another set of understandings are produced through the conversations surrounding their ‘struggle’. The interplay of discourses in creating ever-changing self-understandings is part of the focus of the following section in which I talk about ideas of personal identity.

*Identities*

The idea that people *have* a personal identity, or identities has, arguably, only fairly recently become widespread (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006), though attempts to illuminate the nature of ‘self’ are present in older philosophical texts. Locke, for example, equated identity with soul; so for him, identity was ‘the sameness of a rational being’ (Locke, [1694] (1975):39) as a soul was singular and enduring. Hume, however, argued against the idea of fixity of identity, by suggesting that this was an illusion, a ‘fictitious’ creation, produced by our imaginations linking together perceptions and impressions (Hume, [1739] (1975):168); he wondered whether our selves were any more than ‘a bundle or collection of different perceptions’ (ibid:162). A little later, in the work of Hegel [1807] (1977), we are introduced the idea that the social world has a role in forming self-conception(s); that other people are needed for self-conception in the first place.

Understandings of the social world as central to the formation of identity or self were explored further by a number of authors in the 20th Century. These include the concept of the ‘looking-glass-self’ (Cooley, [1902], 1983); that is, the idea that we build pictures of ourselves using the perceptions others have of us, which they reflect back during social interaction. Emphasis upon the creation of self through the social was also a focus of Mead a few years later. Mead understood the mind itself as arising from social communication, and emphasized the power of language in this process (Mead, 1934). Goffman’s ideas of social interaction as performance likewise argue for the overriding importance of the social in identity expression, though he differs from some other writers in the field (e.g. Gergen, 1991) in that he does speak of ‘true’ and ‘real’ attitudes and beliefs that may be hidden via interactive performance (Goffman, 1958:10). The position that some sort of ‘real’ enduring identity co-exists with the unstable, changing aspects of self, is present in Purkey’s discussion of ‘organised’ and ‘dynamic’ selves (Purkey, 1970:7). However, overall, it is arguable that the movement towards the social as a focus in the study of identity is paired with the post-modern understanding of identity as wholly unstable - fluid and dynamic. And from this perspective it becomes nonsensical to study who-we-are outside of where-we-are; instead the focus becomes ‘man-in-the-world’ (Sartre, 1943:110), or ‘being-in-the-world’ (Laing, 1965:19, after Heidegger). As Dudley-Marling notes ‘one cannot be learning disabled on one’s own’ (2004:482).

From the post-modern social cauldron our identities continuously coagulate, boil, and evaporate. We have, arguably, selves distributed among other people and actions (Bruner 1990:114), identities floating ‘in the air’ (Bauman, 2004:13), selves formed by many ‘subtle inter-weaving threads’ of identity (Burr, 2003:107); in short, writes Gergen (1991) we are experiencing a ‘multiphrenic condition’ where ‘one begins to experience the vertigo of unlimited multiplicity’ (49). From this perspective it may be hard to feel grounded at all, with no ‘reality’ to which we can cling (Berman, 1988). This is very different from modernist and scientific understandings of ‘personalities’ or characteristics (e.g. shy, emotional, aggressive) and ‘categories’ of person (e.g. those of high intelligence, or those who are Learning Disabled, those of particular race, or gender), all of which are understood from this starting point as internal and fixed. From an extreme relativist view, language becomes all there is, and from this position, the self may be lost ‘fragmented and distributed across discourses and interactions’ (Burr, 2003:179). However, for Burr, social constructionism need not deny the existence of a material reality, but only contests the existence of ‘real’ meanings of things or events: ‘objects and events come into existence for us as meaningful entities through their representation in discourse.’ (2003:67).

This idea of discourse is a key one in the discussion of how identities are constructed socially. Ivanic describes discourse as the ‘mediating mechanism’ in this process (Ivanic, 1998:17). According to Ivanic, discourses are used during ‘intermental encounters’ (1998:51) which may be drawn upon by each individual at another time, and the discourses internalized. In this sense, our words *do* things; the discourse is active in our interactions:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.’

(Bakhtin,1981:76)

I will return to the idea of talk as action in the following chapter. But for the moment, I want to relate what I have discussed so far in this section on identity to the subject of dyslexia. If he takes one of the more traditional/ scientific perspectives on dyslexia as I have already considered, a student with the dyslexia label may feel helpless to act against his ‘fixed’ ‘condition’ (the legacy of biological determinism? See Sartre, 1957:34); whereas, if he understands dyslexia as a discursive construction, he may feel less bound by dominant conceptions attached to his label, and freer to explore other meanings and identities. This brings me to the consideration of agency; that is, do people have choice in the discourses they draw upon? And if so, how much? And, specifically, how much say do dyslexic students have over the meaning they attach to their label; how much control do they have over the conceptions they identify with?

‘Do we use discourse or does it use us?’ (Burr, 2003:103). If we believe we have no choice in the discourses that define us, or the identities that become attached to us, then we lose the impetus to struggle against identities we perceive as oppressive because the fighting becomes pointless. Foucault may be interpreted as suggesting that we have little control over who we ‘are’; he writes, ‘[t]he individual is…a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I call “discipline”’(Foucault, [1977], 1995). Berman (1988) rejects what he perceives as Foucault’s message: ‘Foucault denies the possibility of any sort of freedom either outside these institutions or within their interstices’ (34). Rorty expresses a similar view (Rorty, 1986:47). From this point of view, dyslexic students would be stuck within their ‘deficient’ ‘abnormal’ category without hope of escape. Burr, however, feels this may be a mis-reading of Foucault. She argues that with the ability to reflect upon the work of wider discourses, some agency is possible, even within Foucault’s world (Burr, 2003). Danziger (1997) also appears to express little hope on this topic: ‘[f]or most persons the prevailing discursive system becomes inescapable… The discursive resources that might enable people to experience themselves and others differently are generally not available.’ (185).

In fact, what emerges from the fraught discussions upon agency that are relevant here is the feeling that we *do* have some choice in the discourses we identify with, but that escaping from dominant discourses is often very difficult, and is subject to heavy restriction. To begin with, any choice would be restricted to those discourses available in a given social context (McDermott, *et.al.,* 2006). In other words, discourse ‘defines what *can be said’* (Reid & Valle, 2004:466), but within these parameters, we have ‘the right of withdrawal, of throwing into relief one’s participation by casting it in alternative frames’ (Gergen, 1991:196). Bruner (1990) concurs with this position; he writes that, although we are ‘creatures of history’, ‘the self, using its capacities for reflection and for envisioning alternatives, escapes or embraces, or reevaluates and reformulates what the culture has on offer’ (110). However, some discourses, argue Anderson and Williams (2001), are so entrenched that they have become ‘regimes of truth’; ‘hegemonic discourses’ that are very hard to challenge (7). We have to be active in resistance to these if choice is to be had. Bauman expresses this nicely: ‘some [identities are] of one’s own choice but others [are] inflated and launched by those around, and one needs to be constantly on the alert to defend the first against the second.’ (Bauman, 2004:13).

We may, however, find that we draw upon discourses to identify ourselves/ position others unconsciously (Ivanic, 1998). People can ‘become enmeshed in the subject positions implicit in their talk without necessarily having intended to position each other in particular ways.’ (Burr, 2003:115). An example of this appears in a study by Ferri *et.al.,* (2005), where in an attempt to resist one set of conceptions of learning disability, a participant arguably (inadvertently) reinforced binary understandings of ability and disability (75). However, if we are aware of the discourses that ‘position’ us, and that we use to position others, we will not be ‘determined’ by them (Reid & Valle, 2004:466). Being alert to this may be the first step in resistance and choice.

There are examples in the literature where individuals with an LD label appear to have actively chosen or managed their ‘disabled’ identities (e.g. Rapley *et.al.,* 1998; Pollack, 1995; Gerber *et.al.,*1996). But this knowledge of choice may not be automatic; there are comments from some dyslexic people which suggest that choosing more positive identities was something which they came to do after reflection and purposeful reevaluation. For example, Cunningham writes of herself ‘I now have many different suits of armour in my closet, creating a wardrobe that I can arm myself with when and where appropriate’ (Cunningham, 2001:96). The suits of armour may be called discourses, which she presumably draws upon in certain situations. Pelkey, in reflecting on her younger self, explains ‘I accepted those stereotypes [of being stupid] and let them define me’ (Pelkey, 2001:25). Understanding that one can be positioned by discourses may be necessary before a knowing choice can be made. It is possible, argue Ferri *et al.,* (2005) for ‘a dynamic process’ to occur ‘in which an individual reinvents – in more favourable terms – what it means to have an LD’ (65). This process has also been called ‘reframing’ (Gerber *et.al.,* 1996). The ‘re’ of reframing or reinvention indicates the likelihood that before this process is recognized as a possibility, the LD may have been framed in an undesirable or negative manner. It would clearly be preferable for positive discourses to become more widely available to LD children before they have become entangled in a mesh of individualist or medical description (for example of such entanglement see Mehan’s, 1996, powerful account of the within-institution construction of an LD student). Discourses may be hard to resist, even if one is aware of them, particularly when they circulate so widely and abundantly. A teacher with LD in Ferri *et al.’s* (2005) study was noted for the ‘slips and corrections’ in his talk which they argued were a result of ‘constant negotiations enacted as [he] interacts with the various discourses’. ‘[W]ithin this heteroglossia’ write Ferri *et al.,* ‘each discourse competes for dominance in the making of meaning in his consciousness.’ (71). This idea of discursive competition, and multiple possibilities for constructing meaning is clearly expressed by Bakhtin:

‘Our ideological development is…an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values. The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is *not finite*, it is *open*; in each of the new contexts that dialogise it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer *ways to mean*’

(Bakhtin, 1981:79)

This ‘struggle’ with or against available discourses is arguably intensified because of the tangibility ideas appear to take on. Dyslexia, for example, becomes so thing-like in some of the discourses which bring it into being that resisting those discourses is akin to denying the presence of an object in a room that everyone can see. Once an idea has become object-like via language, and thus ‘real’, it may then be theorized and further reified. Memory, for example, discussed and studied as a thing could then have data generated on it, and its thing-like status could become so taken-for-granted that the possibility of it being otherwise forever disappears from view (Saljo, 2002:402). This is true for ideas like intelligence, and learning disability too. It is hard to resist their status as fixed things once they have been named: ‘what things *are called*  is comparably more important than what they are.’ (Nietzsche, [1887], 1974, ex. 57:121). And when these names are written down, argued Ong (2002), they become further thing-like: we can touch words on a page – ‘written words are residue’ (Ong, 2002: 11). The printed word, argued Ong, ‘encouraged human beings to think of their own interior conscious and unconscious resources as more and more thing-like’ (2002:129).

These ‘things’ in our heads like intelligence, like dyslexia, are then arguably compounded further through the use of things-metaphors: ‘mind’ as a muscle, a steam engine, a telephone exchange, a computer, are all examples of this, and have implications for the way people are treated (Säljö, 2002). This tendency to use metaphor to make sense of the dyslexia label given to them, and thus to reify their ‘problem’ and situate it within their heads is apparent in some of the comments made by dyslexic individuals: for example, one student explains ‘[i]t’s as though I have a battery in my head which is running down, while the other children run on duracel’ (Paul, a dyslexic student in Osmond, 1993:30); another says ‘[my] [b]rain is not programmed to process information like most people’s brains are programmed.’ (LD adult in Reiff, *et al.,* 1993: 118), implying the application of a computer-view of the mind (mentioned earlier in the chapter). A question is whether metaphor may be used to help construct other possibilities for understanding mind and self that are less rigid and lend themselves to alternative meanings and actions.

This chapter and chapter one have attempted to build upon an understanding of dyslexia that incorporates history, psychology, education and student experience, that is recirculated and reproduced in contemporary British culture, and that is ever-shifting and multifaceted. This array of ways of conceptualizing dyslexia and being dyslexic is on offer for the students whom I see. In the following (methodology) chapter I will talk about how I approach the investigation into how these possibilities of dyslexia are constructed by students.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Method

This chapter is divided into two main sections. Firstly, I offer a rationale for my chosen methodological approach to the study and justify my particular epistemological and ontological stance. I also consider my general ethical responsibility as a researcher in this area. In the latter section I present the method of the intended study. Here I include the specific aims of the study, the means of collecting data, and the framework for data analysis. Specific ethical considerations and possible limitations of the study are included here.

*Methodology*

*Introduction*

The current study is a discourse analysis of a focus group discussion between myself as researcher and a small number of university students identified with dyslexia. The discourse analysis of the focus group discussions involves two levels: firstly, conceptions or discourses of dyslexia are identified with an emphasis upon the related subject positions taken up, offered or refused (Langenhove & Harré, 1999; Davies & Harré, 1999) by the participants and myself; secondly, the conversations are analysed with reference to Gee’s critical discourse analysis approach (Gee, 2005; 2011b), andWillig’s (2008) ideas around the use of discursive resources in interaction, in an attempt to examine the wider discourses, intertextuality, and ideologies working through the text, offering particular identities and reconstructing systems of power. This level of analysis also takes note of what Sims-Schouten et al. (2007) describe as ‘embodiment, institutions and materiality’ (107) which, from the critical realist perspective, limit the choice people have to draw on particular discourses. Each of these layers involves a different focus in analysis: the identification of subject positions and related possibilities for ways of being and doing is not primarily about syntactical analysis, but makes the storylines, or ‘unfolding narrative’ (Davies & Harré, 1999: 42) central. The second layer of analysis involves a version of critical discourse analysis which considers narratives, social context, and linguistics as important analytical aspects. It also considers that institutions and other aspects of social life have a material existence as well as a discursive one (see reflective subsection preceding chapter 4 for further discussion around this). My choice here was led by my interest in identifying the texts that could be ‘heard’ through the stories participants told and the power these had to shape identities. A politically-led aim was also to examine the ideologies and power dynamics present in the discussions we had, which in turn informed the subject positions available, and offered some stable identities around being a student with the label of dyslexia. In this first section, therefore, I will offer a brief overview of the different versions of discourse analysis before providing a rationale for my particular choices.

Discursive psychology [DP] and critical social psychology [CSP] have been positioned as alternative starting points for the study of people and society, which hold ideas about language, meaning, and psychological fact that are very different to those held by traditional social psychology (Fox, et.al., 2009). Critical social psychology emphasises the historical and cultural construction of truth and aims to critique the claims of traditional psychology, and to show how ideas are used to uphold the power of dominant groups (Parker, 1999). Like CSP, DP is concerned with social justice (Hepburn & Jackson, 2009). One of the underlying understandings within DP is that ‘objects and events come into existence for us as meaningful entities through their representation in discourse’ (Burr, 2003: 67). This means that the meanings we attach to objects and events are not eternal, but may be maintained, manipulated, or even overturned through the way we talk about them. Mainstream social psychology, on the other hand, stands by the idea that we can learn about society and mind by studying people outside the contexts they are found in, through rigorous empirical study and observation. Discursive psychologists do not argue that internal thoughts do not exist: ‘it is just that these are methodologically always just out of reach’ (Burman, 2006: 19). The ’turn to discourse’ has meant a rethink of the understanding of people as isolated units to be investigated ‘behind and beyond language’ (Wetherell, 2001:187). DP examines how ‘feelings and ‘beliefs’ come to be constructed in talk (Edwards & Potter, 2005), and also how minds and identities are communally and socially created (Wetherell, 2001).

The recognition of the constructive power of discourse or talk springs partly from the understanding of language, not as a conduit for information transfer from the speaker to the listener, but as a set of tools for performing a range of functions; the meaning is dependent on how the words are used, on the particular situation, and on perspectives of the speaker and listener (Wittgenstein, 1958/1979). Wittgenstein’s idea of language as a toolkit (ibid), and Austin’s understanding of utterances as speech acts (Austin, 1961) have been extremely influential in discursive psychology (Potter, 2001). The speaker is no longer simply a ‘designer’ or the listener an ‘analyst’ and words are no longer thought to represent fixed things (Coulter, 2005: 91-92). The subsequent idea that truth (epistemologically speaking) is created, negotiated, and contested in talk forms a central thread within DP (Gee, 2005: 5; Edwards & Potter, 2005). There is a great deal of cross over between the different approaches to discourse analysis; they do at least agree upon the idea that the world, people and other things are (partly) constructed by the way people talk.

*A two-level discourse analysis*

Some types of discourse analysis focus mainly upon the functions of language in interaction. Here DA is concerned with the specifics of the interaction such as turn-taking, persuasion, accusation, and requesting, for example (Potter &Wetherell, 1987); defending one’s position, and managing ‘stake’ (Potter, 1996:97); or use of rhetoric and emotional metaphor (Edwards, 1999). Potter argues that descriptions in interaction ‘*construct the world* …and are *themselves constructed’*’; he uses the metaphor of interaction as construction yard (ibid: 97). In Potter and Wetherell’s (1987/ 2001) approach, attention is drawn to the difference in accounts of the same object or event which they argue indicates the functional aspects of language and the impact of perspective and context upon description. They use the term ‘interpretive repertoires’ (1987:146) to identify the different sets of terms used for different interactive situations. Analysis here involves asking ‘”what is *this* person, in *this* part of the conversation, seeking to achieve?’” (Stainton-Rogers, 2003: 85). This kind of discourse analysis is fairly similar to conversation analysis [CA]; though arguably CA is less politically charged (ten Have, 2007: 57). Where conversation analysis is lacking, writes Fairclough (1992a), is in its ‘underdeveloped social orientation to discourse’ (20). Fairclough also criticises Potter and Wetherell’s discourse analysis which he describes as an ‘impoverished analytical framework’ that doesn’t take sufficient heed of implicit signals in interaction, nor, like CA, does it take enough account of ‘social orientation’ (1992a: 25). It also cannot explain why people adopt discourses which are not personally optimal in a given situation; that is, it does not incorporate an analysis of the social or institutional realities which limit or direct people to identifying themselves using particular discourses. By ‘realities’ here, I mean both the material, and the discursive (see reflective subsection preceding chapter 4). In practice, rather than being an inferior analytical method, it may simply be that conversation analysis suits different kinds of questions to critical discourse analysis; for example, if I was interested in how people can ‘do’ apologising, I might be concerned only with the various ways people appear to apologise in different conversational contexts. The political or ideological reasons for apologising in particular ways might not be of interest such a narrow study. The questions I am asking in this study ask about the within-interaction construction of a topic (dyslexia) *and* about its wider cultural and historical construction, and its evolution as a socially relevant concept, and I also ask questions about aspects of a material world which interact with the relevant discourses; and therefore a diverse approach is needed.

Some types of discourse analysis are purposefully distinguished from CA. Willig (1999b), among others, uses the term ‘discursive practices’ to refer to what is being done in talk, and ‘discursive resources’ to indicate what is being drawn on in the interaction (2). This kind of discourse analysis looks further outside the situated interaction to question what resources society (culture and history) have on offer for people to take up. For example, Hollway (2001) investigated the use of a masculine-need-for-sex discourse by men in talking about their relationships with women; she considered the individual histories of the participants in her study as well as the positions available to them in society. Both Willig (1999b) and Davies and Harré (2001) use the idea of ‘subject positions’ in their discourse analytic approaches. Subject positions (positions from which someone can speak or act) are offered by specific interactive situations, and by wider societal and historical context. Willig (1999b), particularly, is interested in investigating the creation of categories of person through discourse and believes that subject positions can allow or limit particular actions and ways of being (2). In ways that conversation analysis cannot, this type of discourse analysis ‘allows us to question and challenge dominant constructions of psychologically relevant concepts’ (Willig, 1999b:2), which is one of the objectives of the current study.

Those versions of discourse analysis which concern themselves more explicitly with the wider social and historical contexts of interaction also appear to involve more attention to the construction of ongoing social identities. The ‘possibilities for selfhood’ (Ivanic, 1998:10) within an interaction, are limited by what is currently socially available; so though these possibilities are ‘open to contestation and change’ (ibid: 12) it is arguable that the ‘selves’ we may construct are so shaped and constrained by wider social and historical forces that the same person may find themselves with a collection of identities which, in particular social contexts, do have some consistency over time. In the context of Higher Education, for example, the ways students may talk about the dyslexia label assigned to them is likely to be dominated by traditional ideas about the ‘condition’; and so the ‘dyslexic selves’ may persistently be drawn from the readily available inferior, ‘abnormal’, and ‘deficient’ menus (see studies by Pollack, 2005; Osmond, 1993). Davies and Harré (2001) recognise that, having to some degree committed oneself to a category, and so experienced some continuity in that ‘self’, it may be hard to shift position. Willig (1999b) explains nicely how discourse analysis can be an aid here: ‘By deconstructing such categories, we can demonstrate that things could be different, that our customary ways of categorising and ordering phenomena are reified and interest-driven rather than simple reflections of “reality”’ (2). This is part of what I want to achieve.

The idea of a ‘subject position’ was adopted as a replacement for ‘role’ which was considered by Harré and his colleagues to imply a separation between the individual and the ‘role’ they were fulfilling, and to neglect the dynamic role of interaction (Langenhove & Harré, 1999; Davies & Harré, 1999). The process of positioning is described as ‘the discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines’ (Harré & Langenhove, 1999: 37). This emphasis on narrative over linguistics is also a feature of Margaret Wetherell’s discussion of discourse and discourse analysis (2001). For Wetherell, as for Harré, the stories we tell about ourselves and others and the world have consequences, and it matters just how accounts are put together for how our ‘selves’ are constructed: identity for Wetherell is ‘a set of culturally available performances…sanctioned through power relations’ (2001: 186). Identity, she writes ‘is partly a matter of what one can create for oneself and partly a matter of the positions made available by others in the preceding turns of the conversation’ (2001: 186). Identities are likely to be multiple and may be fleeting and contradictory. Arguably, therefore, analysts such as Harré, Willig and Wetherell do have something in common with the approach of conversation analysts in that they are interested in the ‘function’ of utterances with an assumption about a certain degree of choice in positioning; but they differ from conversation analysts and from discursive psychologists such as Potter in that they place greater focus upon the histories people bring to a conversation, their previous interaction with wider discourses, and the social structures which help to produce certain identities and power relations. This is important for my work here because it helps me to avoid a philosophical and epistemological discord between the two layers of my analysis.

Davies and Harré take up what they call an ‘immanentist position’ in their theory of positioning; that is, they do not recognise a Chomskian-type ‘grammar’ existing independently of social context as a kind of abstract object (1999). In fact, they argue that ‘there are only actual conversations, past and present’ and it is these conversational histories that come to bear upon the discourses speakers engage in (and positions they speak from) in future conversations (1999: 33). The snippets of autobiography that are constructed in people’s stories contain characters with different parts to play, and where the speaker fits in their story tells of the subject position they are constructing for themselves (knowingly or not). However, this is not about an individual’s intention, but about joint action in a conversation: how a speaker’s position is interpreted will depend on others’ histories and expectations and ‘attitudes’ for this kind of situation or for this topic (Davies &Harré, 1999). While it might be usual for a particular discourse or group of discourses to be followed in a conversation after a speaker introduces it, there is room to resist, or refuse, and to bring other discourses into play. We are at once, so to speak, the authors and audiences of the conversational performance (Davies & Harré, 1999: 42). But we are not free to author any identity we wish: ‘we construct our identities out of the options afforded to us by our general positionality and our particular trajectory of experiences…’ (Lemke, 2008: 21).We are also arguably limited by what might be called the material realities of social life, in this case, for example, disability legislation, or access to resources, and the body (by this I mean the arguably embodied aspects of ‘being’ dyslexic – see chapter one). Davies and Harré (1999: 36) give a five point outline of how positioning occurs: firstly we learn that there are categories of person, such as man/woman, father/daughter, or groups of people like ‘students’ which are attached in our society to particular storylines and discourses. Even within the category ‘student’ there are many subcategories that are placed in a hierarchy (Williams & Abson, 2001), for example, ‘student at a red-brick university’, ‘PhD student’, ‘media studies student’. We then position ourselves within these stories and discourses as if we belong to a particular category. Once we have taken on the characters and parts which correspond to the given categories and related stories then we tend to construct or view the world from the position of someone in that category. In this sense, then, there is a continuity to the ‘I’ that is experienced, but one that may be punctuated by more fluid, temporal identities that come and go through the course of everyday conversations (Davies & Harré, 1999: 37). The understanding of some continuity of identity in a discursive *and* material world is important for Harré and his colleagues, and allows him to deal with ontological questions that more relativistic analysts might avoid. He is comfortable in recognising ‘being’ and ‘mind’ as partially stable and organic, and identities as ‘relatively integrated and coherent’ (Harré & Gillet, 1994: 180).

Various types of critical discourse analysis are also concerned with the subject positions available to people in interaction, and they place great emphasis upon the maintenance of social inequalities and power relations via discourse (Woofit, 2005). The emphasis is transferred from the local interactional situation to the wider context, although the analysis of the micro elements of interaction is still important in identifying the many voices in the text. Rebecca Rogers (2011) recognises Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), with capitals (after Fairclough) as one approach within a wider field of critical discourse analysis (lower case). My approach in the second layer of analysis is informed by Fairclough’s work to some degree, but at times will move away from a rigid linguistic focus, with greater attention to social context, social meanings, histories and narrative. I have found Gee’s approach to be broader than Fairclough’s with greater room for manoeuvre, and so refer more often to Gee’s guiding questions (see Gee, 2011a; 2011b). This is largely because Gee does not proffer a prescriptive approach, but rather offers a set of tools which the analyst can use according to their particular questions and data type. Gee’s approach pushes the researcher into a process of wider reflection around whichever questions are guiding analysis; something which overly detailed and strictly systematic approaches stifle. Fairclough (CDA) holds that new discourses are produced though historical change, and people are then positioned by these discourses (Fairclough, 1992a). He is clear that both textual analysis and social theory should form a part of a ‘multi-dimensional approach’ in discourse analysis (1992a:5). In a given interaction, argues Fairclough (1992a), other texts/ discourses are drawn upon, and by attending to this ‘intertextuality’ it is possible to make visible discourses which uphold and sometimes mask the power relations which restrict our ways of being (9). He expains ‘[w]hich prior texts and text types are drawn upon in a given instance…and how they are articulated, depends upon how the discursive event stands in relation to hegemonies and hegemonic struggles’ (10). For Ian Parker, recognising and understanding hegemonic power is a matter of history, and he criticises Harré, among others, for neglecting the issue of power through a historical lens (Parker, 1989a). Parker suggests the use of ‘historical frames’ as a tool in investigating how people come to take up oppressive or stigmatising identities in everyday interaction; it is these ‘historical frames’ or ‘discursive regimes’ (after Foucault) which determine what can be said and how the self is constructed (Parker, 1989a: 58). For example, the rise of capitalism in the West has arguably created the idea of the agentic individual; ‘an entity who is the integrated centre of certain powers…’ which means that it is normal to blame the individual for problems, and for the individual to blame herself, when institutional and state forces are masked (Sampson, 1989: 3). David Hyatt is another critical discourse analyst who, following Foucault, stresses the importance of recognising the ‘ways of knowing’ of a given epoch, as these ‘ways of knowing’ decide ‘how people within that epoch think, act and understand their identity and the world around them.’ (Hyatt, 2005: 518).

Critical discourse analysts like Gee, Hyatt, and Fairclough have been greatly informed by the works of Foucault, Bakhtin and Bourdieu, among others. Foucault saw the ‘self’ as a product of history, and the categories of person we now recognise as connected to the emergence, and control, of the ‘individual’ at the end of the 18th Century (Foucault, 1977). Foucault argued that ‘man’ [sic] as an object, didn’t really exist until this time, and neither did the human sciences; but from the beginning of the 19th century, ‘man’ began to exist as the ‘foundation of all positivities’, i.e. the discoverer, producer, and basis of all ‘knowledge’ (Foucault, 1970: 344). Man was also produced as something to be studied scientifically as an object, classified, and thus controlled (1970). The linear, deductive, ordered nature of the mathematical, physical and life sciences, their interest in causes and effects, according to Foucault (1970) formed part of the modern ‘episteme’ , and thus influenced what and how we came to know things and who we came to be. In terms of examining discourse, therefore, Foucault asks how a given discourse or group of discourses appeared, how they have come to a particular space and time, how and when did related objects come into being (Foucault, 1972)? Foucault defines discourses as ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (1972: 54), but by ‘practices’ he was not thinking primarily of linguistics. Foucault’s ideas here are aligned with Harré’s, in rejection of a ‘normative system’ of language (1972: 37): for Foucault, too much changes with time to rely upon stable rules of language to understand the production of objects; rather, Foucault would have us examine ‘relations between statements, and groups of statements and events’ (1972: 32), and investigate the ‘authorities’ who have come to categorise individuals (46). In speaking of Don Quixote’s reality, in The Order of Things, Foucault poetically expresses his position against the word-world relation:

*truth is not in the relation of the words to the world but in that slender and constant relation woven between themselves by verbal signs…words have swallowed up their own nature as signs’*

(Foucault, 1970: 54)

His interest in institutions, history, ideology and dynamics of power are foundational to the field of critical discourse analysis (Hall, 2001; Woofit, 2005).For example, the idea of ‘social languages’ preferred by Gee, arguably reflects Foucault’s discussions of the ‘discursive formations’ at work in producing meaning in particular historical contexts (1969/2002). Burr (2003) also draws upon Foucault’s discussions in her argument that ‘knowledge’, created by prevailing discourses, leads to particular social practices, which in turn can lead to categorisation of people as ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’ and perpetuate inequalities (68). She writes, ‘[d]iscourses are intimately connected to institutional and social practices that have a profound effect on how we live our lives, on what we can do and on what can be done to us.’ (2003:75).Van Dijk considers these discursive practices as a form of top-down social control, and recognises, like Burr, that discourse may also be used to challenge the status-quo (Van Dijk, 2001).

Another influential author who recognised the necessity of understanding language as a socially and temporally situated phenomenon was Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s voice has joined others in criticising Chomsky’s view of language, in this case for ignoring the impact of social and economic conditions upon the availability of language(s) for different groups; and warns against the assumption that language is easily accessible for all (1991). Bourdieu equates ‘linguistic exchange’ with ‘economic exchange’ and considers utterances as indicative of wealth and authority, or lack of these; but the value of an utterance depends upon the language ‘market’ at any given time, and this can vary (1991). This view of language as fluid, structurally and semantically, is in line with Foucault’s argument (see above) against subscription to a fixed grammarian view of language at the expense of attention to those social institutions and practices which help to maintain the value of particular kinds of language. For Bourdieu, particular languages get their power depending on who is using them, and which groups have the ‘competence’ connected to that language, and so ‘the whole social structure is present in each interaction’ (1991: 67). Bourdieu gives an example of academics’ use of exclusive, elaborate language for helping to create distance and unequal power relations between them and their students, which the students may unintentionally maintain by confirming their tutors as ‘sage masters’ (Bourdieu &Passeron, 1994: 7). Antonio Gramsci echoes this argument in his contention that the difference between ‘intellectuals’ and ‘non-intellectuals’ is purely social (Gramsci, 1929-1935). Similarly, for Basil Bernstein, the differentiated access to language means differentiated access to two *orders of meaning* he describes as the ‘thinkable’ and the ‘unthinkable’; more simply put, Bernstein argues that having social access to the elaborated code (rather than only restricted code) itself allows more transcendental thinking (Bernstein, 1990). Bernstein considers power and control in society as responsible for the creation of categories (e.g. of person) and for the languages that legitimate and socially embed these categories, but he holds that there is always a struggle going on here; there is space to challenge (Bernstein, 1996).

This idea of the presence of the social structure in everyday interaction is commensurate with Bakhtin’s position on the dialogic relations between utterances, between a speaker and listener, society and history (Bakhtin, 1986). Baktin states ‘I hear voices in everything’ (1986: 164), and by this he means that words do not have isolated meanings, but they accumulate meanings from the ways they have been used before, from who has used them, when, and where. Other ‘voices’ thus speak through them. The word a speaker uses first ‘exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own.’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 294). As for Foucault, Bakhtin (Voloshinov) is interested in the space and relation between utterances, and is similarly dismissive of a purely logical or linguistic approach for answering questions about dialogic meaning; he considers that this approach risks ignoring the central ideological meanings produced in a given context (Voloshinov, 1973). In illustration of this, he explains:

*The actual reality of language-speech is not the abstract system of linguistic forms, not the isolated monologic utterance, and not the psychophysiological act of its implementation, but the social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance or utterances. Thus, verbal interaction is the basic reality of language.’*

*(Voloshinov, 1973: 94)*

The multi-voicedness of meaning is an important theme in much critical discourse analysis as it directs the analyst’s attention to the ideological work of discourse in a text, as well as to the many other facets of social life and history which give the utterances their flavour.

I turn back to Gee at this point, to consider how his discourse analysis incorporates some of the ideas discussed so far, and why I draw a good deal upon Gee in the second layer of the current analysis. The influence on Gee’s writing of figures such as Bourdieu, Bakhtin and Foucault is apparent in his approach to discourse analysis which takes a balanced look at socio-historical factors, personal narrative, social languages, linguistics and local contexts. Gee considers language-in-use under ‘discourse’ with a small ‘d’, while this and all of the other aspects which make up the communicative context: place, time, gesture, dress, histories, etc, he describes as ‘Discourse’ with a big ‘D’; discourse analysis, according to Gee, studies ‘discourse’ within ‘Discourse’ (2005). ‘Discourses are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted instantiations of particular roles by specific *groups of people*’ (Gee, 1990: xix. Italics in original), and include assumptions of normality, about correct ways of being, and about who should have what and do what. Following ideas like those of Bourdieu and Bernstein, Gee recognises that people have differentiated access to different kinds of language in different contexts, and therefore, different possible ways of being in those contexts (and across contexts):‘[t]he fact that people have differential access to different identities and activities, connected to different sorts of status and social goods, is a root source of inequality in society.’(Gee, 2005: 22).

Our different access to different language is part of what marks us out as being part of particular social groups, for example, professions, sports teams, street gangs. These groups each have ‘distinctive ways with words associated with distinctive identities and activities’ (Gee, 2011b: 36). All of the words we can use only have meaning in relation to other words and other contexts, explains Gee (1990). Within this space, a word takes on a ‘situated meaning’ particular to the local context, but echoing its history. Bakhtin has a similar perspective:

*All words have the “taste” of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life.*

(Bakhtin, 1981: 293).

Gee considers those ways of speaking ‘that enact and are associated with a particular social identity’ as *social languages* (Gee, 2011b: 39). One student speaking in an overtly ‘academic’ style in front of other students in a seminar, for example, might mark him out as belonging to, or aspiring to the academy, an exclusive, high status group; though how his ‘identity’ is constructed will depend on a host of other factors: the preceding utterances, his and others’ non-verbal communication, the specific context, the history of the group, the mix of personal and shared narratives brought to the group, all set in the wider socio and temporal milieu. Gee likens the construction of identity through ‘being in a discourse’ as a sort of ‘dance’; ‘a distinctive sort of *who* doing a distinctive sort of *what*.’ (Gee, 2011b: 37-38). Though Gee notes elsewhere that ‘utterances communicate an integrated, though often multiple or “heteroglossic” *who-doing-what*.’ (Gee, 2005: 23).

I understand that there are particular institutional and social structures which limit how students with dyslexia may perceive themselves in relation to their label, and which therefore may restrict the positions they may speak from and the action they may take. At the same time, I believe that in specific interactions different dyslexia-related selves may be produced, negotiated, maintained, or resisted, and that attention to how this is achieved is key when the wider aim of research is to help those in disadvantaged positions to empower themselves. Discourse analysis, according to Willig (2008) ‘tends to disregard the wider social and material context in which a conversation takes place’ (107), and so, she argues, it is appropriate to combine discourse analysis with critical discourse analysis. In her approach to discourse analysis, Willig appears to situate herself in a midway position between kinds of discourse analysis concerned with interactions in a local context (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and varieties of discourse analysis which take a more ‘critical’ approach; that is, those which attend to the ways power is established in text through the specific linguistic forms and wider social context (e.g. Van Dijk, 2006; Fairclough, 1992a, 1992b). For Willig, detailed linguistic analysis is not the central requirement; instead, she guides the analyst through a number of loose steps. One of her initial ‘steps’ is to identify the constructions of the particular topic in the given text, explicit or implicit (2008: 115). For me, the identification of instances where dyslexia is constructed throughout the texts will be part of the process of identifying different constructions of ‘dyslexia’ which I will consider also as discourses of dyslexia. According to Davies and Harré (2001) certain discursive constructions allow or do not allow certain subject positions. Therefore, as part of an initial analysis of the texts, my approach would be to name the different positions the participants were taking up, and to consider the implications of these positions for ‘being’ and ‘feeling’.

At this point, Willig’s approach begins to ask questions about wider discourses and in doing so her approach begins to cross with others who consider themselves specifically ‘critical discourse analysts’, like Fairclough (1992a) and Gee (2005). Willig advises the analyst to ‘locate the various constructions of the object within wider discourses’ (2008: 115); she asks for attention to significant words or phrases that seem to be relevant, or seem to indicate a wider discourse. Willig leaves it open as to how a wider discourse should be recognised. Gee is a useful supplement here because his approach goes into greater detail about what the analyst might be looking for: He asks which institutions and which discourses are being constructed or reproduced in the text; he asks what relationships appear to be valued, or assumed, and he asks what meanings and values seem to be attached to other texts (other people, institutions, places, written or oral texts) (2005). I am interested specifically in Gee’s (2009) recognition that utterances have a meaning potential, so to speak; that is, he distinguishes between ‘utterance-type meaning’ and ‘utterance-token meaning’, the latter he re-names ‘situated meaning’. It is Gee’s ‘situated’ meaning that is most relevant to me as this is concerned with examination of meaning in context, rather than analysis of linguistic form and function from a more abstract perspective (Gee, 2009). I intend to draw upon Gee’s approach to critical discourse analysis in my exploration of intertextuality and ideology in the focus group texts, but only to the degree that it corresponds to my particular research questions. Linguistic elements will be combined with a broader thematic analysis which relies more heavily on social contexts.

One of the problems associated with combining discourse analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis is the perceived difference in philosophical stance between the two. If, as FDA supposes, there are strong historical and social constraints upon how people and objects may be locally constructed, it is arguable that relatively enduring structures (social/ political/ material) must exist. That is, the ways an individual can be socially constructed are arguably limited by some sort of material reality (Harré & Gillet, 1994). However, in a discourse analysis that takes the idea of social constructionism to an extreme relativist position, there is no reality outside the given interaction, only the ebb and flow of ‘knowledge’ wafting in and out of being. From this position there is no right or wrong way of being or doing, because right and wrong themselves are constructions. In this case, writes Burr ‘[t]he rug is pulled out from under our feet’ (1998:14), because all perspectives may be considered equally valid. The question of reality or lack of it needs to be addressed, Burr argues, and she criticises Potter for apparently dismissing this need (Burr, 1998: 19). If it is not addressed, suggests Parker (1999), we may find ourselves in a dangerous position where any version of historical events, such as the Holocaust, may be equally accepted (Parker, 1999). Social constructionism, however, need not deny material reality altogether. In fact, argues Willig (1999a), a ‘historical materialist analysis of society’ is a necessary part of social constructionist work (39) because this will help us to understand why certain discursive positions are taken up by groups and individuals. There are a number of other authors (Gergen, 1998; Burr, 1999/ 2003; Parker, 1999; Gee, 2005; Harré & Gillet, 1994) who also argue for a balance between the extremes of relativism and realism in discourse analytic work, and may be described as critical realists. In practice, this means acknowledging the actuality of bodies, minds, and objects to some degree, while at the same time recognising that the meanings we attach to these things, and how we come to engage with them, are socially constructed and temporal.

A critical realist stance also allows individual actors some degree of agency in the processes through which they become attached to particular identities, while recognising that the choice is neither infinite nor unconstrained. In other words we are not merely ‘hailed’ as subjects of ideology, as Althusser (1969/1970) would have it, which would suggest passivity, and lack of choice in who we become; but that within the parameters of social and material realities, we do have some room to move, room to choose between a finite number of discourses. How much choice individuals feel they have, for example, over how they make meaning of a label like dyslexia, will depend on their individual histories and experiences which will have brought them into contact with the particular socially and historically created conceptions of learning ability and disability. A combined discourse analysis that recognises the choice participants in the study can have over their identities as learners in HE is as important as understanding the social, historical, and institutional constraints upon that choice if the research is to have a practical purpose.

In studying discussions, writes Billig (2001) ‘the aim is to see how the themes of ideology are instantiated in ordinary talk, and how speakers are part of, and are continuing, the ideological history of the discourse themes they are using’ (218). In my work I would like to examine the discursive positions available to the participants in the focus group, how dyslexia is constructed in the conversations we have, and how what we are saying perpetuates, builds upon, or resists the dominating ideology surrounding specific learning disabilities. In extending my discourse analysis to include some attention to linguistic analysis and power following Gee’s guidance, I will be able to explore the intertextuality and ideology apparent in the conversations I am analysing.

*What do I mean by ‘ideology’ and why might ideological analysis be useful?*

Etymologically speaking, ‘ideology’ might be understood as the ‘study’ or the ‘science’ of ideas; but while this might have been its original use in some contexts, it has been subject to different additional layers of meaning over time. Ideology has been used to mean ‘revolutionary thinking’, therefore something of a threat, or to mean ‘false consciousness’ after Marx and Engels (Meighan & Harber, 2007), and in this sense describing an argument as ‘ideological’ is a derisory term. Eagleton suggests that the meaning of ideology changes depending on whether one takes a right-wing or post-modernist perspective: in the former it may mean dogmatism and so is dismissed for over-rigidity, and the latter as metaphysical, and impossible to grasp hold of (2007). This, argues Eagleton, has been helpful for the end-of-ideology theorists in buttressing their position as speaking from outside ideology (2007). A different understanding of Ideology is that it is a set of beliefs or values which over time are understood as common sense, and, write Carr and Hartnett, ‘what is distinctive about common sense is that it is an inherited way of thinking …inevitably impregnated with the myths, superstitions and prejudices of the past’ (1996:3). By the time the ideas have become ‘common-sense’ their ideological nature has become largely hidden from view. This need not mean the common-sense view is ‘wrong’ or negative, but that it no longer has questions asked of it; and herein lies the danger.

Arguments that we have reached the ‘end’ of ideology in the West (for example, Bell, 1960; Fukyama, 1992) arguably allow the western political status quo to go unquestioned in just this manner. End-of-ideology arguments themselves, argue Carr and Hartnett (1996), allow questions which address the education system critically to be dismissed as ‘just’ ideological. In this sense the dominant ideology declares itself as not ideological and everything that threatens it as deeply ideological. Cummings (2000) accuses Fukyama of creating an ‘iron cage in which every person is presumptively free and every interest is represented’ (91); Fukyama’s 1992 work ‘creates a discourse of power that says, in essence, you’ve never had it so good, so what are you complaining about?’ (Cummings, 2000:91). This ideological position situates the individual as site of blame, and in effect removes her right to question, complain and fight. This construction colours my reading of my focus group texts, particularly in the individualistic ways dyslexia is produced in many parts of the conversations (see thematic explorations below).

To return to the problem of how to conceptualise ideology for the purpose of this analysis, I want to move away from the idea that ideology is always negative and used in the service of domination (Thompson, 1990), to the idea of ideology as actually or potentially emancipatory (Eagleton, 2007) and as useful to ‘the notion of struggle’ (Giroux, 1997: 73). I also subscribe to Carr and Hartnett’s idea that ideology can masquerade as common sense (1996). For this study, then I am going to use a loose understanding of ideology as belief systems (after Van Dijk, 2006) expressed through discourses; or, as Giroux nicely expresses it, ideology is a ‘weight’ in discourses that may easily be hidden. This also fits with Gee’s understanding of ideology as assumptions or theories that are wrapped up in language (1990) though my position is that ideology is expressed through much more than spoken or written language. When analysing my texts, I will therefore be asking myself which ideas or assumptions are these discourses or conceptions based upon, and whose interests do they serve; and how far are they perceived as common sense?

*Ethics and responsibility*

Traditionally, psychology has treated people as subjects of research whom the researcher distances him/herself from in order to measure or observe behaviour or thought. This kind of research has not always been undertaken in the interests of the ‘subjects’ concerned. It would be dishonest to suggest that my motivations for the current study are not partly to do with my own ambitions and interests; however, a major reason for conducting my study is my hope that it will have the potential for positive influence upon individuals who are struggling to find helpful identities as learners with dyslexia in HE.

Gee (2005) argues that discourse analysis should always have a practical point, and the potential for application. He writes:

‘The fact that people have differential access to different identities and activities connected to different sorts of status and social goods is a root source of inequality in society. Intervening in such matters can be a contribution to social justice. Since different identities and activities are enacted in and through language, the study of language is integrally connected to matters of equity and justice.’ (22)

This quote from Gee sums up what I am aiming to achieve in my research. However, exactly how this intervention can be achieved is quite complicated, and there appear to be ethical risks at every stage. Willig (1999c) outlines three possible ways discourse analysis may have positive practical application: it may be used as ‘a *tool to challenge* [oppressive practices]’; or to ‘inform *training programmes’* which may help people to resist certain discourses; or used to help ‘*facilitate empowerment’* by identifying counter discourses that people may take up (148). However, Willig (1999c) goes on to warn that we need to be aware of the position of power held by the researcher in discourse analytic work, and the ways that this power may be used to influence others in unhelpful ways. Those discourses which may appear more beneficial to individuals in particular situations may later become burdensome or restricting. Bauman warns of the danger of fighting to change an identity that cannot then be shaken off, of there being ‘no ‘‘bridge, if you have to bear a retreat’’’ (Bauman, 2004: 98). We must also be aware of the risk of ‘blaming’ people ‘for failing to shake off limiting discourses’ perhaps because the wider institutional or social discourses are so powerful (Willig, 1999c: 149).

I hope to deal with these concerns in a number of ways. Rather than playing the part of objective researcher, I intend to include myself as one of the participants in the conversation(s) which I hope to analyse. I will reflect upon my own participation, standpoint, and interests throughout the process in an attempt to make my role as co-constructor of meaning as transparent as possible. I also aim to invite the participants to comment upon my analysis and to talk to them about the reasons behind the research. In this analysis I hope to discuss how particular identities come to be reproduced ‘routinely and unconsciously’ in the educational environment (Merttens, 1998: 63). One of my aims will be to open up a discussion about how discourses may be used as ‘tools to challenge’ what appear to be the dominant conceptions of dyslexia, if where these unhelpfully limit certain ways-of-being. I will emphasise the idea that identities may be flexible, and may suit different situations. This will include discussion of positioning and how this may aid a ‘person’s efforts to change themselves or their circumstances’ (Burr, 2003:119).

Although, ‘[e]very discourse is potentially dangerous’ (Burr, 2003:85), opportunities for positive change may be lost if we eschew discourse analytic studies for fear of creating harm. If this work can help a few individuals to consider different, and more helpful possibilities for their identities as students with SpLDs in Higher Education, this may be a first step in broader empowerment: ‘[w]hat seem like individual acts of identification can build up gradually to large scale social change’ writes Ivanic (1998: 332). This social change is only possible if people recognise that they have a degree of choice in the identities they associate with, that the self is constructed ‘inside-out’ as well as ‘outside-in’ (Bruner, 1990: 108), and that ‘the self, using its capacities for reflection and envisioning alternatives, escapes or embraces or reevaluates and reformulates what the culture has on offer.’ (ibid: 110).

Method

My research questions are as follows:

1. Which conceptions or discourses of dyslexia are constructed during the focus groups?

2. What positions are taken up/ offered by participants in relation to these

Constructions or discourses?

 3. What connections are there between constructions of dyslexia, related

positionings, and explicit or implicit ways of being and ways of doing? That is,

how do constructions of dyslexia help to open up or close down certain

possibilities for feeling and behaviour?

4. How are certain constructions drawn upon and positions taken up within the

conversations?

*5*. Which relevant wider discourses and ideologies are drawn upon (implicitly or explicitly) in the conversation and how do these interact and co-construct

participants’ identities as learners in higher education?

6. What are the implications of drawing upon the named discourses and

ideologies for the participants (and others) within higher education?

Research questions one to four are addressed by the analysis and discussion of chapter four; research questions five and six are discussed in chapter five. Research question five may also be considered the overarching research question..

*Data collection*

*Participants*

I invited students (via email) with a registered identification of dyslexia in one institution to take part in a focus group around the topic of dyslexia. At this stage I introduced myself, outlined the aims and scope of the study, and emphasised confidentiality. If students replied with further questions or to express interest in the study, I replied to them answering these questions and/or I supplied them with an electronic information sheet (appendix vi) which detailed the scope and aims of the project and discussed the risks of taking part. It was made clear to whom they might address any concerns and that they were entitled to withdraw at any time without explanation. Of those who replied, thirteen were finally willing and able to participate. This group of thirteen divided into one group of six and one of seven, a division decided by which dates and times were most convenient for the participants. Before the focus group began, participants read and signed a consent form (appendix vii). This form was sent to participants via email and provided in hard copy on the day of the focus groups.

*Focus groups*

I set up two focus groups (six students in one, seven in another) with the students studying at HE level who had a formal identification of dyslexia. The focus group took place in a comfortable, quiet office within the chosen university campus so that participants would not be interrupted, would feel as comfortable as possible, and so that background noise would be limited for recording purposes.

Following initial introductions, I talked to the participants about the aims of the study once again, and explained that they were free to disengage with the discussion and leave the focus group at any point, without explanation. The focus group discussion was an open one which I initiated using a few start off questions. There were a few broad areas I wanted to ask the group to discuss, but otherwise, the conversation was able to wander where it would around the topics of learning and dyslexia. I acted as a facilitator by asking follow up questions, and pursuing ideas raised by the participants.

I recorded the focus groups using a digital voice recorder, and I transcribed the conversations using a simplified Jeffersonian (2004) method (see appendix viii for transcription key). Although I began by transcribing the pauses and pitch changes, I later decided these interrupted the reading of the text on the page, so removed these. Square brackets indicate overlap of talk, and underlining indicates vocal emphasis. I undertook all of the transcription myself as I felt this was a key part of becoming familiar with the texts before systematic analysis. I did not use video recording equipment because I wanted the participants to feel as relaxed as possible; video equipment was likely to be more intrusive than a small recording device. I made some mental note of gestures, expressions and other non-verbal communication where that appeared to me to be particularly relevant. I recognise that I could not pick up on all relevant non-verbal communication. I also understand that my interpretation of what is relevant or not is a matter of my particular perspective, and that this is both a strength and a limitation of the study.

These focus group data were then analysed using the analytical framework detailed below. After this stage, I sent copies of the transcript and details of my own analyses to the original participants, asked them to read and think about the analysis, and requested that they return their feedback.

*Methodological framework for analysis*

*Layer A: Identifying conceptions of dyslexia, related subject positions and links to ‘being’ and ‘doing’ in narrative*

1. *Becoming familiar with the transcripts*

The first thing I did with the transcribed focus groups was to read through them several times, slowly, to get a feel for them, while asking ‘why am I reading this passage in this way?’ (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This gave me the opportunity to highlight parts which were immediately interesting, and to relate what I was reading to the memory of the conversations themselves, the intonation, posture, loudness of voice, the actual bodies of the people who were there. I have no faith at all that I was ‘remembering’ the way things ‘actually’ were, and I have no access to others’ perspectives, but nevertheless, my memories of the participants and the day, the time, our surroundings, are going to have a huge influence upon my particular interpretation of the conversations at this distanced point. It therefore seems useful to consider them.

1. *Looking for constructions of dyslexia as a topic*

At this stage I wanted to look at how the topic of dyslexia was produced in the text. My guiding questions included ‘how did participants talk about dyslexia?’, ‘how did they allude to dyslexia in the stories they told?’. I went through both focus group transcripts and underlined places where dyslexia was being referred to or being constructed as an object explicitly or implicitly. This included expressions of being dyslexic: ‘I am dyslexic’, or having dyslexia: ‘I have dyslexia’, as well as referring to ‘it’ in place of the noun ‘dyslexia’, or when ‘dyslexia’ was implied as an object without being named, as in ‘I dunno, when I was diagnosed, I felt really proud’. Dyslexia was constructed within the participants’ narratives, often telling of their own experiences in education. I was therefore asking, how does ‘dyslexia’ appear in these stories as an object? What kind of object is it made into? What meanings seem to be connected to it? Obviously the ‘conceptions’ I named using the text were my own choices, and another analyst might have named them otherwise, so there is not right or wrong in the process here; but what I tried to do was stick closely to the stories being told and use the words of the participants where I could. For example, if a participant explained ‘yeah, I think it means that you are intelligent’ then I might have named the conception of dyslexia ‘dyslexia as intelligence’ and ‘dyslexia as a mark of worth’, or even more broadly, ‘dyslexia as positive’. All of these labels might fit. The transcripts and tables detailing my ‘names’ for the conceptions are provided in full in the appendices. This stage is loosely based on Willig’s guiding questions for analysis (2008). I was also looking for variability and consistency in the construction of the topic (idea from Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 168) because this gave me an idea of how fluid the related ‘dyslexic’ identities could be, and whether or not the participants seemed to stick to certain conceptions of dyslexia over others.

I noted the way dyslexia was constructed at the side of the transcript as I went along. I later transferred these notes into a table for clarity.

1. *Identifying subject positions related to the topic*

Having made a note of my interpretation of the different conceptions of dyslexia present in the texts, I next wanted to analyse the topic-related subject positions taken up, offered or refused (Langehove & Harré, 1999; Davies & Harré, 1999) by the participants and myself. I have given a fairly detailed description of positioning theory in the methodology section above, but it is worth emphasising here that my interest is in how participants positioned themselves within the stories they told, and what positions were made available to others in the narrative. So, how did their ‘selves’ in the narrative fit into the storylines produced?

Here is an example. Below is a short extract from focus group 1:

*C: Erm, hgm, I was identified in my second year, erm, and it sort of felt like, I sort of*

*new I was dyslexic but it was nice to be told like you are dyslexic. and here’s the*

*help and [support] sort of thing.*

*H: [yeah ye]*

*H: Why was it, why was it nice to be told?*

*C: because er I struggled with my grammar and that and and spelling and that, and I*

*just thought I wasn’t that good at it, but it’s nice, like, I ’have like a reason why I’m*

*not very good at it, if that makes [sense].*

*H: [Yes ].*

*H: [yes ]*

*C: [so it’s] not like my fault as such, like. [ugh, huh]*

From this short narrative, I named the construction of dyslexia ‘dyslexia as a desirable explanation’ and ‘dyslexia as something innate’. These named constructions were based on the use of the verb ‘be’ in the second line (‘you are dyslexic’), which implied dyslexia was a part of a person. The desirability of dyslexia as an explanation was a construction that appeared again and again, but in this case it relates to C’s story of relief, of it being ‘nice to be told’ having struggled with aspects of literacy. There are of course other ways I could have characterised the conceptions of dyslexia in this short extract (for example, as something named by professional others, as implied by the use of the passive in the first two lines in, which makes the dyslexia seem less a matter of personal opinion). I named the subject positions C spoke from as ‘self as thankful for dyslexia label’, and

‘self as not just incapable’. I reached these labels in answer to my question ‘what position available for C here, in her narrative?’. This was a relatively quick and intuitive process which allowed me to hold onto the conversational chunks surrounding the one being analysed, and was by no means a thorough linguistic process. The grammatical aspects that were key here included the use of the personal ‘I’ and generalised ‘you’ as the pronouns leading the narrative, which helped to centre the self in the stories told, and to offer positions out to the group by including them in the universal ‘you’. I borrowed concepts from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) in this coding process in that I tried to make my codes as close as possible to the words used in the utterances, and to code quickly. I noted down the subject positions I named in the table next to the named constructions of dyslexia. How one interprets ‘subject positions’ is fairly open. That is, there are arguably different ways of conceptualising ‘position’ in a given context. I might have named the positions according to what social languages/ social groupings participants were identifying with; for example someone might position themselves as ‘knowledgeable postgraduate student’, or ‘professional expert’; but these weren’t the positionings I was most interested in. I was more interested in the more fluid positions which one could consider as a level below those social-group positionings, including ‘self as stupid’, ‘self as a cheat’, ‘self as intelligent’. The more specific positionings related to the social languages being used become more relevant in the second layer of my analysis (critical discourse analysis), and are drawn on at that stage.

My key interest at this stage was to consider whether there were any links between the subject positions I had named in my analysis and the apparent possibilities for ‘being’ and ‘acting’ and ‘feeling’ that were made available to the participants. There were times when, within a particular narrative, a given discourse around dyslexia seemed to produce particular subject positions and not others; and from these positions, it appeared easier for the speaker to tell another story about feeling a certain way, or about something they decided to do, or about how they identified themselves as students. This sometimes led to very different conclusions about what was ‘fair’ behaviour, or what it meant to be ‘intelligent’ or ‘deserving’. I am not insinuating causal relationships between positionings and potential ways of acting or being, but I am interested in links, or interactions between these things.

*Layer B: An exploration of ideology in the text using critical discourse analysis*

Having undertaken analysis of the specific conceptions of dyslexia and of the subject positions taken up, offered or resisted by the participants and myself in the focus group texts, my intention was to reanalyse the conversations from a different perspective. In the first stage of analysis I was interested specifically in the different ways of ‘being’ dyslexic that were produced in the local context and what implications these ways of being had for feeling and action. In this second stage I want to explore the ideological foundations that arguably underpin the discourses from which the subject positions could be constructed. This means going deeper into the text to look for webs of meaning latent in the realities we produced together. As explained in the methodology section, I am basing much of this analysis on the critical discourse analysis of Gee, while being grounded by the philosophical discussions of Foucault, Bourdieu, and Bakhtin whose work is reflected in Gee’s approach. I do not follow Gee’s guidance rigidly; some of his guiding questions are more appropriate for my aims than others, so I am heavily selective. Syntax is important in my analysis, but I do not comment upon grammatical form in every discussion point because I found this distracted me from my research questions which often drew me towards the ways particular words or phrases were imbued with particular social meaning: sometimes this was about form, but often this was more about the history of a word, the other contexts it is used in, and how the speaker wove it into their story to give it a powerful situated meaning (for example, the word ‘diagnosed’). The space, so to speak, between different speakers’ utterances was also meaningful; by this, I mean that how one speaker’s autobiographical snippet reflected back on, or altered the situated meanings of the stories that had come before was very interesting and seemed to shift our identities continually through the conversations. So I was often asking how a particular story fitted in with wider circulating discourses or ideologies; did it construct a ‘figured world’ (Gee, 2011b) that contradicted the wider discourses another speaker had drawn upon?

In order to explain exactly how I undertook analysis I am going to start by presenting the simplified, general questions I was using as I worked my way slowly through the transcripts. These generalised questions hide a lot of detail, so I will also give some examples of the kinds of things I was looking out for in trying to answer these questions. The questions below draw much on Gee’s guiding questions (2005; 2011a, 2011b), but are also informed by Willig (2008), and Fairclough (1992a; 1992b); the latter only for questions about hegemony, and in his useful attention to the significance of different syntactical and semantic structures when these become relevant. Foucault is present particularly in questions 3 and 5 which ask in part about history, institutions and power; and Bakhtin’s ideas about the multivoicedness of utterances is relevant throughout.

General guiding questions for analysis:

These questions were tools for analysis, and should not be confused with my research questions (see above). It was useful to have a guide through the analytical process, and such questions were put to this end.

1. What other texts are alluded to in the conversation; that is, what other institutions, people, systems, places, oral or written texts are referred to either explicitly or implicitly?
2. How are these other texts constructed?
3. What assumptions are being made about these texts (what is taken-for-granted?), and who or what is served by these assumptions (or what social goods are these assumptions linked to)?
4. How are these assumptions maintained?
5. What webs of meaning and power appear to underlie these assumptions?
6. Which subject positions have been taken up, offered or resisted from these webs of meaning?

The questions above are presented linearly for convenience, but they weren’t necessarily approached in order. Questions 1 and 2, for example, often appeared to be the same question, though it was useful to try to separate them. Question 4 which asks how particular assumptions are maintained seemed to loop back into question 2; that is, the maintenance was achieved in the allusion to and construction of other texts. I used question 5 as an opportunity to take a deeper look at the social and historical roots of the ideological strands I came to name. But again, ideology was brought into the conversations through the social languages used and texts which were given voice.

In asking what other texts were alluded to (qu.1) I was looking for anything that seemed to bring to mind other ‘voices’. This included the second hand voices of real people in the stories being told, for example the voice of a teacher, friend, or parent whose speech was directly reported (e.g. ‘and my friend said “but you can’t be dyslexic”’). It also included the hidden voice of agents who were missing from the sentence, for example ‘I was finally given the full diagnosis’, in which I assume the role of an educational psychologist, and the formal printed text of the diagnostic report. In having a shared understanding of the role of an educational psychologist the participants were thus in the reach of psycho-medical discourses and impressed by the status of the expert. Reaching such a conclusion necessitated the question – what does the listener have to know to make sense of what is being said? What is taken for granted? (after Gee, 2011a). I also included reference to A-level grades as texts, and as representative of the wider institutional text that is the school or other similar establishment. Almost everything in the participants’ narratives could have been considered a ‘text’, and so I did keep returning to my research questions to ask which texts were most relevant in understanding the ideologies at play in the conceptions of dyslexia and identity constructions that were coming and going in the conversations. So – which words the participants used were of note to me, and how they wove themselves into stories, likewise.

Now I come to form. I want to give an indication of how important attention to linguistics was in analysis. One aspect of language which appeared important when asking about social languages was the mix of Germanic (everyday) English, and Latinate/ Greek origin language in any particular utterance or string of utterances. The more ‘scholarly’ or ‘technical’ vocabulary (often of Latin or Greek origin) and syntax (e.g. use of complex sentences, passive, nominalisation over simple or compound sentences with simple conjunctions as dominant) did wax and wane with the different stories told and with the differing perspectives on dyslexia, education and society. However, I did not note down sentence structure at every stage and automatically consider sentences which began with a subordinate clause in a particular way without considering the surrounding context, and indeed, other aspects of the utterance and context often seemed far more important than form. But it is something I looked out for, and questioned, and noted where I felt it was important. Other questions I asked included, ‘how are the items in the utterances connected (cohesion) and is this important in helping me to recognise other texts or express particular values?’; ‘What is the theme in a particular utterance – is this formed by the subject of the sentence or by something else? Is this important?’; ‘why has a participant used a particular subject in an utterance – could they have chosen a different subject – what would this have changed about the situated meaning?’; ‘what are words like ‘it’, ‘he’, ‘this’ actually referring to?’; ‘how is context affecting the situated meaning of particular significant words (the ‘deictic-like properties’)?’; ‘how is grammar being used to make some things more significant than others?’; and ‘what perspectives are given by the way clauses are put together in utterances?’. All of these questions are paraphrased selectively from Gee’s ‘toolkit’ for discourse analysis (2011a). They suit me because they always link the linguistics back to the questions about intertextuality and ideological assumptions directly, so that I never feel I am dissecting grammar for the sake of it. They also mix attention to linguistics with attention to narrative and address situated meaning in a way I feel Fairclough’s approach does not. It might be argued by some that this approach to analysis is philosophically problematic because I make room for a rules-based understanding of language, and also for locally constructed meanings, unbound by the rigidity that some linguistic theorists presume. I talk more about this in the reflection section at the end of this chapter.

During this systematic analysis I began to give rough working names to the wider discourses or ideologies I interpreted as being present in the conversations. These were many at the beginning of analysis, but gradually I came to recognise certain of my named discourses as being so strongly linked to or subsumed by others, I grouped them together. For example, meritocratic discourses came to fit under the ideology I named ‘individualism’, partly because the ‘merit’ we all appeared to value so highly in the focus groups (in the form of grades or hard work) was always about individual achievement, and individual responsibility. As this second stage of analysis was coming to an end, I had grouped the ideological threads and discourses I identified into four themes, and it is under these themes I construct my discussion in the following section.

*Related ethical considerations*

Before undertaking the proposed study it was necessary to receive approval from the ethics committee at The University of Sheffield, and this was done. I recognised that in setting up focus groups in which I hoped to facilitate discussions about personal disability, it is possible that participants may have become uncomfortable, or have found discussing personal experiences in this way to be distressing. For some people, being identified with, and living with dyslexia may have been an unpleasant experience and one which they do not wish to share. I understood that I needed to make the nature and aims of the research utterly transparent before participants agreed to take part in the study. I also made sure the participants were aware of complaints procedures in Educational Studies, and knew to whom they could talk if they felt unable to raise concerns with me.

Participants may also have been concerned about others knowing about their dyslexic status, either within or outside the group. I made it clear before participants agreed to take part in the study that their involvement meant they would meet others with the same label from the same institution, and that if this made them feel uncomfortable, they should not take part. I also discussed with participants the possibility of allotting them an alternative name for use within the discussion group. I have ensured that the process is confidential, and that the names of all the participants will be kept out of the draft and final thesis, along with any other information which may identify them.

It may be that participants found it difficult to express their discomfort when the focus group discussion had begun. I made it clear at every stage that if a participant was unhappy about a question or line of discussion they could disengage from the conversation at any time, or that they could simply leave the room. I discussed with the group that they could use phrases like ‘I’d rather not say’ or ‘I think I would prefer not to talk about/ answer that’, or that they could simply raise their hand to indicate that they did not want to respond. In the case where such a signal was used, I would have changed the direction of the conversation without drawing attention to any particular participant.

As the discussions and analyses involved looking in detail at the various identities the participants appear to associate with as learners in HE, I may be helping to bring to the surface, or constructing participants’ understandings of themselves that they do not like. There is a risk that the discussions could lead to negative self-criticism which remains with them after the study is complete. My standpoint is that the conception of dyslexia as an individual deficiency and as abnormal may be unhelpful to students with the label in some HE contexts; I made this clear to the participants.

I avoided asking the participants to read aloud, and set aside time for reading the given quotes or phrases in the second part of the focus group. I also allowed time for the participants to gather their thoughts before asking them to share their perspectives. At the end of the focus group, I talked to the participants again about what I intended to do with the data. There was an opportunity for the participants to ask questions or share any concerns they had. I also explained that they may contact me by e-mail or by phone if they had any questions or concerns they would like to share with me in private.

To some degree, the requirement for confidentiality was limiting. Some details which might have been pertinent to analysis and discussion were omitted because they risked the participants being made identifiable. For this reason, inclusion of participant biographies was not considered appropriate. This is one of the limitations of this kind of research and I felt it was unavoidable in this situation. A related difficulty was the realisation that even should one participant wish for their real name to be used (for example, as a demonstration of pride in their own experience; to claim their stories for their own) this could not be done because it would risk the others’ anonymity. For such anonymity to be waved, all participants would have to express a desire to be identified, and I would need to have demonstrated there was no further conflict of interest. As it was, no participants explicitly stated they did want to be named, but neither were they apparently concerned about being identified. This is something to be aware of for future projects.

*Reflection, positionality, limitations*

What is there, ‘out there’? Where is dyslexia?

In 1890, William James pondered upon the possibility that there is ‘nothing…but the everlasting atoms. When grouped in a certain way, we name them this “thing” or that; but the thing we name has no existence out of our mind’ (loc. 3373). This possibility admits both the existence of stuff-out-there, and the human construction of temporal categories of things and beings. As a founding father of Anglo-American psychology, it is interesting how far from James’ position some traditional psychologists have moved in their assumptions that the names we give to things are a simple reflection of nature’s categories (Spearman’s ‘g’ for general intelligence is an example). In the paragraphs below is my search for a workable ontology.

I am writing this section retrospectively, though I am inserting it before the analytical and discussion chapters because it acknowledges some philosophical and ethical questions which troubled me before and during the analysis. As I began this work from a social constructionist standpoint, I was primed to consider carefully my role in the production of the truths I would ‘identify’. However, I later came to understand that social constructionism was not sufficient as an explanatory framework. It did not leave room for much enduring, embodied, materially present life. The value of social constructionism as a tool for critique of the truths of psychology and neuroscience was paired with its inability to acknowledge the wisdom they might be able to offer in our understanding of bio-social interaction. I do not want to cut traditional psychology out of the picture. I do not want to give psychology up. Where to position myself is a problematic question. However, I have come to consider the in-between as a strength, and not a sign of indecision.

In this section I offer a sincere consideration of the areas of contradiction in my constructions of the topic of dyslexia and the mechanisms which I have identified as complicit in its production. To begin, I ask the following questions: ‘what is science?’, ‘what is mind?’ and ‘what are ‘feelings?’. I do this knowing that these questions have many possible answers. My purpose is to briefly lay out my position(s) on science, mind and feeling and to discuss how these positions helped to produce the ‘facts’ of my conclusions. I then outline my argument for a critical realism which can accommodate social constructionism and materiality, and which allows some consideration of an extra-discursive dimension in the lives of the participants in the study. I have touched on this elsewhere in the thesis, but feel it warrants condensed attention here.

In analysis I found my position on what I might infer from syntax (by this, I mean from the particular language form, or grammar, a participant ‘chose’ in conversation), or word choice was not always consistent. I discuss this inconsistency here.

I draw this section to a close by considering how elements of cognitive and discursive science may be complementary in addressing the kinds of questions I ask in this study.

*Science*

In chapter one of this thesis I used the word ‘science’ to represent the ideas, practice and processes based upon the version of the ‘scientific method’ underpinning cognitive science (and borrowed from the physical sciences). I now recognise this as a narrow view of ‘science’. It is a view of science as something that happens in a lab, and in the popular imagination as something that identifies certain facts about the world and about people; though in fact this is not normally what cognitive scientists are claiming. Science used to be defined as ‘knowledge’ of both the physical and the metaphysical, and could be used to mean ‘skill’ or ‘art’ (according to Williams, 1976). Science as a neutral route to truth was a 19th century creation (again, according to Williams, 1976). In this 19th century creation, science appears to mean something ‘discovered’ via a very particular set of processes (neutral observation, recording, hypothesising, experimentation etc) undertaken by particular people (scientists). From this perspective, what I have been doing in the course of this thesis is not science. Instead, science is something which I hold to account for the restricted ways people in my social environment understand mind, learning, and ‘dyslexia’. How should I then characterise what it is I have been doing?

Cognitive scientists might argue that to call my work science would be inaccurate because I have not applied the scientific method (from the perspective of positivist science); but then, little in my work is measurable, and indeed, if I had attempted to measure it (by, for example, counting the number of times a particular word was used and using this to inform hypotheses) I would be accepting a view of language as static and word meaning as existing entirely beyond context. I am therefore left with two options: that doing ‘science’ may include investigating meanings, perspectives, and stories in context and in full acknowledgement of shifting truths and social construction, which would mean an adjustment to the conception of scientific method; or that doing ‘science’ means measuring things, cause and effect, and prediction, which all rely upon an assumption of static ‘objects’ (including ‘mind’). This is a dilemma. Psychology might benefit from greater transparency around motivations and processes, and could perhaps acknowledge that its methods may not be able to help us understand every aspect of humanity. However, I do not think there would be net benefit from psychologists all throwing in the towel and abandoning their experiments and adherence to their chosen scientific method. There is value in attempting to observe and measure something in a systematic, controlled way, and in a manner that acknowledges, but tries to minimise bias, and applies reductionist principles. Using this approach to try to better understand people’s behaviour in certain situations is also valuable, despite the limitations of the lab. However, if we should not give up on psychology (as a discipline) we should also not forget that doing psychology can change the subject it is investigating (Dewey, 1922).

There is a problem when scientific facts become unchallengeable by perspectives constructed from any other paradigm (Latour: 1987), or when psychology is separated from the political context in which it is being undertaken (Dewey, 1927). There is also a problem when psychologists try to use the scientific method to help them investigate questions about people which are so tightly connected to complex social contexts that lab work gives an incomplete or confusing picture when it tries to isolate a single phenomenon for investigation (see for example the ongoing disagreements around investigation into unconscious ‘priming’ (Abbott, 2013); or when they use the public faith in science to make grand claims about how the brain/mind works (e.g. Adams, T (2013) – ‘How to spot a murderer’s brain’ popular write-up of Raine’s work ‘The anatomy of violence’).This is the position I feel I am in: if what I am doing cannot be called science, then it seems less valuable from a mainstream position, less likely to be taken seriously, to inform policy or to change behaviour. This is frustrating. I believe this view contributes to an unbalanced and impoverished understanding of humankind in popular and research circles. On the other hand, if science comes to include any and every investigation into human and social life, the benefits that come from a regularised and simple scientific method which is best suited to particular questions might be watered down. A distinction between positivist science and discursive science might appear at first to be a solution, but narrow ‘positivism’ may be too extreme for many cognitive scientists today, and it also has a tarnished reputation (Shotter, 1993); moreover, ‘discursive science’ is divided – the approaches to studying language that are covered by this label are not obviously compatible (compare the rules-based approach in conversation analysis with the less systematic, politically driven Foucauldian analysis).

On the other hand, perhaps science is strengthened through inclusion of multiple and contradictory approaches to investigation, in which case my concern about watering science down is unfounded.‘[S]cience is an essentially anarchic exercise’ writes Feyerabend (1993: 9). He argues that the assumption that science is about standard methods and that these methods lead to truth is illusory: in fact, ‘truth is concealed and even perverted by the processes that are meant to establish it’ (1993: xiii). From this perspective, the variety of methodological approaches and processes adopted by scientists is an advantage. Uniformity of method would be limiting, and probably dangerous, while anarchism is ‘excellent medicine’ for science (Feyerabend, 1993: 9). Feyerabend’s ethos is preceded by William James who called for psychological science to be ‘as vague as its subject’ (1890: loc 616) and who argued ‘[w]e gain much by a broad than by a narrow conception of our subject’ (loc 618). This view is also echoed by Burman who writes of psychology’s obsession with method above all (1997). This is liberating to read, as it indirectly shakes the hierarchy which places physical scientists at the highest rung and sociologists somewhere near the bottom. However, it also places a question mark over what may be judged ‘good’ science; what becomes of ‘rigour’ and ‘validity’ as meaningful for different kinds of science? How do we as a society decide which results should inform policy or behaviour? Could any ‘fact’ become ‘scientific’? Would this be dangerous, or would it be preferable to a situation in which ‘scientific’ is only applied to a ‘fact’ that has the weight of many researchers and papers behind it (Latour, 1987)?

Science may therefore be understood from several positions: as the dominant producer of narrow conceptions of ‘mind’ and ‘dyslexia’ (which I question in chapter one); as the popularly accepted neutral route to truth; as inseparable from positivistic scientific method; and as an umbrella term which describes a wide range of investigations and multiple methodological approaches. The last of these is the only conception of science accepting of my research here. Having escaped the ‘need’ for ‘neutral’ observation, measurement and prediction, I do nevertheless need to show that my research has been thorough, to explain how it is epistemologically and ontologically grounded, to describe my methodological approach, and to show how I have engaged with and built upon prior scholarly work. Fulfilling these requirements (see chapters one to five) helps me to show how my investigation can be recognised as science. Likewise, I take Burman’s position that I need not repeatedly state that my work is ‘”only” subjective’, as this belittles the quality of the research and implies it is less valid than traditional scientific investigation (Burman, 2003: 104). Interpretation is a strength, rather than an embarrassing secret.

*Mind and feelings*

In my work I shift between competing views of mind. I sit most closely to a Vygotskian view of mind as socially produced, and not located in the brain (nor, indeed, located anywhere in physical space). However, I sometimes talk about ‘feelings’ and ‘beliefs’ as if they were in-the-head objects (after the mind-is-brain position), which may appear contradictory to my rejection of the idea that ‘feelings’ and ‘beliefs’ are ‘caused’ by brain-based processes or that they exist, so to speak, in any enduring manner within the person. On first glance it leaves me open to the criticism that my ontological position is not consistent. However, my position on mind as both discursively and non-discursively produced, I believe, allows me to recognise the socially created meanings of ‘feelings’ and ‘emotions’ as primary while acknowledging an organic (neuronal and biochemical) role (see, for example, Damasio, 1994). For example, the same biophysical response appears to be present in people across social groups around certain ‘emotions’ or ‘feelings’ that have been named ‘anger’ (Sauter, et al. 2010); however, the word ‘anger’ is a human creation. There are socially constructed degrees of anger, types of anger, and how we react to the anger felt differs according to context. How we choose to interpret ‘anger’, or indeed, what makes us ‘angry’ is hugely variable. It is not, therefore, a ‘natural kind’ (Griffiths, 2004: 901). Thus, we cannot then make sense of a particular biochemical response unless we know the environmental conditions which helped to produce it; only after naming an emotion in discourse may the relevant brain mechanisms be investigated (Harré & Moghaddam, 2012). Harré (2012) explains ‘[w]e cannot begin to ask whether adrenaline has anything to do with anger unless we have a prior understanding of what sort of behaviour, expressions, and so on the word “angry” refers to. It is a word the meaning of which has a history long before the advent of biochemistry.’ (202). Rorty asks whether it is possible ‘that the absence of a name for feeling entails the absence of feeling’ (1979/1991: 274), in other words, is ‘anger’, for example, not there until we name it? But I think Rorty’s question is misleading. We cannot possibly answer it, because we cannot conceive of an emotion which has not yet been named. If we acknowledge the presence of a feeling, we have already constructed it as an object, and have therefore named it (even if we call it stimulation of ‘c-fibres’, after Rorty: 1979/1991). Likewise, we might oversimplify the experience of emotion using the language of ‘cause and effect’: considering dynamic interaction of different elements of context and biology offers a richer and more useful route to examining our experiences. The same is true of mind: ‘minds inhabit environments which act on them and on which they in turn react’ (James, 1890: loc 621).

When considering emotion and feeling from a discursive perspective it seems unnecessary to deny the presence of the body, or ‘psychological states’ as long as we recognise their primary construction in language (Billig, 2001). It is therefore language I have looked at, and not neuroscience. Billig (2001) writes

*If we wish to study “memory”, “perception”, “emotion”, we should not be searching for the hidden inner processes, which are assumed to stand behind the use of these words….In [studying language] …we will discover the outward criteria for the social usage of these words. These criteria will be rooted in social practices…By taking seriously the idea that psychology is constituted in language, it will then become possible to study directly the process of thinking.*

(211-212).

In my own work I talk about feelings a great deal. I construct them as something we ‘do’, for example ‘feeling frustrated’, and I also construct them as objects by using the noun forms: pride, shame, guilt, envy, jealousy, annoyance, indignation and resentment, among others. The students in the focus groups also named feelings in these ways. I agree with the argument that in using the noun form I am reifying the named feelings as objects which can then be perceived as having an independent existence; as if ‘shame’ were floating around out there in the world with a being of its own. However, naming feelings is often a central part of storytelling or sharing experiences – and this was certainly true for the participants in the current study. I do not want to remove all mention of feelings in the noun form from my work (see suggestion by Harré, 2012), and certainly not from the students’ dialogue. What I would like to clarify, however, is that I do not consider feelings and emotions to be static, independent objects, measurable solely via biochemical and physiological markers. ‘[T]o study emotions is to study a certain kind of social act’ (Harré, 1991: 142). When I name a feeling I name a bundle of discursive and social threads that have been woven and rewoven in different contexts, that cannot exist without bodies, without language, without relationships; but that are no less real for all this. My position is that feelings and emotions are *primarily* socially and discursively produced, yet are not separable from the humans (or bodies – see Damasio, 2006) who experience them; or, as Harré puts it, an emotion is an ‘interplay between social conventions, moral judgements and bodily reactions’ (1991: 143). I do not consider them to be examples of Bhaskar’s (1998a) ‘intransitive objects’ (17), existing outside our knowledge of them; yet nor are the constructed emotions so unstable that ‘shame’ in one context bears no resemblance to ‘shame’ in another. I am more inclined to consider feelings or emotions as ‘quasi objects’ (after Latour, 1991); ‘much more social, much more fabricated, much more collective than the “hard” parts of nature’ (55). Recognising feelings or emotions as ‘collective activity’ (Billig, 2001: 213) arguably makes it easier to identify the ways in which some feelings or emotions can be ‘put to work’ for political ends (Williams, 2001:11) and can strengthen dominant ideologies (for example, see constructions of ‘shame’ and ‘pride’ which reproduce individualism and neoliberalism in the current research). It is important to emphasise, therefore, that despite naming emotions or feelings in this work I do not consider them to be independent static objects, and using their noun forms is appropriate as long as this position is understood.

*Critical Realism*

I discuss critical realism in the methodology in this thesis. Here I want to explain further how I consider critical realism can offer a way around the ontological difficulties attached to some versions of social constructionism while providing escape from the rigid stability of a naïve realist position. I hold that there is a world independent of our experience of it, but that we can never know this world apart from through our experience of it which is necessarily partial, social, and unstable. ‘It would be extraordinary’ writes Sayer (1998) if “the real” just happened to be exactly coextensive with the limits of our sensory powers.’ (133); yet to argue that there is no world and there are no objects independent to our experience is a step too far. If this were the case, then what would our experience be of? Roy Bhaskar (1998a) takes up this point: he rejects both the Humean (knowledge of the world corresponds to the world) and Kantean (world is not independent of people) and instead ‘regards the objects of knowledge as the structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena and the knowledge as produced in the social activity of science.’ (19). So although we cannot know the world other than via our experience, this does not mean there is no world out there which is being experienced, which has a structure and a stability external to us. He also writes ‘it is not the fact that science occurs that gives the world a structure such that it can be known by men [sic]. Rather it is the fact that the world has such a structure that makes science, whether or not it actually occurs, possible.’ (23). In this way, therefore, there is still room for ontology; and for a ‘being’ which can admit bodies and biologies. In fact, argues Latour, the human separation of nature and society and the invention of different approaches to study these is a modernist attempt to make sense of the world, but one which relies upon the denial of the networks between ‘Nature, Discourse, Society and Being’ which should be considered ‘to be in continuous connection with one another’ (1991: 90). ‘That a delicate shuttle should have woven together the heavens, industry, texts, souls and moral law – this remains uncanny, unthinkable, unseemly’ writes Latour (1991: 5). A critical realist position perhaps allows us to acknowledge these connections and indeed to make them the focus of study.

But what about the position that all we experience is purely a construction of discourse - the position that objects and people and the world have no reality beyond the texts which produce them? Archer describes this as ‘the linguistic wrong turn’ (1998: 193). Not only does she accuse sociology of ‘ontological disenchantment’ (192) but she considers ‘any representation of “structures” as constructs, subject only to discursive negotiations, sells out on human emancipation’ (193). We have no freedom to shape our world – to ‘be’ in it with any power if we are determined by discourse (nor, incidentally, if we are determined by nature). Latour considers the turn to language as a way of circumventing the nature-society division, as language may be considered a separate realm: ‘a law unto itself’ (1991: 63). Latour sets out his position on the preoccupation with discourse in the following short paragraph:

*In order to produce natures and societies, they [discourses] need only themselves, and, by a strange bootstrapping operation they extract their principle of reality from other narrative forms. Given the primacy of the signifier, the signifieds bustle about in the vicinity without retaining any special privilege. The text becomes primary; what it expresses or conveys is secondary.*

(Latour:1991: 64)

In other words, social structures, bodies and extra-discursive elements of ‘being’ are denied or at least neglected from the position that text is all and all is text. ‘Discourse is not a world unto itself but a population of actants that mix with things as well as with societies’ argues Latour (1991: 90). While my position in this thesis is that much of what we understand about learning, ability and education is discursively constructed, I am resolute on leaving room for the ‘signifieds’, particularly as the justification for the research centres around people’s self-determination and choice in identity. We need the neurobiological and the socially constructed to understand some kinds of being; we need a ‘less tired set of opposites’ (Hacking, 1999: 109). So, ‘the truism that extra-discursive controls on knowledge can only be referred to in discourse does not mean that what is referred *to* is purely internal to discourse’ (Sayer, 1998: 133) is the position I take in the current research.

The voice of critical realism is being heard by some in the harder sciences – particularly in neuroscience (see the recent publication of Choudhury & Slaby’s (Eds.) 2012 Critical Neuroscience). Here there is recognition of the value of reductionism for biological research, but also an understanding that it ‘becomes a problem when it is seen as the only game in town or when methodological approach tips over into a full-blown philosophical commitment’ (Rose, 2012: 58). There is an acknowledgement from critical neuroscience that the field cannot step outside of society and a warning against the assumption that ‘the ontologically most fundamental level of explanation is by default the most appropriate one’ (Slaby & Choudhury, 2012: 30). Yet an ontologically orientated discussion of specific learning difficulties like dyslexia should not be excluded; as Slaby and Choudhury note, ‘both culture and local biologies can transform one another, exerting their influence on the way we experience mental and bodily phenomena, and … this in turn shapes the corresponding biological processes.’ (2012: 35). Critical neuroscience thus offers new insight into understandings of ‘being’ even for those of a constructionist persuasion because it makes room for ontology without obscuring the discursive perspective.

‘Being’ is something I refer to throughout this thesis. My understanding of ‘being’ is ever shifting; but in an attempt to pin it down, I refer again to Latour (1991) and his idea of being as ‘distributed’ (88). That is, he holds that ‘being’ is not just about ‘beings’; we need to look at the way being is spread – ‘[n]etworks are full of being’ (64). Studying isolated individuals is therefore not particularly helpful to an investigation of being. In fact, such ideas of ‘bounded being’ (of individuals who are, so to speak, held in by their skin, impenetrable units) may actually have damaging consequences for human lives, argues Gergen (2009): ‘The presumption of bounded being not only engenders distrust of others, but sets in motion an active search for others’ failures’ Gergen, 2009: 14). So, not only are separated individuals the wrong place to look for a rich understanding of being, but our perception of ourselves as isolated units, defined by innate abilities and genetically decided characteristics is a boon to the individualistic and meritocratic ideologies of the modern western world. We might instead be focusing on *relations* to understand being (Gergen, 2009; Shotter, 2010). Relations between people, between individuals and groups, between individuals and nature are the stuff of society, argues Bhaskar (1998b). Social structures are made of these relations, not made of people; society is ‘an articulated ensemble of …relatively independent and enduring generative structures’ (Bhaskar, 1998b: 218). It is this conception of relative independence and stability of social structures that allows ontology back in to the discussion of being, and permits attention to historical and ideological drivers of psychology’s categorisation of beings; if a discursive approach to the study of people and societies cannot recognise relatively stable historical and ideological relations shaping social worlds it is in danger of undermining its own conclusions through an inability to construct them as any more reliable than mere opinion (see also Parker, 1999). Heading off to do science or study society arguably becomes unreasonable if we refuse the presence of a relatively stable ‘state of the matter, which is what it is’ (Archer, 1998: 195; see also Shotter, 1993).

A relatively stable ‘state of the matter’ does not necessarily contradict with William James’s idea that some things ‘do not exist absolutely’, but only ‘under conditions’ (1890: loc 565) particularly in the realm of psychology. In order to understand something like memory, psychology should take into account brain physiology, external experience, and the body (James, 1890: loc 592). James’s ideas appear to go against the tide of much of modern mainstream psychology in their recognition of ‘mind’ as inseparable from complex and ever-changing environments; James objected to psychology’s preoccupation with unthinking reductionism, preoccupation with statistics, and to its appetite to present animal behaviour as the key to understanding our human behaviour (James, 1890: loc 3927-3748). James’s understanding of being is also echoed in the work of Ian Hacking (1995) and Slaby and Choudhury (2012). James recognised the situated and interactive nature of mind and of other objects psychology studied (1890) long before Ian Hacking wrote *The Looping Effects of Human Kinds* (1995) in which he argued ‘[t]he kind and the knowledge grow together’ (361), long before Slaby and Choudhury considered ‘biolooping’: ‘the ways that both local culture and local biologies can transform one another’ (2012: 35), and long before related ideas of biology as ‘mobile’ (Lock, 2009). These ideas are also present in the work of John Dewey (1925/1958) who emphasised the need to attend to the situated aspects of objects and ideas, and who later warned of the social and implications for conceiving the world and its objects as ‘natural’, static, and unchangeable (Dewey, 1938). In all but name, these ideas are critically realist.

My critical realist stance in the current thesis has allowed me more confidently to undertake a sound methodologically mixed discourse analysis rather than a ‘clumsy stitching together’ (Ducket, 2011: 173). This mixed character is apparent in my understanding of emotions and feelings as neither wholly biological nor wholly social (discussed above), and in my approach to the analysis of conversational snippets. I have been able to recognise the implications of some general rules of syntax upon meaning making within the conversations as well as acknowledging the locally created, specific-to-context constructions of language that might escape traditional linguistic analysis. A critical realist position also allows room for the neurological and the body in conceptions of dyslexia, learning and identity as well as emphasising their social contingency. It also makes room for ‘fruitful’ contradiction and discomfort (Burman, 2003: 104).

*Personal reflection: positionality and motivations*

So far I have talked about my philosophical position and attempted to justify my methodological mix, but I have not been explicit about my own story, political motivations or perspectives as an educational practitioner. Here I would like to talk about my position on dyslexia, my role in supporting students, and my part in the education industry with all of the doubt and hope that comes with this.

Firstly, then, my position is that dyslexia is largely a politically and socially constructed object. This does not mean I think dyslexia does not ‘exist’. This does not mean I think that individuals do not have neurological differences which influence what psychologists call phonological processing, working memory and processing speed. My position is that in a society which grants high status to people who excel in expression through the written word, who can read efficiently and remember ‘facts’, who can organise their ideas quickly and sequentially, others who for whatever reasons do not have these strengths are ‘disabled’; and ‘dyslexia’ is the label which recognises this disablement *for some.* The dyslexia ‘exists’ in the relationships between people, relations between people and activities like writing and reading, and relations between people and social contexts. In my experience, dyslexia is a useful label for many students because it frees them from some alternative labels, and grants access to help in some of the areas of study where they struggle; but the positives of ‘being dyslexic’ are fragile and localised (see discussion elsewhere) and I consider, after Hacking (1995), that ‘classificatory looping’ (the interaction between an object and how it is classified) is a relevant concern.

I have been teaching dyslexic students for over ten years. This role has become a part of the way I think about myself and the stories I tell in constructing identity. Following the position that ‘being’ is about ‘being-in-the-world’ (Sartre, 1943), about relations between people, between people and things, networked (Gergen, 2009), part of my being is made through my relationships with students, my relations with a social world that celebrates people who work in supportive roles while also relegating them to a feminised nurturing category, my relations with peers, academics, with the texts I read, with the media who alternatively patronise or congratulate (people like) me for the various roles I occupy. It is important to my sense of worth that what I do is understood by other people as worthwhile; and so, it is difficult for me to identify how much of my work in dyslexia is self-interest and how much about social justice. I am a child of individualism. Perhaps oddly, I want to quote the comedian Russell Brand (who is my age) in his own reflection upon growing up under Prime Minister Thatcher:

*What is … troubling is my inability to ascertain where my own selfishness ends and her neo-liberal inculcation begins. All of us that grew up under Thatcher were taught that it is good to be selfish, that other people's pain is not your problem, that pain is in fact a weakness and suffering is deserved and shameful.*

(Brand, R: 2013)

Uncomfortably, I admit that I struggle with this too. Without a careful policing of myself I find I quietly blame people for ‘failing’, and I act to maintain my own positive identities above others’. I certainly do not mean to lay this at Thatcher’s door, but do feel that I am selfish, even when I am doing something apparently morally respectable like supporting students, and that this is partly to do with the individualism of the culture in which I grew up and continue to live. I play a daily role in reproducing this individualism. I cannot step outside it. It is brought to life again and again in my relationships with others, and the world, and must be remembered when I make my theoretical arguments in a thesis such as this, and when I undertake my practice as a teacher. It is arguable that what I do in my work with dyslexic students is part of the problem, if I understand the problem to be the power imbalance between individuals and groups in a hierarchical and inequitable society. For example, if I am not careful, I reinforce the status of the written word, the value of following academic convention even when that is a struggle, and the elevated positions of the expert psychologists and the intellectual heavyweights, as well as creating my position as expert researcher. As Burman writes ‘while such commitment … [to research with particular groups of people] is commendable, it often engages the narrative of the lone pioneer, the discoverer of uncharted territories’ (114), which is precisely the kind of ideological positioning I hoped to resist. My thread of hope is that, from within the great monsters of the education and disability industries, I can create and use opportunities, with others, to resist and subvert in some small way the power imbalances which help to produce some damaging ways of being. This might be a vain hope, but the alternative may be to do nothing, for fear of doing harm.

Chapter 4 – an analysis and discussion of discourses and subject positions

Introduction

My intention is to undertake 3 broad stages of analysis as outlined in. Each stage is informed by particular theoretical perspectives in discourse analysis and structured carefully in light of my particular research questions. In the following paragraphs I will describe the purpose of each stage, discuss theoretical underpinnings, justify my choice, make links to my research questions, and present the initial analytical findings. For convenience, my research questions are listed below:

1. Which conceptions of dyslexia are constructed during the focus groups?
2. What positions are taken up/ offered by participants in relation to these constructions?
3. What connections are there between constructions of dyslexia, related positionings, and explicit or implicit ways of being and ways of doing? That is, how do constructions of dyslexia help to open up or close down certain possibilities for feeling and behaviour?
4. How are certain constructions drawn upon and positions taken up within the conversations?
5. Which relevant wider discourses and ideologies are drawn upon (implicitly or explicitly) in the conversation and how do these interact and co-construct participants’ identities as learners in higher education?
6. What are the implications of drawing upon the named discourses and ideologies for the participants (and others) within higher education?
7. **Becoming familiar with the transcripts**

Whichever perspective is taken upon approach to discourse analysis, getting a feeling for the text as a whole before selecting specific sections for closer analysis is arguably essential. I wanted to get a sense of where and how the conversations moved on, of how the aesthetics of the conversation developed and of which perspectives of dyslexia and learning were revisited, broadly resisted or contradicted in comparison to others. While I move away from Wetherell and Potter’s (1987) guidance for analysis in later stages, I found their initial approach to be fitting. Having identified the research questions that will shape the particular analytical focus, and having collected and transcribed the appropriate data, Wetherell and Potter (1987) suggest a preliminary coding stage (167). These codes are loose and brief, and it is understood that they may change as the analytical process goes on. I interpreted this as a means of getting to know my data, to begin reflecting on the themes and issues within. I numbered the lines in each of the focus group transcriptions, printed hard copies and read through them several times. I made notes by hand on the transcripts where I recognised distinct perspectives on dyslexia, how topics changed or drifted, and my own role in shaping the discussion.

Wetherell and Potter (1987) suggest it is sensible to note ‘organisational features’ of the text in order to get a sense of the data before more complex analysis. For me this meant dividing the conversations into chunks. I use the term ‘extracts’ rather than Gee’s (2005) ‘stanzas’ because I felt that I wanted to separate the text into longer parts according to topic (and topic change); I felt that using Gee’s stanza approach would have led to many more divisions based upon a change in patter, style, or voice as well as topic. My longer chunks may be broken down further but at this stage I wanted to be able to identify and compare parts of conversation on one topic or aspect of a topic so that I could eventually identify and compare the (sometimes multiple) constructions within them.

At this stage of the analysis I noted a number of important features: for the first half of focus group 1, I was leading the topic changes most of the time. Participants looked to me for questions, responded briefly and rarely initiated expansion of the topic with other members of the group. In the second half of the conversation, the participants became less reliant upon my questions to stimulate discussion and I became more comfortable with gaps in conversation and allowed the conversation to drift. The participants in the second focus group appeared to me to be more vocal and confident than those in the first group. I found myself leading less and in some chunks not verbally taking part at all. There was a greater sense of conflict within and across participants’ constructions of dyslexia and their experience as learners in institutionalised education, and a greater sense of resistance to traditional ideas about dyslexia and disability.

1. **a). Noting constructions of the topic**

My first research question is ‘which conceptions of dyslexia are constructed during the focus groups?’ Having identified deficit-based scientific constructions of dyslexia as dominant in the literature, in legislation and in the media (see chapter one) I would expect these constructions to proliferate in our conversations on the subject. As discussed in previous chapters, my position is that the different constructions of dyslexia permit, promote, or deny certain learner identities, or subject positions (Davies & Harré, 2001). I drew here on Willig’s (2008) guidance on discourse analysis by searching for explicit and implicit constructions of dyslexia. I began by locating all references to the topic of dyslexia and categorising these with a short descriptor which I placed in a table with the relevant line number. Examples of such descriptors include ‘dyslexia as an acceptable explanation for difficulties’, ‘dyslexia as a strength’, dyslexia as a brain-based deficiency’, ‘dyslexia as relief’, ‘dyslexia as stupidity’, ‘dyslexia as laziness’, ‘dyslexia as struggle against adversity’. I identified the following broad themes incorporating the many constructions of dyslexia:

* Dyslexia as desirable (socially acceptable explanation, gift, strength, survival/ struggle against the odds, relief)
* Dyslexia as difference
* Dyslexia as innate specific deficit (limitation, things you can’t do, brain dysfunction, neurological problem, poor memory, individual problem, automatic learning dysfunction, specific learning disability)
* Dyslexia as (excuse for) stupidity or laziness (myth, not real, being slow, middle-class excuse, limitation, stigma, inferiority)
* Dyslexia as disability (including as specific learning disability)
* Dyslexia as a social/ environmental construction
* Dyslexia as identity

Having identified these broad themes of dyslexia construction I went back to the focus group transcriptions and noted down what I perceived as the dominant construction theme in each chunk of conversation. I colour coded each of the conversational chunks in the focus group maps according to the dominant construction and indicated which participant drew upon that construction (red initial indicates resistance to the given construction). This provided a sense of the spread of constructions over the course of the conversations, though it does hide the detail: chunks often held multiple constructions and categories that were not possible to show in this overview, or included constructions that fell into more than one of the chosen themes. Nevertheless, the maps are useful in that they indicate some of the differences in focus between the two groups. For example, there is greater clear resistance to certain constructions of dyslexia in focus group 2, although in both groups the instances of resistance increase in the second half of the conversation. The maps also show how certain constructions are produced in tandem with others. For example, in focus group two, constructions of dyslexia as a disability were closely tied in a number of conversational chunks to ideas of dyslexia as socially constructed, whereas in focus group one ideas of disability were more often tied to psycho-medical constructions which frame dyslexia as innate deficiency. This is interesting because it shows the different meanings ‘disability’ can take on (in this case as internal deficit/ tragedy or as an external issue), and how these meanings may interact with other constructions of dyslexia, learning and identity.

 **b). Noting subject positions related to constructions of the topic**

At this substage of analysis I am still interested in the constructions of dyslexia as an object, but change my focus to the ways these constructions allow or do not allow certain subject positions (Davies and Harré, 2001). In Wetherell and Potter’s (1987) guidelines the attention moves to observation of the local functions of certain constructions; that is, they ask what is achieved for the speakers in the given context through use of certain constructions. This implies that the speakers have choice over how they construct objects, themselves and each other, and that they do this to achieve a particular function (to gain something) in the immediate interactional context. My position is that the speakers have limited choice in how to position themselves and others because the subject positions (or possibilities for identity) are limited by wider discourses and ideologies which feed through the constructions of dyslexia. My position is that, despite fluidity in identities within and across contexts, there are certain positionings which endure to produce a more or less consistent ways of being and doing in situations where particular constructions and ideologies dominate.

My choice of analytical methodology is justified more carefully in chapter three of this thesis, but it is useful here to recap upon the reasons for this next stage of analysis. Gee (2005) asks who we are when we speak and what we are doing; which identities are we producing and which discourses are these identities connected to? (22). Fairclough (1992) and Davies and Harré (2001) similarly argue that discourses position people as particular subjects and in this sense, access to alternative discourses may present us with more freedom to choose the subject positions we inhabit, take up, or resist. It is the discourses that are drawn upon in the conversation (the ‘discursive resources’) that are as relevant to my research questions as the ‘discursive practices’ that are being ‘done’ within the conversation context (Willig, 1999).

In order to address the second research question (at the beginning of this section) I returned to the data to consider which subject positions (Davies & Harré, 2001) are produced in each of the conversational chunks. As before, I chose to examine the conversation in chunks rather than simply according to line number because this offered more coherence and allowed me to see better the connections between conversational flow and the relevant constructions and positionings. The tables in appendices iii and iv show the relevant subject positions, the constructions of dyslexia, and any related affect, behaviour, or way of being that I identified in each conversational chunk. These tables superseded the initial table of constructions of dyslexia according to line number, which is not included here.

Following completion of the subject positionings tables I constructed a hand-drawn diagram of the pathways between ways of ‘being’ (implied by the subject positions), feeling, and action (or ‘being’). The ways of ‘being’ are taken directly from the subject positions, and summarised in one or two words. I use the description ‘way of being’ because that’s just what the subject positions implied. The participants positioned themselves as ‘being’ something, or as literally positioned in a particular place or seeing things from a particular perspective. The ‘being’ was not necessarily fixed; in fact, participants moved in and out of sometimes contradictory ways of ‘being’. However, certain participants did appear to associate themselves with some ways of ‘being’ (and subsequently with certain feeling and action) more often, or more vehemently than others (for a discussion around understanding of ‘being’ refer back to the reflection within chapter 3).

In this diagrammatic analysis, I did not distinguish between participants. I simply drew lines between the ways of being, feeling and doing that I identified in the text. This was useful because it showed which ‘ways of being’ were constructed repeatedly, which less so, and offered a visual overview of the connections being made. I talk about what I found at this stage in the following paragraphs.

I noticed that certain ‘ways of being’ were constructed more frequently than others. This does not necessarily make these ways more important, but it did allow me to draw in thicker pathways and to note patterns of association between these ‘beings’ and different feelings and actions. This gives me a starting point for this stage of analysis. In constructing the diagram I noted the following summarised subject positions or ways of being as prominent: being intelligent/ able, being a survivor, being ‘just who I am’, being a hard-worker, being worthy/ deserving, being disabled, being a fraud’ an imposter, and being deficient/ limited. Certain other ‘ways of being’ were not so prominent but were nevertheless revisited fairly often: being stupid, being different, being superior, being talented, and being unique. Some of the remaining ‘ways of being’ I will incorporate into those mentioned above, but worthy of separate mention are the less frequently constructed positions: being part of a repressed minority or special club, being ‘not like them’. I will attend first to the more prominent positionings or ‘ways of being’ and the related pathways.

Please refer to ‘reflection’ section at the end of chapter three of this thesis for discussion of my constructions of ‘being’ and ‘feeling’ for the purposes of the current research. Please also refer to appendices to read the given extract (appendices i and ii) or to the relevant tables showing a summary of the subject positions and constructions of dyslexia within each extract (appendices iii and iv).

The key to the transcripts is as follows:

[ ] Square brackets indicate overlap in talk

? Question mark indicates questioning intonation

. Full stop indicates a moderate pause

, Comma indicates a brief pause

\_\_ Underlining indicates vocal emphasis

CAPITAL letters indicate loudness

*‘Being intelligent/able’*

‘Being intelligent’ was probably the most commonly constructed relevant position. The pathways between this position and particular feelings and actions were relatively strong. In brief, ‘being intelligent’ was connected to ‘feelings’ I have called vindication, relief, pride, indignation, defensiveness and righteousness, and to certain behaviours/ doings including telling people about dyslexia, reassessing themselves positively, challenging negative attitudes, laughing off negative comments, and blaming the system/environment for their difficulties. In this subsection I give some examples of these connections using extracts from the data.

In the following extract (extract 3, focus group one) between me and B, B positions herself as intelligent but unfairly measured by the given assessment. She talks about how it felt ‘nice’ to be given a ‘diagnosis’ as an explanation for why her intelligence wasn’t being truly reflected in her grades:

*H: yes, yeh .hhhhh. anyone else?*

*B: yeh, well I was I was diagnosed when I was in first year. So [yeah, it was]*

*H: [oh, ok, so ]*

*H: you three [were ]*

*B: [quite similar] but erm. it was it was nice, it was nice to be told*

 *like’ because, especially at school, like we did the CATS test? so they predict your*

 *grades for you. [so like] intelligence tests. And urm, I was*

*D: [mmm ]*

*B: predicted like A-stars in English, and and I got like Bs. And like, urgh, I’m well*

 *aware that a B is still good, but, but [the fact] that, er, they’d told me my*

*H: [yeah ]*

*B: potential was’n A-star, it it was the frustration of, not understanding*

 *[WHY]*

*C:[why ]*

*B: it wasn’t getting that far. Like I was doing everything that I was supposed to be*

 *doing, but, [but not ] yeah.*

*H: [yeah, yeah]*

*C: [yeah ]*

In the above extract I hear B’s relief in being given what she implies is a legitimate and respectable reason for not achieving her predicted grade; a label that does not threaten her sense of identity as an intelligent student, but that in fact vindicates her (B’s use of the word ‘diagnosed’ is also significant here as B is the first to switch to this term from my purposefully chosen ‘identified'. I will expand on this further in my later analysis of the impact of wider discourses and ideologies present in the text). A similar link between ‘being’ and feeling is expressed by D and then by C in the preceding extracts:

FG1, extract 47

*D: [I th]ink in some respects, like, I think it’s good to say anyway, when I*

 *used to send in, like I actually think I did tell my boss in the end,because I*

 *think I sent e-mails, and they had spelling mistakes in them, and he sent me like*

 *an e-mail back saying, it’s really best of you don’t put spelling mistakes in your e-*

 *mails [and I was ] like, sorry er it’s not really my [fault]*

*H: [yeah, yeah] [yeah]*

*H: yeah*

FG1, extract 54

*C: Erm,hgm, I was identified in my second year, erm, and it sort of felt like, I sort of*

 *knew I was dyslexic but it was nice to be told like you are dyslexic. and here’s the*

 *help and [support] sort of thing.*

*H: [yeah ye]*

*H: Why was it, why was it nice to be told?*

*C: because er I struggled with my grammar and that and and spelling and that, and I*

 *just thought I wasn’t that good at it, but it’s nice, like, I ’have like a reason why I’m*

 *not very good at it, if that makes [sense].*

*H: [Yes].*

*H: [yes ]*

*C: [so it’s] not like my fault as such, like. [ugh, huh]*

*H: [yes, yeh.] .hhhhh.*

In the second of the extracts above one can also read the relief C appears to feel in having a ‘reason’ for what she is not good at; that reason, by implication, is not stupidity. In other words, C appears to suggest that dyslexia is a legitimate reason, one that does not suggest she is unintelligent. It is then possible for C to relieve herself of the blame for her difficulties: ‘so it’s not like my fault as such, like’ – it’s the dyslexia. C inadvertently positions those who struggle as she does but who are not dyslexic as simply ‘stupid’ and to be blamed for not being very good at ‘grammar and that and spelling and that’. This is important because it is one example of how favourably positioning for one identified group of people can potentially be damaging for another. This is a theme I will return to.

It is also interesting that C distinguishes between *knowing* she is dyslexic and *being*  dyslexic. Although the verb ‘be’ is still used in the former, the vocal emphasis rested on the word ‘know’. In the latter the emphasis was placed upon ‘be’. Being told, having the label formalised by an expert, appears to make a difference, therefore, to how deeply the dyslexia is embedded into identity.

In this next extract (FG1) in which I led R to consider what it would be like not to have been given the label, R similarly presents dyslexia as a good reason for having ‘problems’. It suggests that without the label it is some personal failing that is responsible, but with it, the self-blame is removed. So I interpret ‘no reason’ to mean ‘no socially acceptable reason’, and therefore ‘dyslexia’ as a socially acceptable label.

*H: What would you have felt like if they had said that you weren’t dyslexic?*

*R: frustrated with myself, I think, because I’d’ve felt like then, there was no reason*

 *why, erm, I was having these problems.*

*H Yeah. yeah [yeah]*

*R: [hmm].*

*H: So, so, in a in a sense it was sort of relief?*

*R: yeah [definitely] [yeah].*

*H [to find ] [out ]?*

Below I have chosen an extract from further on in the conversation which I opened by asking about the reactions of friends and teachers to the label. In this extract (27) C describes the reaction of a school mate when C said she was going for the dyslexia test. C is positioned by her peer as not deserving of the label as she was doing too ‘well’; in relaying this story C is positioning herself as capable and intelligent, and in the described reaction to her peer’s assumptions C reinforces the idea that the dyslexia label is very much for people who ‘get good grades’. In fact, C uses her understanding that dyslexic people are intelligent to actively resist the insinuation that she cannot be dyslexic.

C expresses pride in being dyslexic in this instance and actively resists implicit accusations of stupidity by telling people she is dyslexic: ‘I don’t know about everyone else here, I like telling people I’m dyslexic’. The implication here is that people will be forced to reassess their understandings of dyslexia as stupidity once faced with the contrary evidence of an intelligent person claiming the label. I feel this is a good example of the links between positioning oneself as being a certain way, feeling a certain way, and acting (compare to ‘being a fraud/imposter’ discussed further below):

*H: um, did you always, well, and if you’ve been identified, then now, but,*

 *do you and did you in the past find it easy to tell your mates and your teachers,*

 *and other people around you that you that you’re dyslexic?*

*C: there was one girl at.. at um, who. I said that erm I was going to be tested, um,*

 *and she was like well you probably haven’t got it cos you’ve got this far, like, and*

 *you’ve done really well, and you probably haven’t got it. And I know, and then I (?)*

 *get, and I told her I had been diagnosed and she was like well, you obviously can’t*

 *be that bad, because, you’ve you’ve done this well, you’ve got really good grades*

 *and that so you can’t really be that much affected. And I thought that was a bit*

 *like, well, that’s not, that’s, just because I got good grades doesn’t mean I can’t*

 *be dyslexic. [you know ].*

*H: [yeah yeah].*

*C: and I think a lot of people assume, you’re dyslexic, you’re thick [basically]*

*H, A, D: [yeah yeah]*

*S: mmm*

*C: yeah, so. I don’t know about everybody else here, [I I like] telling [people]*

*R: [mm] [I like telling ]*

 *people [too ]*

 *[general agreement noises]*

*D: yeah, like you work really hard*

*C: yeah*

*D: to get the same grades as everyone else, so.*

*C: yeah [yeah]*

*R: [yeah]*

*H: [yeah so] it’s like a badge of honour [really in] a way then?*

*D: [yeah]*

*C: [yeah]*

*H: to have to work that [hard]*

 *[general agreement noises]*

The constructions of the self and dyslexic people as intelligent were equally present in focus group 2. Interestingly, this position was most commonly taken up by G who returned to the subject of her own intelligence repeatedly. While this may seem on first look to be a little conceited, with further attention her self-positioning can be seen as a strategy to resist assumptions of stupidity and inferiority that she has been presented with in her educational history. I include a few examples of G’s self-construction below.

FG2, Extract 6:

*G: and then the end of my A-levels, the teacher said ‘I think you’re probably dyslexic’*

 *and by the time I went for an assessment, it was at X college, um, and I was*

 *doing an arts course, and spending most of my time getting stoned and*

 *getting drunk, [and not really] caring. Hhhhh.*

*General: [hhhhhhhh ]*

*G: didn’t take much notice of it [at all. Hhhh]. Came back and did an access*

*H: [yeah, yeah]*

*G: course at X college, so when I was like twenty three. Um, got it picked up again,*

 *and this time the psychologist I saw at X college, um said that I’ve got to forget*

 *I’ve got dyslexia, ‘stop using it as a crutch’. The worst problem that I have is that I*

 *have a high IQ and that’s going to give me worse problems than*

 *[the dyslexia ]*

*H: [wow, and how did you] react to that?*

*G: I dunno, I was just like ‘oh, ok’*

*H: hhhh*

In the above extract G offers the group the psychologist’s proclamation of her high IQ. Her ‘oh, ok’ in the penultimate line indicates acceptance of the psychologist’s label, and offers some idea of how this identity as ‘intelligent’ was affirmed and incorporated into G’s more consistent sense of self. G appears to place great faith in psychology’s and psychologists’ explanations of dyslexia, and in the existence of intelligence as a single measureable thing.

G’s positioning of herself as having a high IQ here follows a brief narrative of her educational experience up to her dyslexia identification. She implies her suggested lack of success on her arts course was through ‘spending most of my time getting stoned and getting drunk, and not really caring’, which allows her to preserve her identity as capable and intelligent. She is later vindicated in this self-representation through the psychologist’s confirmation of her high IQ.

The following is the end of an extract in which G affirms a psychological deficit concept of dyslexia. She again produces the idea of high IQ, and positions J as someone in this category too:

FG2, extract 67:

*G: ….And the thing about the cerebellar deficit is that there’s a problem with*

 *the cerebellum, so you’ve got a problem in learning how to do things*

 *automatically, and maybe it’s just one possible route of dyslexia and there*

 *are others, but per, especially in people like yourself, where you generally*

 *are a high achiever, and you’ve got a very high IQ, the idea is that your*

 *cerebellum, the front thinking bit of your head, learns how to do things, so*

 *instead of doing it automatically with your cerebellum, like people without*

 *dyslexia, you have to [kind of use, like thinking ]*

*J: [have to use a different part of our brain]*

*G: you have to like, think your way through it.*

The presentation of herself and J as people with high intelligence allows her to prevent her difficulties from being seen as evidence of intellectual inferiority. In fact, it means that her achievements are even more impressive because she has to ‘think her way through it’ in a way that others do not. She reserves the theory of a cerebellar problem for people like her and J, and by implication, not for people who do not have their degree of intelligence. G actually uses her high IQ as a weapon to directly resist implications of inferiority and stupidity:

*H: [ok] so there’s the idea of social construction which is a bit*

 *different from saying to you ‘look you’re really just a bit slow, and daft, aren’t*

 *you? [you know], come on!’um ‘this label is just to cover that up.’*

*M: [mmmm ]*

*H: I mean, if someone says that to you, what what would [you say? ]*

*J: [I’d be really angry]*

*H: you’d be really angry?*

*J: yeah, really angry.*

*J: I wouldn’t know particularly what to say back, but um*

*General: hhhh*

*J: but [erm]*

*G: [I’d ] show them my I.Q report] hahahaha*

G’s easy solution ‘I’d show them my IQ report’ compares with J’s ‘I wouldn’t particularly know what to say back’. While J says she would feel very angry with the implication that she was ‘just a bit slow’, in this extract she does not know how she would counter it. G, on the other hand, would simply refer to the evidence of her intelligence. G comes back to the subject of intelligence in similar ways in other extracts (for example ex. 57, 68, 111, 117, 150). Of all the participants, G used ‘being intelligent’ most obviously as a tool to resist negative assumptions about the capabilities of dyslexic people.

Being intelligent and being a hard-worker were often intertwined positions, as the above extract illustrates. I move next to ‘being a hard-worker’ and the similar links between feeling and action.

***‘****Being a hard-worker’*

‘Being a hard worker’ was most strongly linked to feelings of pride, vindication, relief, frustration, and annoyance, and to working hard, challenging negative attitudes, seeking reassurance, and challenging academic convention. ‘Being a hard worker’ appeared to be very important to participants in maintaining a positive identity particularly when they felt their grades were not indicative of their true ability, or when others doubted their label. The feeling of being vindicated when the dyslexia label was realised was very strong. The expressed pride was connected to the idea that people would finally be able to see they had not been lazy and that they weren’t ‘just stupid’. Extract 5 below is an example of this:

FG1, extract 5

*H: mmm, interesting. ok. How about you?*

*R: Erm, well mine was just after getting some really awful essay results? erm, an it*

 *was so frustrating because I knew that I’d tried really really hard [ ]*

*H: [yeah]*

*R: urm, and, yet the marks just didn’t reflect that? And other people hadn’t tried at all*

 *and had done loads better. so in a way it was nice to get it because it was like I*

*had tried, and it wasn’t as if I hadn’t put enough [work in].*

*H: [yeah ]*

*H: completely, yeah. So I suppose they were all quite similar feelings*

Following is part of another extract (16) expressing a similar experience. C describes frustration at her teacher’s perspective, and looking back now with the dyslexia label, appears to feel vindicated. The ‘knowledge’ she is dyslexic allows her to reconceptualise the past situation and herself as hard-working, and as having unrecognised ability:

*H: Erm. What about through school then? Whether you knew that you*

 *that you had this this label or not, what. can you remember any experience*

 *where dyslexia was kind of stood out, you know, became obvious?*

*C: yeah [yuh]*

*D [yeah]*

*B: [hmm]*

*H: [yeah?] go on, yeah.*

*C: well, when I was at high school, in, like year year ten or eleven, erm, with my*

 *English teacher, I didn’t really get on with her, and I think it was because maybe*

 *we both didn’t know that I was dyslexic, but my grammar and my English was*

 *both really rubbish, and I was getting like Ds and Cs when I was predicted As,*

 *and I just couldn’t understand, like I was doing everything she told me, like I went*

 *for extra help [and ev]erything [and ] it just got really*

*H: [yeah ] [yeah]*

*C: frustrating that she was, like, no, it’s still wrong. And she wasn’t very positive*

 *about it? And it was really frustrating to be, like, well I’m doing what you’ve asked*

 *me to do, but it’s still [not], still not getting the grades, [erm]*

*H: [yeh] [yuh]*

*H: did you feel, did you feel that she felt that you were being lazy or*

 *[something]?*

*C: [yeah ], that I was being lazy and that I wasn’t putting the effort in, you know?*

 *Th’ I was poor student and stuff. And it actually got to the point where, um, I*

 *didn’t like going to the classes, and like, my mum was involved in like, having*

 *conversations with her, and that. Erm. But it was just really annoying because,*

 *she wouldn’t, she wasn’t very supportive. But obviously, she didn’t know that I*

 *was [dyslexic, she] just thought, uh, that I just wasn’t trying hard enough.*

*H: [yuh, yeah ]*

*C:. But I but I got an A overall in the end.*

*H: wow, ah.*

In the extract above C takes up a position as a hard-working, A-grade student; the label of dyslexia C received in her first year of university allows C to affirm this identity, and also appears to allow her to explain away her former teacher’s perspective. That is, the implication is that, as her teacher didn’t know C was dyslexic, the assumption of laziness was understandable. Before the ‘dyslexia’ vindicated her and allowed her to resist accusations of laziness, C ‘got to the point where …I didn’t like going to the classes’. With a ‘legitimate’ reason for her perceived underachievement, C may have been better able to resist the feeling that she was lazy. Should C (and her mother) have accepted the ‘lazy’ identity without challenge, feelings of self-blame and related behaviours may have persisted.

*H: yeah. I mean it, has it has it made you, rethink about yourself?*

*B: erm, a little bit, but I think that’s a positive thing. Like I think, it’s ok to have to work*

 *really hard at something else, and if anything, it shows that you are a really hard*

 *working [person] and if you could ever say that in a job interview*

*H: [yeah ]*

*B: or what[ever ][then] I think that is, like, a positive point.*

*D: [yeah ]*

*C: [yeah]*

*H: [mmm]*

*B: you know, [you] might work three times as hard as [everyone else] hhh*

*H: [yeah, exactly ]*

*H: and that’s a really [valuable thing], isn’t [it? ]*

*B: [mmmmmm ] [yeah]*

In focus group 2, extract 64, N puts forward the same self-presentation as B above, of working harder than other people to achieve the same ends; but for N his identity as a harder-worker compared to his peers is used to resist their suggestions that he was being a bit of a cheat. N explains that his peers do not see that he is any different or any less capable than they are, and imply that his label is meaningless. N produces his hard-working self as a counter to these assumptions:

*FG2, extract 64*

*N: but people people do perceive it as, as I’ve*

 *said before – you’re not stupid, which is what you come across*

*H: have you come across [it? ]*

*N: [well] yeah,*

*G: has someone said?*

*N: yeah, when I did my first degree, I hung about with, that’s probably why I did quite*

 *well [actually], people I’d associate with, they walked away with*

*J: [hhhhhh]*

*N: firsts. So that, I have felt, dragged my grade up. I know for a fact that I gave them*

 *ideas, etc, so you know, so they’re, they were the kind of people who’d say ‘yeah,*

 *whatever. You’re talking crap. [you’re] just as good*

*H: [mmm]*

*N: as we are’. And I’m like ‘yeah, it’s not that. [I read] a little slow, I write*

*H: [yeah ]*

*N: a bit slow. I have [to work] harder than you’ and they’re like ‘but I work*

*H: [yeah ]*

*N: all night!’ and I’m like ‘yeah but you got out t’pub [eight times a week], and*

*G: [hahahahaha ]*

*J: [hahahahahaha ]*

*N: you’re climbers, well I don’t do that*

*H: yeah*

The fact that N works harder than his peers is an important idea for N. Without it, I am left with the feeling that N would have less obvious evidence of his difference, which might lead him to question the validity of his label.

*‘Being a survivor’*

‘Being a survivor’ is the label I have given to a group of subject positions which suggest struggle amidst adversity, and success despite disadvantage or discrimination. I identified pathways between this constructed way of being and feelings of joy, pride, and self-acceptance, and also to particular actions or behaviours: reassessing self positively, adapting, attributing success to internal factors (self), struggling on alone, working hard, not asking for help, taking responsibility, blaming self for difficulties.‘ Being a survivor’ was also linked to ‘being a victim’ in that they both appear to situate the problem in the environment in the first instance. They are separated here because the ‘survivor’ position is connected to the ‘just get on with it yourself’ attitude and places some of the blame for failure onto the individual, whereas the ‘victim’ position appears to allocate blame entirely to factors outside the individual’s control. I talk about ‘being a victim’ at the end of this section.

Part of FG1, extract 76:

*S: I don’t. No. Not for me. I mean, like I said when I was younger, I was diagnosed*

 *from a very early age, and then noone seemed to pay any real attention to it.*

*D: mmm*

*S: It was something I always felt, well, just deal with it. I mean I suppose it has*

 *influenced me in that when I come to do work I sort of apply masses amounts of*

 *time, and I’ll read twice as, I’ll read five times as much as anyone else does and*

 *do ten times as much research.*

*H: mmm. mmm.*

*S: erm, so that might be overcompensating a bit in. and that’s sort of my general*

 *mentality anyway?*

*H: yeah*

In this extract, S starts by responding to an earlier question about whether or not dyslexia has become part of the participants’ identity. S says he does not feel this is the case for him, and tells the group that ‘noone seemed to pay attention to it [his diagnosis]’. In this sense, then, a ‘dyslexic identity’ as he constructs it was not given to him by other people, and nor did he take one up himself. What is interesting here is that it could be said S then goes on to construct himself as having a particular identity (as an over-compensating, hard-working survivor) that has emerged directly from dyslexia (in his narrative). He constructs himself as someone who has to do ‘masses amounts’ compared to his peers; ‘ten times as much research’. Despite the difficulties he faced and despite the lack of attention to his dyslexia, through sheer effort S won through. When S says he doesn’t feel dyslexia is part of who he is, he may be rejecting the idea of being a victim, ‘needy’ and pitiable. He avoids these identities by emphasising, and probably exaggerating the amount of work he does. He places the reason for his success upon internal characteristics. The self-presentation appears again in the extract below:

FG1, extract 144

*S: I think it, Ithink it’s not sort of a benefit, but it’s sort of fortunate with dyslexia, in*

 *that it’s one of those things that you can. You’ve got more control over than some*

 *other people with learning disabilities or disabled people*

*D: mmm*

*S: because you can let it hamper you or you can sort of, in a way, you can. If*

 *you’ve found a way of coping with it you can sort of, just go about it, but if you*

 *want some help, you can just go and ask for it. and in a way, I don’t think. I mean,*

 *I’ve got a friend who’s not dyslexic, but he’s really short sighted and he’s not, he’s*

 *just always going to need [need help ] he won’t be able*

*H: [need help yeh]*

*S: to find a position in normal society if he doesn’t have this [help]*

*H: [yeah]*

*D: [mm ]*

*S: but for me [I ] can to a [cer]tain extent [cope] on my [own]*

*H: [yeh] [yeh] [yeh ] [yeh]*

The impression here is that S is just fine coping by himself, that he is in control; he is never going to need help like ‘other’ disabled people. He removes himself from the group of disabled others whom he constructs as ‘them’ to be pitied. In doing so he creates a separate, strong and independent ‘us’. Although this provides S with a positive, self-affirming way of being, it arguably constructs asking for help or receiving support as indicative of weakness. He pities his short-sighted friend who ‘won’t be able to find a position in normal society’ without assistance, and is relieved to be more ‘fortunate’.

One of the implications of the ‘survivor’ way of being is that it potentially situates the blame for failure within the individual. It places the onus on the individual to battle against obstacles they face, even when those obstacles are unfairly distributed. It also implicitly connects the idea of support to a feeling of shame, and disability to a tragedy that happens to other people. The ideological undercurrents here are discussed in more detail in chapter five.

In the extract below S tells me and the other participants that he has ‘never used it [dyslexia] as an excuse’, though he doesn’t tell us for what the excuse would be for. This might mean that he doesn’t use dyslexia as a ‘crutch’ to help him succeed, and doesn’t need any help. The repeated ‘jokingly’ is emphatic here – it appears important to S that we knew he was not serious. In this context I understood S to be saying that even if he once said he would use dyslexia as an excuse this was just pretending as a way to cope with friends ‘taking the piss’. This position may be seen in contrast to one in which dyslexia is presented as a legitimate reason for using support which has different implications for feeling and behaviour.

FG1, extract 149:

*S: [I’ve ] never used it as an excuse, like. Jokingly, I’ve sometimes said that,*

 *jokingly I’ve had some friends that have said. When they have started taking the*

 *piss, I have jokingly used that*

*H: mmm*

*S: but I’ve certainly never genuinely said that I can’t do this because I’m dyslexic.*

*H: yeah, yeah.*

*S: you know, it might have hampered me from doing it, but I’ve always, if I’ve given*

 *myself enough time and effort, I can overcome [anything].*

*H: [anything]*

*H: yeah*

D then continues S’s emphasis on the individual’s responsibility for their own academic success:

FG1, extract 150:

*D: well the reality is you just have to work harder [like ]*

*S: [yeah]*

*D: cos people can help you, give you Dictaphones and stuff, give you all the help in*

 *the world, but in the end you’ve just got to sit [down and work ]*

*H: [work more, yeah].*

*D: like [like]*

In other parts of the conversation both D and S take up positions which appear to contrast the one they share in the extracts above, so my point is not that the positions taken up here are functions of fixed identities for D or S. It is that in this instant in constructing themselves as people who just get on and survive, alternative positions which are more closely tied to use of support and criticism of institutionalised education are less accessible.

G, below, appears to similarly eschew a traditional dyslexic identity (i.e. someone who struggles reading and needs lots of help). ‘It has never been something I took much notice of’, says G. Yet this position is not typical of G in this conversation. More frequently G appears to embrace a forthright identity as a dyslexic person; she presents dyslexia as something she very much takes notice of, and her rights as ‘disabled’ as imperative (see ‘being disabled’). But here she makes it clear she does not rely on the label.

FG2, extract 9

*H: But did you feel that you had been using it as a crutch?*

*G: No.*

*H: mmm*

*G: Not at all. It had never been something that I took much notice of.*

*H: No, mmm.*

*G: mmm. I just got on with it. Cos I love reading as well, and that’s the thing that*

 *most people don’t [get ], I [devour] books.*

*H: [yeah] [yeah ]*

In the following extract J is talking about her visit to speak to dyslexic secondary school children as part of an outreach project. She positions herself as someone who succeeded despite dyslexia and uses this to encourage pupils to aim for university using an I-can-do-it-so-you-can-do-it framework. This allows her to fill the role of ‘inspirer’ which is drawn out by N’s slightly disingenuous interjection ‘one, you’re from a mining community, two, you’re dyslexic’ you know? You can just go in and inspire these Kids.’ The feeling of mild sarcasm I get from N’s comment here I feel hints at an awareness of playing the ‘survivor’ or hero role. It’s something we recognise from stories – working class/ disabled/ ugly kid made rich, successful or beautiful. However, N may not have been intending this meaning at all. Regardless of this, ‘being a survivor’ here allows J to show a pride in her achievements which is all the greater for having had to overcome the challenge of being dyslexic.

FG2, extract 58:

*J: a lot of the students who I went to see in the high schools are, like, they’re not*

 *going to go to uni, and I was like ‘why?’ and they were ‘because I’m dyslexic’*

 *[and I was like ‘no ]*

*H: [is that the reason they gave?]*

*J: well, yeah, ‘maybe I’m not clever enough, or I won’t get good enough*

 *[grades’ ]*

*N: [yeah, I didn’t] do the promotional talks*

*J: yeah*

*N: cos you’re like, ‘one, you’re from a mining community, [two], you’re*

*J: [huh]*

*N: dyslexic’ you know? You can just go in and inspire these [these] [kids]*

*G: [yeah]*

*H: [yeh]*

*J: [yeah]*

*N: [and ( )]*

*J: [I thought it was] really nice. I [really enjoyed it]*

*H: [did you manage] to persuade anyone,*

*H: [do you think?]*

*J: [erm yeah ] erm just getting them to be more open minded about it*

*J: [anyway ]*

*N:[even if it’s just ] one, I sup[pose]*

*J: [yeah] and I think it’s just good for them to see*

*J: someone who has been through it all*

*H: mmmm*

*J: and can relate to their feeling, and whether they’re sort of nervous, or don’t*

 *want to tell people, and the fact that you’ve come out of it kind of a very well*

 *rounded [person], I think they think ‘oh, that’s ok. I’ll be, [I’ll be] alright’.*

*H: [mmm ] [yeah]*

Being someone whom others look up to as a role model may help J to construct a positive idea of herself in this context, and may indeed be inspirational. The nagging concern is over those ‘inspired’ who find that for one reason or another they do not become ‘successful’ in the same way, those for whom the if-I-can-do-it-you-can-do-it does not work out. The construction of the hero character who defies all odds to get the prize simultaneously constructs failures.

FG1, extract 141:

*H: ok. Thanks for that. Um um, so is there anything good about being dyslexic? I*

 *mean, we may have covered some of those things already.*

*R: definitely. I think erm, I think the fact that you are able to be in higher education*

 *despite the fact that it might take a lot more time to do something, actually I think*

 *is a really huge credit [er ] because it shows that you are really*

*H: [yeh]*

*R: intelligent, and that you’ve worked out ways around something that you do find*

 *quite difficult, and I think that’s really positive.*

I am adding ‘being a victim’ under the survivor subheading because it is closely related. I felt that the victimhood positionings were constructed for past selves and usually superseded by survivor positions. I included here constructions of the participants as ignored or neglected by teachers, or as having potential that was unrecognised. I also included here ideas of being helpless or done down in some way. There are similarities between these ways of being and being ‘disabled’, but I have separated them because they have an important qualitative difference: being a victim implies passivity, whereas being ‘disabled’ may be linked to passivity or to activity depending upon which underlying discourse of disability is being drawn on. I considered victimhood to be negative, and guessed that it would not be a particularly productive way of being; being disabled, however, in my experience may be positive, active, and politically motivated, despite popular negative associations with the word. I will discuss this more at a later stage. Being a victim was associated with feelings of shame, guilt, frustration, indignation, resentment, annoyance, vindication, and to blaming the system or the environment for their difficulties though still keeping dyslexia a secret, and struggling on alone.

In the extract below J positions herself as the victim of what she implies was teachers’ ignorance about what was really ‘wrong’. The label is important to J here because it vindicates her and allows her to shift the blame onto others and away from herself.

FG2, part of extract 4:

*J: but I remember when I was younger, and knowing the teachers had said ‘no*

*there’s absolutely no problem’ when I actually did have it, I was quite angry at*

*[them]. [hhhh]*

*H:[yeah] yeah. [hhhh]*

*J: I was like, well, there is something wrong! Why, why wouldn’t you*

*H: yeah, and what, so was it nice to get it reconfirmed when you.*

*‘Being just who I am’*

This way of being includes positions constructed with more or less direct reference to identity, character or personality. That is, some participants talked about themselves as very much ‘being’ dyslexic, about dyslexia as intertwined with or forming a core part of whom they perceived themselves to be. This is contrasted with positionings which separate the dyslexia from the person and construct it as an add-on, a discrete object. ‘Being just who I am’ was connected to feelings of happiness, pride, comfort, and confidence; it was also connected to descriptions of the self as unique, quirky, a bit ‘mad’ and to being open with others about dyslexia, choosing the bits of dyslexia which fit in with the positive idea of self, laughing off negative comments, reassessing self positively, laughing at oneself, embracing being overly-organised, embracing new ways of learning, and self-improvement.

The extract below is a dialogue between C and me. I have asked C if she feels dyslexia is a part of her identity, and C takes this idea up enthusiastically. ‘Being’ dyslexic for C in this moment offers a way for her both to brush off what could be interpreted as insult - ‘they laugh at me’, and to recognise related, positive attributes in herself, i.e. being ‘just a very organised person’. The repeated use of ‘just’ in this extract adds to the impression that this is simply who she is; she can’t help it; it’s fundamental and essential. C presents this strength as a direct result of being dyslexic. C is fairly consistent throughout the conversation in presenting this kind of ‘being’.

FG1: part of extracts 73 and 74:

*C: [I ] would say it’s part of my identity.*

*H: In what way is it?*

*C: I don’t know, like. I don’t think I would be the same person if I wasn’t dyslexic.*

*H: mmm*

*C: I think like. Even just, like, talking, and saying the wrong word, as just like, and*

*they laugh at me but, that’s just me, like*

*H: so, it’s just part of your personality?*

*C: yeah, I think it is part of my personality and just, my organisation, and that is just*

*like, who I am. I am just a very organised person, like, and that’s because I’m*

*dyslexic. so I think, I think I would be different if I wasn’t.*

*H: yeah.*

*C: so, it’s quite a big part of my identity, I think.*

*H: yeah.*

D also constructs dyspraxia/ dyslexia as part of who he is in extract 79 below. D tells us a story of how his friend was first to recognise D’s dyspraxic ‘personality’. D constructs this as a defining moment for him, a moment when he ‘got’ what was going on. The idea that dyspraxia or dyslexia can explain aspects of D’s ‘personality’ offers D some relief. It is a pleasant alternative to ‘like, me being weird’. This may seem puzzling, as the ‘weird’ behaviour does not alter after the dyspraxic label has been applied, yet somehow, with the label the behavioural categorisation shifts from one which suggests abnormality to one which confirms normality; that is, bumping into things and stopping half way through sentences becomes completely normal and understandable for someone who ‘is’ dyspraxic. ‘Being’ dyspraxic is constructed as more desirable than being ‘weird’. In fact, the weirdness is shifted onto the shoulders of the label, relieving the ‘me’ of that burden. The positions taken by both D (below), and C (in the extract above) project quirky, unique and endearing selves, unashamed and unhidden.

FG1 part of extract 79:

*D: does anyone else find [er] oh er, sorry [er]*

*C: [I ] [no] you*

*D: er, does anyone else find they’ll occasionally read something, or someone will*

*mention something or something will make sense but you never really got why you*

*did it or something bizarre you used to do, or something?*

*H: er, can you explain what you mean*

*D: well like, erm. Like a good example is when a friend of mine was like picked up a*

*book on dyspraxia, and was like, he was reading through it and he was like ‘ah,*

*this is you’. This is your personality [cos] it was like*

*H: [hhh]*

*D: hh walks into things [hh] stops in the middle of sentences, and you know,*

*H: [hh]*

*D: like, sort of, makes those sort of mistakes, like I never really understood why I did*

*that, I always thought it was like, me being, weird.*

*H: yeah.*

*C: yeah.*

*D: and it’s kind of, nice to know, that ( )*

A very similar process appears to be happening for R and B in the extracts below. Dyslexia is an explanation which helps R and B to understand why they ‘are’ how they ‘are’ through self- realisation. B wonders what would be lost if she was ‘cured’ and in doing so connects dyslexia to her wider ‘personality’, not just to difficulties experienced. What one ‘is’ is arguable presented here as relatively fixed, and one cannot so easily be blamed this. The dyslexia then is not a personal failing; it is ‘just’ the way one happens to ‘be’.

FG1, extract 82:

*R: yeah, I think having the label has helped. It’s made me like, think about the things*

*I do, and when I do something, I’m like, I can see where that’s coming (from)*

*H: yeah yeah*

*R: It’s it’s [kind of] like a, seems a part of me*

*H: [yeah]*

*R: but I never really realised*

*H: yeah*

*R: it was there before, you know.*

FG1, extract 164:

*B: I like the idea that dyslexia is part of your personality, and [like] well*

*D: [mm]*

*B: It’s you. And if someone cured you of that, like, it would be, like which bits of you*

 *would be [lost?]*

*H: [yeah] yeah.*

R continues the construction of a dyslexic self in extract 165. We hear her apparently reframe what might have been presented as purely a negative, not being able to write essays quickly, as a positive, as the reason why she has ‘become the conscientious student that I am’. Rather than considering dyslexia to have held her back and limited her academic development, R constructs dyslexia as one of the reasons she has succeeded. ‘Being’ conscientious means being someone who perseveres and succeeds. ‘Being’ persevering and successful is likely to mean one approaches life and learning differently than ‘being’ limited or defeatist, yet R could have positioned herself or have been positioned as being the latter. I will argue later that the choice individuals have in taking one position or another is limited by the ideologies woven into the text.

FG1, extract 165:

*H: well I was going to ask, if you could wave a magic wand, or I could do that, and*

*erm right now, and clonk it on your head and like, the dyslexia would go away,*

*would you, let me do it? Hhhhh.*

*R: (shakes head)*

*H: oh? No? even though you say your dyslexia is specifically to do with writing?*

*R: well I think that that is obviously why over the years I’ve become conscientious,*

*like I’ve become the conscientious student that I [am bec]ause*

*H: [mmm ]*

*R: I’ve had to be because, to get this far*

*H: mmm*

*R: and if I could just write an essay beginning it the night before, and hand it in, I*

*think I wouldn’t be the hard-working, motivated, you know, focused person that I*

*am, and that’s very much [ ] who I [am].*

*H: [yeah] yeah*

*D: [yeh]*

J takes up a similar position in FG2, extract 87, as does N in the extract below:

FG2, extract 92:

*H: mm how about you?*

*N: eh well, it’s made me who I am, number one. I suppose. I dunno, er it’s difficult to*

*say erm. I’m a bit like you were saying, I think differently. My girlfriend comes out*

*with problems and I’ll just say have you tried this this this and this,*

*H: ahhhh.*

*N: and her PhD, which is a totally different area to mine, I’ll not figure out biology*

*she’s she’s ( ),*

*H: hhhh*

*M: hhhh*

*N: you know.*

In both focus groups certain participants repeatedly presented dyslexia as part of who they were: R,B,C,D and J took up these positions consistent with this idea more than once (e.g.‘I just am it’, J, extract 76, extract 87, FG2; D, extract 168 FG1); others like T took up this position less consistently. In extract 80, FG2, T describes how he ‘thinks differently’ to other people and says ‘the differences caused by dyslexia just er makes me me’, whereas in another part of the conversation T constructs the dyslexia label as not very relevant outside education (FG2, extract 29) and therefore not a core part of his ‘self’. M, in contrast to Ra,B,C,D and J firmly constructs himself as separate from the dyslexia label:

FG2, part of extract 97

*M: but like you say, I’ve not been part of the system [of dyslexia] so you know*

*H: [yeah ]*

*M: I see it as something very separate from [me ]*

In the extract preceding the one above (see below) there is a further contrast in orientation between M and the others in the group. Where J,D and Ra, among others, construct dyslexia as something that has made them better in some way, M strongly resists the idea that his achievements have anything to do with dyslexia.

FG2, extract 96:

*M: see I I don’t see dyslexia in that kind of, I see, I I see what you are*

*saying, you know, in this kind of sense that you’ve got this label even*

*though you’ve got this label ( ) but you know, like, cos I didn’t have*

*dyslexia until like 24 and stuff, I almost feel like you know I‘ve*

*got the same, I’m very pleased I got my degree and my masters*

*and all this, but then it’s like everyone’s like, ‘oh and you did it with*

*dyslexia all this [time’ and I’m like ‘that’s got nothing to do with it!’]*

*General: [ yeah hhhhh mmmm yeah yeah mmmm ]*

*G: yeah.*

*M: You know I’m [not]*

*H: [Oh] really? So that’s similar [to ]*

*M: [it’s] it’s not, I mean , it is patronising,*

*it’s almost like dyslexia is taking some of the glory or the*

*General: [hhhh yeah hhhhhhhh]*

*M: [It’s like you know, it’s]*

*H: [hhhh yeah ]*

*M: it’s nothing to do with that, you know, I am who I am, I’ve done what I’ve done,*

*H: mmm*

For M, the idea that dyslexia is a part of him and has aided him in his educational progress is rejected. In fact, M expresses annoyance at the suggestion from others that dyslexia has some of the credit for his success.

*‘Being worthy/ deserving’*

‘Being worthy and deserving’ was associated with feeling justified in one’s label, that is, with feeling genuine and legitimate, with getting cross because of factors external to themselves, reassessing themselves positively, going for a dyslexia assessment, and accepting help. This ‘being’ is contrasted with the idea of being a cheat or an imposter which was linked to opposing feelings and doings and which is the focus of the section following this one. The parts of the conversations in which positions as ‘cheats’ or ‘frauds’ were taken up or offered, ‘being worthy or deserving’ was produced as a counter. Therefore, some of the extracts where ‘being worthy’ positionings were presented are discussed in the next section.

In the extract below, I was asking C is she felt the reasonable adjustments put in place at university meant that she was on a level-playing field with other students. C’s ‘yeah, um’ I understood to mean that she didn’t entirely agree with this, and went on to emphasise dyslexic people’s need for ‘loads of time’. D takes this up, and tells the group that he is absolutely reliant upon having a particular adjustment (a computer in exams): without a computer, ‘I just wouldn’t be able to do a degree’. D’s need is absolute – there is no grey area – and from this position, D becomes fully justified in making use of the adjustments offered.

FG1, extract 106:

*H: do you think it now means that you do compete on the same level as the other*

 *students who don’t have dyslexia?*

*C: yeah. Um, it’s still time consuming so you still [just need] loads of time]*

*D: [hmmm ]*

*S: [ yeah, like it’s ]*

*D: I mean, If I couldn’t do an exam with a computer, I just wouldn’t be able to do a*

*degree.*

*H: yeah*

*C: yeah.*

*D: I just wouldn’t, I’d never do anything.*

*H: yeah.*

*D: [cos ]*

*H: [because] it allows you to take part.*

*D: yeah, yeah definitely.*

*D: and I think Dictaphones have been quite vital at some points.*

*H: yeah yeah.*

T (in the extract below) accomplishes something similar to D; he also positions himself as worthy of particular adjustments because of his absolute need for extra time. He emphasises the extreme nature of his need through repetition and additional adverbs/ adverbial phrases ‘hardly ever’ and ‘actually’. J continues the thread and takes up the same position. She offers hypothetical evidence for her need (and therefore her entitlement) by considering the difference in her mark if ‘they er like, drew a line at where my actual time would have been’.

FG2, extract 103:

*T: [I I ] need that extra [time ]*

*G: [really?]*

*T: I hardly ever, well I hardly ever finish erm before my extra time starts, so I actually*

 *need the extra time, [before] I get any where to close to fin[ish]ing*

*H: [yeah ] [near] [mm]*

*J: [mm]mm, If I had to, I*

 *sometimes think it would be interesting if they er like, drew a line at where my*

 *actual [time] would have been*

*G: [yeah]*

*H: mmmm*

*G: mmm*

*J: See what else I write in my extra [time and] see my [grade im]prove*

*H: [mm yeah] [yeah ]*

*J: cos I think it would be a [ ] big [difference ] yeah.*

*N: [big] [mmm]*

*H: [big difference]*

*N: mm*

*H: yeah*

*J: mmmm*

Taking up a position of worthiness based upon genuine need here is paired with the taking up of adjustments offered; however, it is interesting that these participants took care to justify their decision to make use of adjustments. One might have expected the use of adjustments to be self-explanatory and entitlement beyond doubt. Each of the participants in some way tells of the bigness and honesty of their need which adds weight to their justifications: J, H, N: ‘big difference’; T: ‘before I get anywhere close’; D: ‘definitely’, ‘I just wouldn’t, I’d never do anything’; C: ‘just need loads of time’. The ‘just’s in C’s and D’s utterances construct a simple ‘truth’ of incapability which makes the entitlement to support apparently straightforward and obvious.

In the two extracts below R and then J both resist the idea that dyslexia is or can be used as an excuse for laziness or stupidity, or as a way to get extra stuff, by constructing themselves, and other dyslexic people as ‘obviously’ genuine. R achieves this by poo-pooing the idea that anyone could fake the dyslexia test: ‘see if someone can get ninety nine percent on one thing and one percent on another’. J’s ‘really intelligent’ friend could not even fake the test. These short dialogues place dyslexic people (and dyslexia) as genuinely entitled and so defend the right to adjustments.

FG1, extract 152:

*R: erm, I can understand why it’s seen as a middle class thing, but again, if the*

 *parent, it’s the parent who says to go and get tested for it all, but erm, anyone who*

 *says something like that should have a look at the assessments we had to do and*

 *see if someone can get ninety nine percent on one thing and one percent*

 *on [another] It’s obviously they’re [not working]*

*H: [yeah ] [yeah ]*

*D: [yeah ]*

*R: [the same as everyone else] you know?*

*D: [yeah yeah yeah ]*

*H: [mmmmmm ]*

FG2, extract 71:

*J: my friend actually went to one of the tests and I don’t actually think he thought he*

 *was dyslexic but went with the aim of wanting to be*

*G: yeah*

*J: and er at the end they just sat him down as was like, and he was really intelligent*

 *so he was probably like playing the game a bit, and he said*

*(H enters with R and offers R a seat)*

*J: unfortunately, you are not dyslexic, but there will be other help*

*H: ha?*

*J: [okay hhhhhhh]*

*G:[hahahahaha ]*

*J: so, Oh gosh.*

The existence of dyslexia as a natural and distinct kind of thing is vital to the participants in the extracts above. The understanding of dyslexia as a ‘natural kind’ draws upon positivism in its assumption of measurable distinction between those who are not dyslexic and those who are; that these distinctions are correct, eternal, and that science is able to identify the ‘essence’ of different natural kinds or categories of person and name them (see Hacking, 1995 for more here).

From a position of entitlement, S does not tolerate a tutor who positions him as unworthy of adjustments (see extract below). He does not accept himself as the site of the problem, and apparently resolves not to go to this tutor for help again. I found some bravado in this extract, and obviously cannot know if S positioned himself in this way at the time of the tutor rebuttal, but in this moment, S positions himself as entitled, and the tutor as ignorant. It preserves S’s dignity and power in the story.

FG1, parts of extracts 106 and 107:

*S: …and I remember in the first couple of weeks I was like having panic attacks, and*

 *I went to see someone and said well ‘what can I do to calm myself down?’ and*

 *there was this guy who was my personal tutor as well as my dyslexia tut, and he*

 *said, basically, ‘well it’s your own problem’*

*H: did he?!*

*S: yup.*

*H urgh.*

*S: And I was like, ok, fine, I’m not going to see you again!*

For G, positioning herself and dyslexic people as genuine and entitled is linked to her construction dyslexia itself as something ‘real’. This is contrasted with M’s positioning of some dyslexic people as ‘cheats’ and not entitled (see extracts presented under the subheading below) and his construction of dyslexia as a ‘creation’ or ‘invention’ and of questionable existence. Ideas of reality and myth become a little confused in this extract and I wonder by the end if G and M are not somehow arguing the same point: I think G is saying dyslexia did ‘exist’ in the Bronze age, but that it was hidden – ‘it wasn’t being seen’ – but it was a ‘brain’ thing. And M is arguing there was never such a thing, and that it is almost akin to a modern fashion. The ‘existence’ of dyslexia is vital for G’s positioning of herself and other dyslexic people as genuine and entitled; as the ‘invention’ of dyslexia is crucial for M’s positioning of himself as independent, academic and a not-someone-who-takes-any-of-this-nonsense-seriously:

FG2, extract 147:

*M: [you know, so ]*

*R: [they say it’s an invention], not something that’s there, something that’s been*

*R: dis[covered]*

*M: [discov ]ered. My personal opinion is that it wasn’t discovered,it’s it’s something*

*that, it’s a creation or an in[vention]*

*G: [I definit]ely think it’s been labelled.*

*G: I definitely think it’s something that will have been there [cos cos I*

*M: [if if you ask*

*G: personally think it’s a brain it’s] [the way your brain works ]*

*M: mean did Dyslexia ] [exist in the Bronze age, well, it didn’t].*

*G: but writing didn’t exist in the bronze [age] and neither did rea[ding] that’s*

*M: [but ] [no ]*

*G: a spurious, in the bronze age it was not, we probably people of my level at least*

*who came from a mining community, would not have been able to read.*

*M: no, but that’s something that you do , but*

*G: [so I wouldn’t have had dyslexia, so I wouldn’t have some across it]*

*M: [but you know, cancer existed in ] the*

*M: bronze age, but none knew it as cancer, some of that’s [just yeah but ]*

*H: [couldabin, just, yeah]*

*M: yeah, but you know [dyslexia is a label ]*

*G: [but dyslexia could’ve been] there in the bronze age,*

*G: but it wasn’t being [seen. Because ]*

*N: [wasn’t being associated with reading and writing]*

*G: There wasn’t things that you had [to]*

*M: [no] ok.*

*G: [do]*

M brings up the idea that dyslexia does not exist earlier in the conversation as well (note J’s refusal of M’s construction), in FG2, extract 19:

*M: you know, between you and me, I don’t even know anything about dyslexia, I*

 *don’t study it or anything, but, you know, it doesn’t strike me as something that*

 *actually exists, you know, you can only, you can’t have dyslexia, you can only be*

*identified as having [dyslexia, cos] it’s not*

*J: [I have! ]*

*M: a thing. It’s er, you know*

The extracts above bring the discussion here to the positions ‘being a fraud/ an imposter’ which becomes quite prominent in FG2.

*‘Being a fraud/ an imposter’*

This way of being contrasts with those constructions of the self as legitimate or deserving above. It was connected to feelings of guilt, shame, the feeling they may be ‘found out’, being unentitled, and feeling stupid. It was connected to a number of actions: refusing help, struggling on alone, rejecting the label, attributing success to external factors, and blaming self for perceived failures. This was not a frequently expressed way of being, but its power to seemingly shape identities in unhelpful ways was quite pronounced. These positionings in the conversations were often quickly followed by counter-positions of worthiness. There was some conflict around these ways of being, particularly in FG2.

First, however, is an example from FG1 which highlights the links between the positioning of dyslexic people as frauds or cheats and certain feelings and behaviours. In the extract below, R tells a story of her friend who despite being ‘very severely dyslexic’ has come to reject the label and who does not make use of support or adjustments because ‘she just wants to do it all on her own merit’. In telling this anecdote R presents the participants with an uncomfortable construction of dyslexic people as using the label as a crutch, and as people who aren’t succeeding on their own merit. The character R conjures up immediately produces the contrasting idea of a dyslexic person as cheating by using the label to help achieve a degree.

FG1, parts of extracts 31 and 32:

*R:… I have a housemate who is very severelydyslexic, erm but but she doesn’t, I*

 *think she doesn’t accept it in a lot of ways? Erm, she refuses to take any help, and*

 *she, you know she [won’t]*

*H: [yeah]*

*R: give [her ]self the label I don’t think.*

*H: [yeah]*

*D: mmm*

*H: why does she, why does she refuse the help? I mean, does she talk to you about*

 *why?*

*R: um, a little bit, um, she just said that she doesn’t want it to stop her from doing*

 *anything, and she just wants to do it all on her own merit. I think she had a lot of*

 *help when she was younger,*

 *but she just [doesn’t take any of it now ]*

*H: [doesn’t take any, university, yeah] yeah.*

The very presence of this friend, or idea of this friend, in the conversation requires participants to justify themselves, their label, and their choices around support. One way of doing this is to position oneself as genuine, truly experiencing exceptional difficulties and having exceptional needs. In this way, the problems dyslexic people experience become the focus and the justification, and the discussion of dyslexia as *difference* rather than *deficiency* is therefore side-lined.

Something similar occurs in FG2 in the extract below. M and J together construct some dyslexic people as reliant on their label and as somehow using unfair means to succeed academically. This position is not a positive one and neither J nor M suggest that they apply this position to themselves; they position themselves as survivors who do not rely on their label. For J this is one position of many she takes up in the course of the conversation, but for M this position is fairly persistent (which is discussed further below).

R sets the tone of the interaction here by placing responsibility for adapting to conventional learning style onto the dyslexic individual. He constructs rote learning as an essential aspect of education rather than a historical product, and positions himself as someone who has adapted and does not expect special treatment. J takes up the position offered by R. She constructs a hypothetical dyslexic person whose dyslexia gets them a first class degree, and positions herself in opposition to this. M’s ‘you want your first to be the same as this person’s first or that person’s first’ echo’s J’s position. From these positions, J and M project strong, capable, surviving selves; they also produce selves for whom support beyond a very basic level is to be shunned in case it diminishes the value of their achievement. This also arguably creates contempt for people who do rely on adjustments to take part in education at this level.

FG2, extract 129:

*R: look, I think, [it’s not easy] and it’s not easy for dyslexics, but I think*

*J: [hhhhh ]*

*R: rote-learning does have a place in this in this education that we’re doing now. I*

 *think it’s just a reality that we find hard.*

*J: I think, cos I wouldn’t want to get a first, and know that it was because I had*

 *dyslexia, when I [get that] I want to know that it’s because I’ve done it*

*M: [mmm ]*

*J: and to the same, to like their standard*

*M: mmm*

*J: and so like, I agree. [with what you’re saying]*

*M: [mmmm you want your ]*

*J: [yeah you’ve got a degree and you’re dyslexic ] or*

*M: [first to be the same as this person’s first or that person’s first]*

*J: you got is [cos] you’re dyslexic, you wanna know that you*

*M: [mm]*

*M: mmm*

*J: achieved it the same [as ]*

During the FG2 conversation as a whole J appears uncertain about whether or not to take up adjustments or equipment granted to her as a dyslexic student. It seems to conflict to some extent with her favoured position as not-needy, a survivor. For example, in extract 101 she constructs herself as insecure in her choice to have extra time and use a computer in exams as this does not fit with her positioning of dyslexic people as survivors. She suggests these adjustments would be desirable for everyone and questions the fairness that they are reserved for dyslexic students alone:

FG2, extract 101:

*J: I can type mine up on a computer, but, I think everyone would like that*

*H: [yeah yeah ]*

*R: [mmm ]*

*T: [mmm ]*

*J: I don’t think er, I don’t think that, er I think everyone would probably do better with*

 *extra time and like*

In the following FG1 extract, C,H and R are discussing the timed, online tests that are sometimes a requirement for employers at job application stage. C and R both find the timed tests difficult and feel dyslexia impacts here. It is notable that C positions herself as lacking, suggesting that the A she got for maths GCSE at school was some sort of fluke which she did not deserve; R does the same thing. The problem with the timed employee tests therefore appears to lie with her and ‘her’ deficiency. R then constructs the tests as the problem; she says they ‘discount anyone who can’t really do that’. By ‘that’ I understood R to mean ‘maths on the computer under timed conditions’ rather than maths in general. C appears to feel fraudulent in presenting her A grade. She puts her difficulty in the online tests down to her lack of ability and her success at GCSE down to some sort of luck.

FG1, extracts 95-97:

*C: [and they] make you feel so stupid., and like how did she get an A in*

 *[maths? ]*

*R: [yeah haha]*

*H: [yeh ]*

*C: like, obviously she didn’t. You just feel like you shouldn’t be put, and you shouldn’t*

 *have done really well [in maths] because you just can’t do [it ].*

*H: [yeah ] [no].*

*R: It feels like a barrier [to to any ] job that needs you to*

*General: [yeah yeah]*

*( )*

*R: It’s just a no go.*

*H: but does that make you feel that, you know, the test is not fair, and not measuring*

 *your ability? Or do you somehow feel that, the A you got before wasn’t a true*

 *reflection of your ability?*

*R: erm yeah [er I] feel like I probably didn’t des[erve] to get an A at*

*C: [erm] yeah [yeah]*

*R: GCSE, so yes it’s probably not a very good reflection of my ability. Hhh*

*C: hhh yeah[hahaha]*

*D: [hahaha]*

*R: not really good at it, but um, but then, I think those tests are unfair as well,*

 *because they discount anybody who can’t really do (.) that*

*C: yeah*

*R: because it’s just the computer assessing you and you can’t er*

As well as attributing success to some sort of fluke and failure to personal lack, feelings of guilt also appeared to be connected to taking up a position as a ‘cheat’ or ‘imposter’. On occasion through FG2, N swung between taking up a position as ‘genuine’ and a position as ‘cheat’. Extract 49 below is one of the instances where this identity conflict was constructed. In the first few lines of the dialogue between me and N I interpreted ‘I would use it. It’s terrible. But I do use it to get away with stuff’ as a presentation of guilt and embarrassment about what N was constructing in that moment to be unfair use of his label to get preferential treatment. Midway through the dialogue, I (H) offer N an alternative position (that of being genuine and entitled). N takes this alternative up momentarily before returning in the final few lines to the idea that he has taken unfair advantage and feels ashamed: ‘if you’ve got a little bit of leeway, you might, you’ll take that inch and then you’ll take that mile’. There are other instances where N takes up the ‘genuine’ position (see FG2 extract 64 in the section above ‘being hard-working’) and elsewhere the ‘cheat’ position (e.g. FG2, extract 108:*‘*I actually felt like a scrounger’).

FG2, extract 49:

*N: like, that’s what I got, I got, I would say I’m dyslexic, and they would go ‘urgh’ and*

 *run a mile and I would use it. It’s terrible. But [I do! I use it to get]*

*General: [hahahahahaha ]*

*N: away with stuff.*

*H: like what?*

*N: so, say I’m late for a meeting, or time management, or say I’ve not, or I should*

 *have done some analysis to show my supervisor and I’ll say ‘oh it’s not, it’s taken*

 *me a bit longer, a bit longer to read, and you know I’m dyslexic’ and he’s like ‘*

 *yeah, send it me when you’ve done it’ type thing. So [you know]*

*H: [yeah but ] that’s also, I*

 *mean, how do you know when you are using it like that and when you are using it*

 *because it really did take you longer, I mean, it actually probably does, doesn’t*

 *[it?]*

*N: [er] well, I work really hard, so, it. I never missed a deadline, in my undergrad*

 *degree*

*H: yeah*

*N: and people did, you know, who didn’t have dyslexia. But I just worked. I worked till*

 *twelve or two in the morning. Get up next morning, in uni for nine O’Clock, and*

 *did he same kind of thing again, so. You adapt, you know, because you are*

 *[gonna] lose marks because it’s a rigid rule that’s in*

*H: [yeah ] yeah*

*N: place*

*H: yeah*

*N: You’ve got to get it [in on ] time. It doesn’t matter [what you’ve got]*

*H: [yeah ] [yeah, no ]*

*N: so, you do it.*

*H: yeah*

*N: whereas, if you’ve got a little bit of leeway, [you] might,*

*H: [yeh]*

*N: you’ll take that [inch and then you’ll take that mile].*

I felt that there were some similarities between the ways M and N positioned themselves or dyslexic people as actual or potential ‘cheats’, but M appeared much more vehement about this positioning. Whereas N tended to position only himself as taking unfair advantage (though in itself this may have implied all dyslexic people), M subtly positioned himself just outside the ‘cheat’ identity, and other people who proclaimed their dyslexia label as firmly attached to it. This created some conflict which, as we will see, M attempts to repair; but first, I want to present extract 59 below as an example of how M’s apparent choice not to tell people about his label and not to use it as an excuse is arguably connected to the way his peers have positioned him earlier in the extract.

FG2, extract 59:

*H: did anyone else have any, or weirdly positive, or?*

*M: I had people telling me they probably had dyslexia as well. That seemed to be*

 *universal, cos, I didn’t tell many people. I told my close group of friends who are all*

 *doing the same kind of thing as me. And I think they looked at me, and thought,*

 *they were just as capable as he is [and we] are all doing the*

*H: [mmm]*

*M: same kind of stuff, and obviously, I turn up and say ‘yeah well I’ve got dyslexia*

 *today’ and they’re like ‘yeah, probably if I got tested, I’d*

 *have [it as well] and that’s [the end of it]*

*J: [yeah ] [mmm yeah]*

*G: [mmmm]*

*M: [and that’s] all I really got. And I haven’t told many people because,*

*J: [mmmmm ]*

*M: apart from people assessing your work [and] stuff like that. I haven’t*

*J: [mm]*

*M: told my PhD assessors, but, like, I don’t tell people, because the only thing you*

 *can do with that information is use it as an excuse for*

*H: yeah*

*M: I mean you (indicates N) say you use it as an excuse [but but ]*

‘I had people telling me they probably had dyslexia as well’ says M. This is different from the alternative ‘people told me they probably had dyslexia as well’. The former suggests that M was subject to the telling; the ‘had’ + noun + verb + ing format places the subject ‘I’ in a passive-type position during an experience (comparable to sentences like ‘I had my mother-in-law going on about wanting to be a grandma’, or ‘I had some idiot throw a glass at me’ which, despite the missing past-participle nevertheless suggest the subject had little choice but to bear the experience passively). The plural ‘people’ also suggests that the experience happened again and again. M then explains how his close friends ‘looked at me and thought, they were just as capable as he is and we are all doing the same stuff…..yeah, probably if I got tested, I’d have it as well…’. In M’s story, those who M might have expected support from were apparently cynical about M’s dyslexia. That M has gone to get tested and has acquired the label is not a good reflection on him here because it is implied use of such a label is an excuse to get extras, to cheat a bit. This identity is understandably not a desirable one – it demeans him, and lessens the value of any work done under the patronising protection of dyslexia. M immediately goes on to say he does not like telling people about the dyslexia: ‘but, like, I don’t tell people, because the only thing you can do with that information is use it as an excuse…’. N has already said that he does use the label ‘terribly’ and so M has potentially positioned N as a cheat by constructing use of the dyslexia label in this way as dishonourable. M acknowledges this in the final line of extract 59. He also goes some way to repair the situation in extract 60 and 61 where he agrees with N’s right to state dyslexia for his viva examination and positions him as honourable and genuine. Yet M immediately returns to his original self-positioning and positioning of dyslexic others in the second half of extract 61:

FG2, part of extract 61:

*M: … but when you’re, in a day to day situation, I tell the lecturer who’s like, two*

 *doors down, ‘oh, it turns out I’ve got dyslexia, wahay!’ [and ]*

*General: [hahaha]*

*M: and I don’t know what reaction I’ll get off him, [but he] doesn’t need to*

*J: [mmm ]*

*M: know that. The the only way that information will ever come up again is if I’m late*

 *with an assignment, and he’ll be well ‘that’s cos you’re dyslexic’ but it shouldn’t*

 *be an[excuse]. If something’s due in at a certain time or if I’m*

*J: [yeah ]*

*M: supposed to be at a meeting, and I’m not, it’s my fault. It’s*

 *not [the dyslexia’s] fault, you know?*

*J: [mmmm, yeh ]*

*M: So that’s why I generally don’t tell too many people, well, [it’s not] a*

*H: [mmm ]*

*M: [sec]ret. You know, I don’t mind telling people*

*H: [mm]*

M’s tone is sarcastic as he says ‘when…I tell the lecturer who’s like, two doors down, ‘oh, it turns out I’ve got dyslexia, wahay’…’ it positions the lecturer as someone who should not take this news seriously, and positions dyslexic others who do choose to tell their lecturers as a matter of course as using the label as an excuse. M appears to be saying ‘I am not like them’, ‘I am not needy or different and I don’t need any special treatment’. M again implies he does not like telling people about his label and that he bears responsibility, for example, if he hands an assignment in late: ‘It’s my fault, it’s not the dyslexia’s fault, you know?’. M’s discourse to some degree is threatening to some of the other participants because it questions the validity and acceptability of the positions they have been taking up in the conversation so far. As the conversation progresses participants divide into two ‘sides’ momentarily and the loudness levels noticeably increase. M and G’s contrasting constructions of their own dyslexic identities in this context are linked to very different descriptions of dyslexic people, dyslexia as a subject, and certain ways of being, doing and feeling. In the extract below, G draws on ‘disability’ and the law to support her standpoint, whereas M sticks to his positioning as not needy and not a cheat.

FG2, extract 125:

*M: but I’m completely against the idea of that, that even dyslexia would mean*

 *favoured marking, in any way. I think that’s absolutely dangerous. Because, one,*

 *it gives an incentive to go get dyslexia*

*J: mmm*

*M: you know, it gives an incentive to go get [tested and]*

*J: [mmmm ]*

*N: [yeah ]*

*G: [so how how] do you make it a level*

 *playing field?*

*M: support . The idea of support is, it allows you to compensate and adjust for your*

 *dyslexia [ you know, dyslexia is not an excuse for not being able to ]*

*G: [but not everything can be supported for and compensated for]*

*M: sorry?*

*G: like, not in some cases, the support isn’t. like you were saying as well, N was*

 *saying as well, [it’s not always compen]sated [it’s not always a level ]*

*M: [sure. I’m I’m not ] fully [compensated for my issues]*

*M: [with dyslexia]. But, you know, that’s my problem, and the support’s*

*G: [playing field]*

*M; not happening, doesn’t mean I get to give up trying to deal with that and get to get*

 *bonus points on the exam.*

*J: [yeah, you wouldn’t want to get that]*

*M: [I mean extra time and that is ] absolutely*

Although M constructs ‘support’ as an acceptable thing to take up, if it is ‘not happening’, it is his ‘problem’. G questions the fairness of M’s approach for people who still find they struggle and cannot compensate for their difficulties. Each of the contrasting positions constructs an opposing and potentially negative identity. Being ‘disabled’ and therefore entitled to measures which aim at equality stands in contrast to, and helps to produce, being ‘disablist’ (the position G finds for M). M (and J) in return positions G as a cheat, as someone who does not take responsibility for her own learning and who relies on her label to get extras.

N recognises the positioning as a ‘cheat’ in the reactions of his peers to his extra time in exams. Their reported response ‘mm um, if I stay that length of time but, it’s weird, people, like it comes out of people’s perceptions, like, ‘oh yeah I mean cos, you’re no worse than we are but you get fifteen minutes extra

time for your genius answers’ in FG2, extract 101, is very similar in positioning power to M’s sarcastic ‘wahay’ in extract 61. From this position, dyslexia means simply that someone gets concessions when they are apparently just as able as others. N says that in extract 101 he gets the described reaction when he takes his extra time, and that normally he does not use his extra time. It would be interesting to know if N makes a link between his decision to finish early and the potential or imagined reaction from his peers. For both M and N what people ‘think’ is constructed as important and potentially significant in making ‘choices’ about what adjustments to make use of.

This difference in construction of ethical acceptability of taking up adjustments in education persisted for a significant part of the conversation in FG2. I want to include a few more examples here which represent this on-going divide in positionings and behaviours. In the extract below M,J, and I fairly aggressively oppose G’s argument for differentiated marking for dyslexic students. G has told us a story of when she realised the stickers (indicating to a marker that the student has a specific learning difficulty) dyslexic students are allowed to place on assessed work do not mean the work will be marked differently, but only that greater care will be taken over the feedback comments given by tutors. In the extract below G positions herself and other dyslexic students as having the right not to be penalised for not remembering exact names and dates when referencing in exams. My immediate response (H) was to challenge this - ‘it’s fair if they ask you’ – which is immediately echoed by M and J. My relatively powerful position in this context may have been influential here. It may have made it easier for J and M to echo my relatively aggressive comment, and may have made it harder for G to continue with her justification. N is conciliatory. His ‘it’s difficult’ reflects the mood of the conversation here, which is becoming a little uncomfortable.

FG2, part of extract 114:

*G: [it] was after speaking to other er, X said that he was on the team that developed*

 *the actual sticker initiative, and that the idea was that he people would then be*

 *aware, but I think it’s feedback as well dyslexia is, but people might not know that*

 *if you get the names and dates wrong, or if you’re not including them, then, if you*

 *possibly could dyslexia [then it’s ]*

*H: [yeah but ] it’s fair if [they ask you ]*

*M: [yeah, you it’s ]*

*J: [that’s fair ]*

*N: [you could literally have] had a rotten*

 *day.*

*H: [well if if ] what if like another student um, um, what was I going to say?*

*N: [it’s difficult ]*

*G: [mmmm ]*

*H: um, if one of the competencies was to show that you knew of the main*

 *arguments and who made [those], probably, the date is less important, um*

*J: [mmm]*

*H: and you weren’t able to [show that]*

*G: [we’re not] talking about main arguments though,*

 *[this is] this is like referencing, it’s the idea of referencing everything but*

*H: [mmm]*

On the same topic of attaching dyslexia stickers to assessed work, J considers how the academic markers might feel. The idea that they might think ‘why should they get any special treatment?’ influences her choice to make use of the stickers at all.

FG2, extract 113:

*J: but I do sometimes think about putting them on, cos I think some people might be*

 *‘oh they’re dyslexic so I’ll take a [bit more time to read it’] or*

*General: [mmmm yeah ]*

*J: something, but I think other people might be the other way and think like’ oh well*

 *they’re here, and [why should] they get any special treatment?’*

*H: [mmm ]*

*J: sometimes I wonder whether I should I’d be [better] off not putting them [on]*

*M: [mmm]*

In the subsequent extracts (below) G continues to resist the ‘cheat’ position with reference to dyslexia as a disability and to disability law. It adds weight to her position here. Higher levels of adjustment for dyslexic students? ‘[T]hat’s the whole point of the disability and the equality act’ she says. When I ask J ‘ok, what’s your reaction to that?’ it is not a neutral question. J already heard me position myself as doubtful of the need for this degree of adjustment, and the question itself invites opposition. I am not setting J up to agree with G here. Not only is J’s choice in response influenced by my question and power in this situation, J may also not have wanted to break the allegiances she has co-constructed with me and M in very recent parts of the conversation. Therefore, on reflection, J is not free to wholeheartedly agree with G. J’s positioning of herself as someone who is not needy, who is hardworking, who does not take advantage, and is not a ‘cheat’ firmly places G again as a ‘cheat’ and also as ‘lazy’ (see penultimate line). She attempts to repair the situation at the end in saying ‘but then that’s the thing, everyone’s everyone’s affected differently.’

For this period in the conversation there is a tension in the group. Participants began by being careful not to be overly extreme or to cause offense; however, I felt that once subtle allegiances had been formed, it became more acceptable to oppose G. In some ways opposition to the positionings which ultimately facilitate more support and more significant adjustments for dyslexic people is surprising. I would have expected positions of being ‘entitled’ to be dominant in a group of dyslexic students and a dyslexia tutor, yet this was not so. I am also a little surprised at my own role here. I think my own positioning of dyslexic students as not entitled to certain adjustments was influenced somewhat by my perception of M’s high academic standards with which I wanted to be associated. The knowledge in the group that M and N were both studying for their PhDs also helped to construct their status in the group, and perhaps made it harder to resist their positionings.

FG2, extracts 115 and 116:

*H: [and do you feel there should be ] um a higher level of*

*H: adjustment, I suppose, for this kind of [thing?]*

*G: [I think] where there is very very definitely*

 *something that is specifically dyslexia, that is causing the problem, then yes,*

 *because that’s the whole point of the [disability] and the equality act, that if there’s*

 *something that has been diagnosed that causes you to respond differently to other*

 *people, that the disability and the equal well the equality act, breaks that down*

*H: ok. What’s your reactions to that?*

*J: I dunno I do kind of struggle with names and dates, but I just I er write them all*

 *down and I try and write essay pans out and I kind of remember um the names*

 *and dates tied to like a little quote or an idea, so I know that they said that and I*

 *literally have to write both spend like an hour on one little essay and then so it*

 *might be like 12 names and dates to remember and and I just keep constantly*

 *writing them out so I remember them, but it does work ,so*

*H: so do you think it would be fairer if*

*J: If I didn’t have to?*

*H: yeah, or if your [stickers]*

*J: [ I think I] I can do it, so then I should er um [maybe] I would*

*M: [mmm ]*

*J: just be being lazy, but then that’s the thing, everyone’s everyone’s affected*

 *Differently.*

G tries yet again to counter positionings of dyslexic people as unentitled and

potential cheats produced by R in the extracts below. He compared dyslexia to Down’s Syndrome, implying that if dyslexic students are not capable of fulfilling the requirements of a course, then they can’t do it; ‘simple as that’ says R and in saying so constructs this position as obvious, straightforward, incontrovertible; ‘I don’t expect allowances’ positions having ‘allowances’ as patronising . I felt R was saying something like ‘I don’t expect anyone to pat me on the head and give me a head start just because I’m dyslexic’. The meaning G appears to attach to ‘allowances’ is quite different; for her these are ‘reasonable adjustments’ (as per the law) and lead to greater equality. R’s ‘frankly’ spoken before he makes his controversial point, arguably shows an awareness of the potentially unflattering position he is offering to G. It implies R is just being honest and direct, and places R in a favourable light to counter the possibility his coming comments will make him seem unkind

FG2, part of extracts 122 and 123:

*R: erm I can’t think of any exams or coursework where I’ve been particularly*

 *disadvantaged by dyslexia. Erm. Frankly, I wouldn’t expect to be marked any*

 *more generously than anyone else on the basis of what I have. I mean if someone*

 *was er had Down’s Syndrome and they weren’t capable of doing a history degree*

 *or a biology degree then they can’t. Simple as that.*

*H: mmmm*

*R: I don’t expect allowances*

*G: [that’s what the equality act] is. That’s the point though.*

*M: [and I think it’s er]*

*H: [errrrrr. I ]*

*J: [hmmmmm ]*

R continues to position himself as an independent non-cheater a few extracts on from the one above. This time he is supported by M who takes up his medical-doctor parallel. R and M in this extract are very damning of the idea of adjustments. They not only imply they do not make use of adjustments themselves but condemn others for doing so. The sense was that G was battling here, and knowledge of the law and ideas of social justice were weapons for her. I will talk more about the presence and influence of ideology in some of these extracts in the next main section of the study.

FG2, part of extract 128:

*H: …you were saying that you didn’t want anyone to make any adjustments for you.*

 *Is that right?*

*R: yeah. I consider a degree a bit like becoming a medical doctor. If you’re, if you*

 *don’t have that standard, I don’t see how I should qualify.*

*H: ok.*

*G: but, becoming a medical doctor, you can still have allowances if*

 *they are reasonable adjustments, because that’s the whole point of*

 *reasonable adjustments. Someone who’s a doctor, the equality act says*

 *that that doctor gets [reasonable adjustments in their job].*

*M: [but that’s, my wife is ] a doctor, and you*

 *know, if you’re not good enough*

*J: mmm*

*M: If you kill patients because you’re [not] good enough, noone’s gonna go*

*H: [mm]*

*M: oh [they had dyslexia and ]*

*G: [but that’s not a reasonable] adjustment*

***‘****Being disabled’*

Being disabled or not being disabled were positions offered and taken up much more in FG2 than FG1. Being disabled had very different meanings in these conversations. It was constructed at times as being something tragic which happened to other people. No participants took up this label for themselves, but sometimes it was offered as a position for other dyslexic people, or for people who were ‘severely disabled’. This position was linked to being helpless and reliant on others, being an object of pity. Most of the time, participants constructed themselves in opposition to this way of being, as ‘not like them’. On the other hand there was recognition, particularly by G in FG2 that disability does not have to be tragic. G and a few others positioned themselves as disabled from a perspective of disability as a fluid social construct, and as a means to social justice. This positioning was associated with feelings of pride in the label, entitlement; being prepared to fight for rights (e.g. in the workplace), not being ashamed of differences, and a deeper recognition of and empathy for other people in the ‘disabled’ category. For me as a part of these conversations, this version of being disabled was overwhelmingly positive.

I want to look first at a few extracts in which participants from each focus group positioned themselves as ‘not like them’; that is, either as not at all disabled, or not nearly as disabled as people who are *really* disabled. Here is B comparing herself to the ‘severely disabled’ people with whom she has worked. In constructing disability only as something severe that happens to other people, the idea that being dyslexic is disabling is incomprehensible. It’s an understandable position to take; it could quite easily be taken as indulgent to give oneself the same label as people who need 24-hour care.

FG1, extract 135:

*B: yeah, I don’t think it’s a, like, especially from working with severely disabled*

 *people, like um, I’m definitely not disabled. I mean like, I have life easy compared*

 *to [ er ]*

*H: [compared to them, yeah ]*

*B: peo[ple ] with those [disabilities]*

*D: [mm]*

*H: [disabilities] yeh.*

In the extract below, C’s construction of disability as something to do with ‘severe’ physical limitation (a missing arm) interferes with her initial acceptance of a disability position. ‘I’m disabled’ turns to ‘not disabled’, ‘cos it’s not severe’. Being disabled is reserved only for those ‘other’ people. It is a confusing way of being: in law dyslexia is a disability, but popular ideas of disability still revolve around a tragic figure in a wheelchair (though films like ‘Inside I’m Dancing’ are exceptions to this). Most people, disabled or not, might want to avoid being pitied and patronised. For C in the extract below, and B in the extract above, being ‘disabled’ is not a socially acceptable position. By disassociating themselves from the label, it is possible that these students would avoid taking adjustments and funding which rely on proclamation of disability.

FG1, extract 132:

*H: Ok. Thank you.*

*C: I’m the same. Erm, I’m disabled. But I think I would class it as a learning difficulty.*

 *I mean like, not disabled, cos it’s not severe. Like it’s not,*

*D: mmm.*

*C: like that severe and I don’t think it should be, like, when I applied for*

*H: mmm*

*C: these jobs and they were like ‘are you disabled’ and I was like ‘yeah, I am’, but I*

 *haven’t got a missing arm or anything, [or like], it’s not really that severe*

*D: [mmm]*

*H: mmm*

*C: It’s more like a learning difficulty. [yeah, so]*

*H: [yeah ]*

*A: [mmm ]*

In the extract below, J (FG2) has similar concerns to B and C above in calling herself disabled. Positioning herself as not disabled means that she does not tick the ‘disabled box’ on job applications. This has implications for her future employment experience because it may mean the employer will not have put into place the obligatory ‘reasonable adjustments’. It is also interesting that, while J rejects the disability position for herself, she worries that her employer may feel that she ‘should have ticked that box’. She therefore does not appear to feel she can outright reject the position of ‘being disabled’. J says ‘I hate it’ in the first line, and M says ‘I feel like that’. One conclusion here is that being unclear about one’s association with ‘being disabled’ is linked to a feeling of anguish about whether or not to declare one’s dyslexia label in certain situations. This stands in stark contrast to G’s positioning as disabled and proud.

FG2, part of extract 14:

*J: [and also] I hate it when you have a job application where you have*

 *to say whether you’re [disabled ]or not. And I say [‘no’ cos] they*

*N: [disabled]*

*M: [no, yeah]*

*J: say like ‘in your opinion ‘do you [think?’ and I don’t! ]*

*M: [think. Yeah ]*

*N: [yeah hmmm ]*

*J: [I know if I then told them] at a later date ‘ Oh I’ve got dyslexia’, they’d be*

*M: [I feel like that ]*

*J: like ‘ you probably should have ticked that box’*

*H: yeah*

*J: [mmm]*

J and M are joined by T in deciding not to declare their dyslexia on job applications. T gives a similar reason to J, B and C; that is, that disability is too serious a thing to be applied to them. Yet T is inconsistent in this position. In another part of the conversation T does take up the position of being disabled, but only in the education environment (compare extracts 40 and 29, below):

FG2, extract 40:

*H: have you, do you, have you applied for jobs yet?*

*T: I have, and I don’t tick the box, no.*

*H: is there a reason?*

*T: I dunno. I think that I would perceive a disability as a more serious thing. I mean,*

 *this is very personal, and I wouldn’t judge on anyone [else, but]*

*H: [yeah ]*

*T: for me, I wouldn’t perceive my needs as a disability.*

*H: mm, ok.*

FG2, extract 29:

*H: How about you?*

*T: well, what I would say is that, in the education system, I would label myself as*

 *having some sort of disability, because it affects my performance in that area. But*

 *in the the big wide world, and in the work environment, I can’t imagine it having*

 *such a [ det]rimental effect on [me ] that it would cause me*

*J: [mm] [mm ]*

*T: to label myself as dyslexic.*

*J: mmm yeah.*

G is the only person who thoroughly challenges the positionings of other participants as not disabled. She embraces ‘being disabled’ wholeheartedly, and vehemently rejects the idea of being disabled as something to be pitied and applied only to ‘those other people’. Below I include two extracts which epitomise her reaction to the non-disabled way of being. The contrast between M and G’s positionings is again the focus here and a sense of conflict is produced similar to that felt in the extracts involving M and G in the ‘being a fraud/ imposter’ section above. We start by listening to M talk about ‘the thing’ with ‘disabled’ which is implicitly supported by me (H):

FG 2, extract 26:

*M: I think the thing with ‘disabled’ that many people have, is that there doesn’t seem*

 *to be much grey area in the disabled. It’s always [‘are you disabled] or*

*H: [you are disabled ] or*

*J: [mmmmmmmmm ]*

*M: [are you not?’ It’s ] probably the same, Like if I go round saying*

*H: [you’re not , yeah I]*

*M: ‘yeah I’m disabled’ then I’m gonna feel [bad ] if there’s someone in a*

*J: [mmm]*

*M: wheelchair by me, because they’re disabled, I’m just not very good at*

 *deconstructing words, and I’m quite a slow reader,[ but]*

*G: [but]*

*G: they might think they [have just as much] a wide and full [experience]*

*M: [WELL, yeah ] [well yeah, ]*

*G: [as you do, er I ] I actually think that might be quite offensive, they might*

*M: [absolutely, ]*

*H: [yeah ]*

*G: really, they might read and [write really well] and [have] this wonderful*

*M: [YEAH yeah ] [mm ]*

*J: [yeah]*

*G: [mental] life where. People say well ‘dyslexia’s [not disabled], but, like I am’*

*J: [yeah! ]*

*M: [yeah hhh ]*

*H: yeah, so nobody really likes it, then?*

I felt that the above extract was fascinating because M really spelled out how he felt about calling himself disabled: ‘Like if I go round saying “yeah, I’m disabled”, then I’m gonna feel bad if there’s someone in a wheelchair beside me, because they’re disabled. I’m just not very good at deconstructing words’. ‘[T]hey’re’, in its emphasis here, positions M as not disabled. His non-disability is produced by the other’s disability. The wheelchair is constructed as representative of the ‘ideal’ disability, and M is overt in the assumption that someone in a wheelchair is far worse off than him. So much so that he says he feels ‘bad’, guilty, for appropriating the disabled label in front of such a tragic someone. The other that he constructs is only understood in terms of his wheelchair; with no other characteristics or abilities. G is direct in her rejection of M’s construction. Her confidence in a ‘disabled’ identity means she is able to confront M with a very different and quite humbling perspective upon what he has just said. She confronts M with the idea that his idea of disability is potentially offensive as well as being unfounded.

G returns to the disability issue in extract 41 sometime later in the conversation. She is reacting to several of the participants’ descriptions of disability as something physical and severe. She very persuasively gets to the nub of her discomfort with these constructions. In this instance I support and expand upon what G has said, even though I support contrasting positions at other points in the conversation.

FG2, extract 41:

*G: It’s just made me think, and it’s really really weird, cos I’ve thought there, I think*

 *it’s bad that there’s still a stigma against disabilities, and part of it is caused by*

 *people who think a disability has to be serious*

*J: mmm*

*G: a disability has to be something like in a wheelchair*

*H: hmmm*

*G: like, there’s this view of disability that I think is really malfunctional, really*

*H: I think if you don’t have a label of disability, and you don’t think that you know*

 *anyone that does, it’s something that happens to other people who are far, you*

 *know who have [to have] the most extreme help, and, yeah*

*G: [mmm ]*

*H: and like, the symbol is a wheelchair [isn’t it? ] and that’s what you*

*G: [yeah hh]*

*G: yeah.*

*H: associate it with.*

*G: mmm*

In the extract above G is overtly critical of previous constructions of disability. She is placing blame for the ‘malfunctional’ understanding upon the heads of people, including some of the present participants, who ‘think a disability has to be serious’. The strength of her statement allows me to support G’s construction of some people as ignorant. I do not think I would have done this as comfortably had G not presented this perspective so confidently. The argument G makes indirectly positions M, T and R and to a degree J and me as ignorant; the result for me here is to feel a little ashamed of my own complicity in previously positioning G as taking advantage of the label and having too great a sense of entitlement.

G is consistent in positioning herself as disabled and entitled. Very early on in the conversation G is outright in her self-positioning (see extract 15 below); we also see J positioning herself in opposition at this stage – ‘see, I don’t’. G is also explicit in stating the use to her of the disabled label: ‘it’s a psychological protection’. Being disabled, for G in this extract seems to be something which protects her from the alternative constructions. In the final line, G recognises J’s opposition when she says ‘but if it feels like a bad label’. It would not be politically or socially appropriate for J to say ‘being disabled’ was a bad label because that would be demeaning to people to whom the label was attached, yet this is the position G suggests J is speaking from.

FG2, part of extract 15:

*G: and it just means that there are things in your day-to-day life that you are less*

 *able to do than people [without ]your condition]*

*J: [mmmm ]mmmm ]*

*H: [mmmm]*

*G: so to me, dyslexia is disabled. [there are] things in it, in everyday life, there*

*H: [mmm ]*

*J: [mmm ]*

*G: are things that I am less able to do because of my condition*

*H: mmm*

*J: see I [don’t]*

*G: [so it ] doesn’t feel [like] a bad label, I guess because it’s a*

*H: [yeh]*

*G: psychological protection*

*J: mmm*

*H: yeh*

*G: but if it feels like a bad label?*

There were many extracts in which understandings of disability and dyslexia were contested, and I will return to a selection of these when attending to the ideology and wider discourses in the next main section of this project. For now, I want to finish the discussion of disabled/ not-disabled positionings with a long extract in which G, N, T, M and J are once again conflicting on ideas of disability, entitlement and fairness. For N and G, positioning themselves and dyslexic others as disabled allows them to defend their right to approach their employer to make their case for a reasonable adjustment (in this case an extension to a deadline). M and J, positioning themselves as not-disabled, are uncomfortable with the idea of asking an employer for more time. This is an interesting extract because it is an example of how the individuals’ relatively consistent positionings throughout the conversation are linked to certain ways of doing and feeling which are at times contradictory.

FG2, extract 30:

*N: [urgh ]*

*T: [I, sorry]*

*N: sorry. I disagree with that, if you’ve got time constraints.*

*J: yeah*

*N: If you’ve got a job with time constraints, Y wants a certain job done by x time and*

 *date etcetera,*

*T: mmmm*

*H: mmm*

*N: You may not physically be possible to get it to that date, so, you have to*

 *negotiate, you have to go to your boss and say, ‘you’ve asked me to do this task*

 *in this time’ you’re gonna have to say ‘look, my dyslexia means that I am a little*

 *bit slower at reading, little bit slower at writing. [is ] there any leeway*

*H: [mm]*

*N: on this?’*

*H: yeah. Yeah but, yeah.*

*G: so [you’d have to take] notes]*

*H: [yeah so if you ]*

*M: [but, surely ], regardless of if you have dyslexia or not,*

*M: everyone’s going to come face-to-face with a deadline [they ] can’t meet.*

*J: [mmm]*

*M: like, they could be the quickest, smartest, brightest person on the planet, and still*

 *end up having a deadline you can’t meet. You can still go to your boss and say ‘I*

 *don’t think’*

*G: but that’s just about time management.*

*M: well it [is, but it’s surely ] [having dyslexia ]*

*G: [like if that’s just about time-management, then] [it’s just expectation]*

*M: you just have to be very good at time-management.*

*N: not necessarily, you know, you’re slower at reading*

*G: mmm*

*N: you know, how can you make time for that? If you’ve only got x amount of time for*

 *that, [it, you know, exactly ]*

*G: [it depends on the task] It depends upon the organisation. They have to*

 *understand that if someone’s dyslexic it might take them longer and it’s*

 *reasonable to allow them [to have longer ]*

*J: [I’d feel, I wouldn’t] want to ask, I wouldn’t want to say*

 *that to my boss. I wouldn’t want to say ‘can you give me extra time because I’m*

 *dyslexic?’ In an academic environment, I wouldn’t have a problem with it,*

*M: mm*

*J: but, I don’t know why, but I wouldn’t [want to feel ]*

*G: [cos there’s stigma]*

*J: yeah. And I wouldn’t want them to think I was incapable, or something like*

 *[that ] yeah.*

*H: [yeah]*

*N: It’ll all come down to the boss you’re working for*

*J: yeah*

*N: so, I mean.*

There is an apparent overlap in the above extract between not wanting to state dyslexia as a reason for requesting extra time because of how this might be perceived, and not considering this a fair request at all. For J the concern is to do with how her imagined boss would perceive her (‘wouldn’t want them to think I was incapable’); while for M, there is a doubt about whether or not it would be fair to ask for extra time at all on the grounds of dyslexia, with the implication that everyone sometimes has deadlines they can’t meet. N, in this case, argues against M, with his point that not being able to meet a deadline may not be just to do with time management, but also to do with slow reading speed (which non-dyslexic people may not have). This is a conversation which pushes back and forth between ideas of what is fair or unfair: J and N cross the boundary between the two and appear unsure about what they would do in the described situation; however, G and M take up more confident and opposing positions which more clearly open up particular potential actions and identities for them.

 *‘Being deficient/ limited’*

I included within ‘being deficient or limited’ those taken or offered positions which inferred being ‘wrong’ in some way: not being able to do something, being a bit ‘rubbish’, being inadequate. These kinds of positionings were sometimes connected to ‘being disabled’ but normally only in those cases where disability was constructed as an individual, biological or psychological problem. Where disability was presented as a social construction, then the deficit was more often placed in the environment. In many ways, dyslexia is invisible: the difficulties associated with it are not easy to observe outside particular contexts. We have also heard participants construct disability as something ‘serious’, and normally physical. In this sense then, it is understandable that emphasis upon real and significant individual deficiencies may be considered necessary to legitimise the label, and to justify take up of reasonable adjustments. This position was linked to feelings of vindication, but also of frustration, perplexity, fear and inadequacy; it was linked also to struggling on alone, and self-blame.

Dyslexia diagnostic assessments were referred to a number of times as evidence of individual deficiency. Here is D talking about his test results:

FG1, extract 14:

*D: erm. I don’t know. Cos I think, cos I’ve read, I was able to read my own Ed psych*

 *report that time, and understand what it meant, and like. so, some things um, were*

 *quite enlightening, like I, one of the things that was the difference between like*

 *your articulation, and like, your ability [to] pro[cess]?*

*H: [yuh] [yeah]*

*D: your working [memory]*

*H: [yeh ] hmm*

*D: Mine said it was like the same level as like five percent of people*

*H: yeh.*

*D: [that difference was so huge]*

*H: [yeh yeh yeh yeh ]*

*D: and that was like, was kind of like, kind of explains a lot, at at the same time as*

 *quite, like, [wow]*

D reflects upon the ‘enlightening’ experience of getting his results; a moment when he realised the ‘truth’ of his deficiency. He begins by telling us ‘I was able to read my own Ed psych report…and understand what it meant’. This seems an odd thing to say, unless being able to read one’s report is not always possible for whatever reason. My interpretation here is that he is reminding us of the inaccessibility of many diagnostic reports for the general public. By being able to understand what it means, D is aligning himself with the psychologist: he ‘gets’ the language and the significance of the information he has been given. D realises that his working memory ability is at the fifth percentile; that is, his working memory is less good than that of ninety-five per cent of the (measured) population of his age. ‘[T]hat was like, was kind of like, kind of explains a lot…’ says D. This ‘truth’ presented to him is woven into his story of himself in this moment and it helps him to understand why he has experienced the problems he has. While the ‘knowledge’ of such deficit may legitimise the take up of ‘dyslexia’ as part of one’s self, the statistical representation of dyslexia by a scientific expert also arguably contributes to the reification of dyslexia as an individual, internal problem: ‘look’ one might say ‘here are my results written down, empirically founded, irrefutable’.

For G in the extract below getting a ‘real diagnosis’ is constructed as very meaningful, just as with D in the extract above. ‘He’ we understand to be the educational psychologist who gave G the diagnosis:

FG2, extract 7:

*G: He also told me that I might have ADHD, [which I’ve] found out isn’t*

*H: [Oh? ]*

*G: the case, hahaha. But then I finally got a real diagnosis, with like, the full report*

 *and everything.*

*H: yeah*

*G: when I came to [uni ]versity, that was the first time that I actually saw*

*H: [yeh]*

*G: written down what my dyslexia [actual]ly is, and it’s very specifically I think*

*H: [mmm]*

*G: with nonsense words and with my writing [speed] and it’s*

*H: [yeah ] yeah*

*G: really low. It’s like special needs, practically. It’s seventieth*

 *[it’s ]*

*H: [yeh ]*

I find G’s narrative very telling of the emphasis people place upon the written word as truth (Ong, 2002). ‘I finally got a real diagnosis, with like, the full report and everything’ says G, with vocal stress upon ‘real’ and ‘full’; ‘that was the first time that I actually saw written down what my dyslexia actually is’. The ‘written down’ is connected to the understanding of the ‘actual’, the implication being that before it was written down, its actuality was less secure. G then goes on to explain the specifics of the deficit she was presented with, including a writing speed that is ‘practically special needs’. However, as for D in the extract discussed above, the ‘knowledge’ of deficiency is not presented as a personal blow, but almost the opposite: it is something to tell me and the other participants openly, perhaps because it bolsters the fact of ‘their’ dyslexia. In both extracts, the psychologist’s written word is given more weight than G or D’s personal experience of difficulties and strengths.

However, being told by an educational psychologist that some of your abilities are way below average, unsurprisingly, is not automatically positively interpreted. J in FG2, extract 8, made a sad face while saying ‘oowh’ (downward followed by upward intonation, the expression one imagines a child makes when they have been told they cannot have any ice cream) after describing being told that her scores for writing speed were so low that she should not be at university. G responds by suggesting that if she had been told this, ‘I probably would have left’, which I feel is a very understandable reaction. If one is told by someone in a position of authority and respect that one’s ability in a crucial academic skill is so dreadful, feeling upset and demotivated to continue one’s studies would not be a surprising reaction.

FG2, extract 8:

*J: [I remember wh]en I had my test, they said like, my logic and my ability was like*

*way above average, but my reading and my writing speed, I shouldn’t be at uni*

*[and] I remember thinking, ‘owh’ hhh [hhhhhhhh]*

*G: [yeh]*

*General: [hhhhhhhh]*

*H: and sometimes, I guess that is quite [shocking ]*

*J: [mmm yeah ]*

*G: luckily they did]n’t put it like that*

*G: [other]wise I probably would have [left, hhhhhhh]*

*J: [yeah] [hhhhhh ]*

*H: [hhhhhhh*

So far, I have suggested that positioning oneself as limited or deficient in some way has served in these conversations both to justify the realness of one’s dyslexia, but also to situate dyslexia firmly inside the person, which for J, appeared to be a bit disappointing (extract above). In situating the dyslexia and the deficiency inside themselves, participants in both groups frequently focused on their brains; that is, the brain was often put forward as the location of the problem; for example ‘I dunno I know it’s just like your brain is just different from like normal people’(C, FG1, in extract 61). However, there seemed to be uncertainty about what exactly was going wrong in the brain, and in these cases, metaphor was employed, with an amount of humour. Here is B positioning herself and other dyslexic people using the computer metaphor of mind.

FG1, part of extract 55:

*H: what about you B?*

*B: erm, when I describe it to people, when you were saying about the processes, like*

*a computer with this massive memory and a really small RAM*

*Hhh [hahahahaha]*

*All: [HAHAHHAHA]*

B’s computer-mind with an inferior RAM is the idea she says she used to describe dyslexia to other people. Below R (FG1) uses a race-running metaphor to compare the brain signal speed of dyslexic, compared to non-dyslexic people:

FG1, extract 68:

*R: and it’s just like a sl, the brain signals, like, other people’s are kind of*

*sprint[ing ] while yours are [kind of slogging along]*

*C: [yeah] [hahahaha ]*

*D: [mm ] [hahahaha ]*

*H: [haha ]*

*R: [HAHAHAHAHA] so they’re going to get there in the end, it’s just*

*C: [hahahahahahah]*

*A: [huhu ]*

*B: [hahahaha ]*

*D: [hahaahaha ]*

*H: [hahaha ] yes, but takes a bit longer*

As far as I know, there is no evidence to suggest that dyslexic people have generally slower processes of electro-chemical activation between neurons, and I doubt this is what R was implying.The metaphor helps R to construct a feeling of being dyslexic; it is funny, and self-deprecating, but also reminiscent of the Hare and the Tortoise (in which the slogging tortoise finally wins out).

I want to return to the idea of deficient working memory and dyslexia, just briefly, before I continue with the other positionings in this group. Working memory is understood as a capacity, which educational psychologists claim to be able to measure using psychometric tests. It is one ‘ability’ which has been very closely connected to ‘intelligence’ (Jensen, 2002) and when found to be significantly lowered when compared to scores for verbal or performance IQ is taken as a key indicator of dyslexia. In the extract below, N narrates for us his struggle with how to deal with a conference presentation and finally justifies his decision to read directly from his text. He draws on an idea of being working-memory deficient to rationalise his decision. I feel that this exemplifies a link between positioning and action.

FG2, extract 52:

*N: when I, it’s weird, cos I’ve just been to an international conference and delivered a*

*paper on my work, but I had a script, basically. I wrote that presentation, I’d read it*

*twice a day for several weeks, and could I remember it? No!*

*General: hahahahaha*

*N: and so I had to use my script, and I thought, well this is just weird, cos, when I*

*worked at Next, I used to be a training instructor, and I had to trade to people, and*

*I had to do all the different jobs, I gave presentations to people every week,*

*[different people] [properly ] but I don’t know if that’s just*

*H: [yeah yeah ] [yeah yeah]*

*J: [yeah ]*

*N: a matter of time [cos I’d done the job for so long that I knew]*

*General: [yeah mmmmm yeah yeah yeah ]*

*N: what I was [on about] so, at this conference I had to say ‘you’re*

*General: [mm yeah]*

*N: gonna have to bear with me, I’m gonna read the script because I’m dyslexic*

*H: so you actually said [ that? You]*

*N: [yeah, well ] I actually, you know, the German person or the*

*Chinese person that actually use their script, and I thought, well, bugger it, I’m*

*gonna do it, and I know I probably shouldn’t, and I felt a little bit bad but I thought,*

*well, ‘NO’ ‘my working memory’s not as good’, cos I was looking at this thinking*

*[why] can’t I remem[ber] this? [why?], and what, what, and I’m*

*H:[yeh] [yeh] [yeh ]*

*N: looking through all this stuff on dys[lexia] and [mem]ory and I think ah! It*

*H: [yeah] [yeh ]*

*N: must be working [mem]ory, ‘n that’s [what I’m really bad with ]*

*H: [yeh ] [yeah yeh, and it’s interesting really]*

*N: and I know I’ve got really bad short-term memory as [well, [so ]*

*H: [yes, [it’s ]*

The guilt that N says he felt – ‘I know I probably shouldn’t, and I felt a little bit bad’ – is dealt with by drawing on the construction of dyslexia as a working memory deficiency, a construction he uses to position himself in this instance as justified in reading directly from his paper: ‘but I thought, well, “NO. my working memory is not as good”’ says N, and explains how this is something he has read and identified with. So in this story, positioning oneself as being working-memory deficient is a productive one; nevertheless, an alternative is imaginable. It would have been conceivable to take up a position as ‘disabled by the social environment’, and in doing so to place the problem outside himself. The guilt in relying upon his text may have been more thoroughly dismissed, and there may also have been more space for N to have considered a right to more radical adjustments.

Another relatively well- published construct is the automatisation-deficit hypothesis (Nicolson, 2008, see discussion in chapter 1) which situates the problem in the cerebellum. In this extract G very directly tells us how this hypothesis has helped her to make sense of her way of doing things in a more general sense:

FG2, extract 74:

*G: cos even I’ve realised things like chopping fruit and chopping vegetables*

 *[just anything] anything that other people do automatically*

*H: [yeah, oh ]*

*G: and it was Rod Nicolson’s lecture that just [made me go ]*

*H: [mm that’s really interes]ting*

*G: ‘that’s it!’ I just don’t I’m not very good at becoming automatic at stuff*

This construction of dyslexia is returned to repeatedly by G in this conversation. It is compatible with her positioning as intelligent (i.e. having a high IQ) and, as I discussed in the section on ‘being intelligent/able’, also invites admiration for G’s related ability to think her way through things (see the final line in the extract below). Arguably for G, Nicolson’s ideas are useful because they allow her to maintain, or even reinforce, the desirable aspects of her academic identity while constituting a story to explain potentially undesirable characteristics. ‘I’m a great believer in’ is a strong social statement which constructs the idea of faith. G is not taking this position lightly, she is presenting herself as being the figure who epitomises this psychological theory and as someone with an expert’s grasp.

FG2, extract 67:

*G: I’m a great believer in Rod Nicolson’s cerebellar deficit hypo[thesis]*

*H: [hhhh ] can you just*

*explain what it is?*

*G: pardon?*

*H: do you want to just explain a bit [about]*

*G: [so it’s] the part of your brain that kind of sits*

*down here, and um, and you do a lot of your learning in your cerebellar, and we it’s*

*things like procedural memory, so it’s learning how to do things, and to do with*

*automaticity, so doing things automatically, so er, one of the reasons it’s thought it*

*might be dyslexia is a lot of problems with dyslexia are about doing things*

*automatically, so you know, things like, tying your shoelace, telling left from right,*

*learning to read, learning to write, are all things, reading more so than learning to*

*write, but that to some extent are automatic. Things that in the general population,*

*you don’t have to think about doing them, you just automatically do them, If you try*

*to think about them, you can’t do them. And the thing about the cerebellar deficit is*

*that there’s a problem with the cerebellum, so you’ve got a problem in learning how*

*to do things automatically, and maybe it’s just one possible route of dyslexia and*

*there are others, but per, especially in people like yourself, where you generally*

*are a high achiever, and you’ve got a very high IQ, the idea is that your*

*cerebellum, the front thinking bit of your head, learns how to do things, so instead*

*of doing it automatically with your cerebellum, like people without dyslexia, you*

*have to [kind of use, like thinking ]*

*J: [have to use a different part of our brain]*

*G: you have to like, think your way through it.*

As in many other instances in FG2, it is M who positions himself in opposition to G here: his reaction to the position of being automaticity deficient - **‘**I’m not even a little bit convinced. But [you know]’ (in extract 68, following the one above).

G’s take up of a deficient position and M’s contrasting position is present again in extract 83 below. M says that even if there is an organic cause of dyslexia, knowing what it is will not change anything; G’s response to this implies that ‘curing’ dyslexia would be desirable, something J rejects.

FG2, extract 83:

*M: if some, if someone were to say to me exactly what the chemical electrical*

*chemical properties in my brain that’s causing my dyslexia or your dyslexia, then*

*and but we just understand that there’s no cure for it, I mean would that change*

*anything? [to it does it, because there]*

*G: [it brings us closer to cures] and understanding gets*

*G: [you closer to]*

*J: [I don’t think ] I’d wanna be cur[ed ]*

*M: [no! ] that’s what [I MEAN, like ]*

*N: [yeh ] [haha YEAH ]*

*General: [hhhhh yuh ]*

*G: [I mean closer]*

*G: to ways [to ] manage [it ]*

*J: [hmm] [but I think], hmmmm*

Arguably, G’s construction of dyslexia as a discrete brain dysfunction allows her to position herself as someone who would be a better version of herself if only the dyslexia could be removed. Getting rid of dyslexia therefore becomes desirable for G; but for J, who has constructed dyslexia as a positive part of her identity in other parts of the conversation, curing or removing the dyslexia is not attractive.

Being deficient or limited was a position commonly taken up by participants throughout the focus group conversations; however, it was often only momentary. Other positionings superseded these much of the time.

*‘Being stupid’*

‘Being stupid’ could easily have been included within the ‘being deficient/ limited’ family of positionings, but I have placed it separately for two reasons. Firstly, ‘being stupid’ is constructed in both conversations as something far worse than experiencing specific difficulties in areas such as literacy or memory; it is something you might be accused of if you do not have the dyslexia label (see M, FG2 in the final part of extract 70). Secondly, there were only two instances in the two conversations where a participant came close to taking up a ‘being stupid’ position (N, FG2, extract 151 and A, FG1, extract 9). The ‘being stupid’ position was strongly rejected by participants almost every time it was constructed. ‘Being stupid’ was often a position that participants had been offered by someone in their past experience: a friend or family member or colleague had implied a connection between dyslexia and stupidity which the participant had fought against. There are a couple of exceptions to this, but on the whole ‘being dyslexic’ appeared to offer some protection against accusations of stupidity. This idea of dyslexia as intelligence has already been discussed in the first section of this analysis ‘being intelligent/ able’, but I would like to include a few examples here where participants position themselves as very much not stupid.

I begin below by looking at a few examples from the conversations in which participants talked about being made to feel stupid by other people. Below, S starts by telling us about his strength in oral language when he was at junior school – this is then contrasted with his difficulty with writing at secondary school. He frames himself as capable and intelligent before describing his weakness. He constructs the teacher as ignorant of his true ability and of dyslexia, and himself in contrast as genuine and entitled to help. At this stage in the conversation, everyone has shared the difficulties they experience as students in aspects of reading and writing, so it is likely that S feels more comfortable than he might have earlier on. The teacher as ignorant, and insensitive supports S’s construction of himself here as someone reasonable and mature, and someone who has the right to ask for and get help. His self-positioning as legitimate, and rejection of ‘being stupid’, is compatible with asking for help, in a way that being a survivor (another of S’s favoured positions) is not. The extract is below.

FG1, part of extract 158:

*S: and it used to be when I was younger when I was in junior school where it was*

*mostly like spoke, spoken components of language and I was really good at it, and*

*then when I went to, it came to uni, came to secondary school and it was like*

*written components and I was like really bad at it. And the teacher were like ‘no,*

*you are just being stupid, practice harder’ and I was like ‘no I really just can’t get*

*my head around the concept. I need some help’.*

In the next extract, I (H) offer up the ‘being stupid’ position to the group by roughly quoting the words of an MP via a news article. M firmly refuses this position by using humour, which the others in the group laugh along with. This is interesting because at other points in the conversation, M has positioned dyslexic people as using the label for unfair advantage, and himself as cynical about its ‘existence’; but even M draws the line at the implication that the dyslexia label is a cover for stupidity, possibly because this would bring his own intelligence into question.

FG2, part of extract 136:

*H: Ok there was one from an MP called XX who said something like, ‘dyslexia is the*

 *fault of the parents and is just an excuse for being stupid and ignorant and is a*

 *middle class kind of myth [and a professor ]*

*M: [wasn’t a tory, was he?] by any [chance?]*

*H: [yes ]*

*All: [hahaha ]*

*H: [NO! he was labour, he was labour]*

*M: [haha thought so, oh? ]*

*All: [hahahaha hhhhhh ]*

*H: [and the and the other]*

*M: [er, stereotyping hhh ]*

*All: [hhhhhhhh ]*

B and J both report similar reactions from friends to their potential identification as dyslexic; namely they were met with incredulity:

FG1, part of extract 40:

*B……. but telling my*

*H: yeah*

*B: friends at home, they were all very surprised, and erm, one of them was*

 *like erm, you can’t be dyslexic, you’re not stupid.*

FG2, part of extract 18:

*J: Like, people just assume you’re bad at spelling, maybe that’s the only thing, they*

 *just think ‘oh you’re bad at spelling’. Or maybe, that you’re a little bit stupid. Cos, I*

 *remember when I told one of my friends, or boyfriend or something, and he was*

 *like ‘you can’t be. You can’t be dyslexic.’ And I was like ‘well it’s not about being*

 *clever’. And just people find it hard to get their head around.*

Having listened to many dyslexic students telling me about getting ‘diagnosed’, it seems people do, indeed, find dyslexia ‘hard to get their head around’ especially when the label is given to people who appear to their peers and teachers to be doing fine. In these extracts, though, it was not necessarily that peers thought their friends must be stupid, in fact, and they had missed the evidence; but that they didn’t have the right, so to speak, to call themselves dyslexic when they were so academically capable. If academically successful students can be dyslexic, what does it imply about their less successful or equally successful peers? Arguably, people are inadvertently threatened by the identification of dyslexia in their friends and girl/boyfriends because it shifts their relationship. However they compared academically before, following an identification of dyslexia, a student’s past academic achievements take on a new glow. The A at A-level starts to look more impressive when achieved by a dyslexic student than when achieved by a student without an identification of SpLDs. Therefore, what might at first appear like a peer’s rejection of any suggestion of stupidity in their friend on grounds of loyalty and kindness, may also be an outcry at their own relative demotion on the local intellectual hierarchy. The reaction by peers as narrated by B and J in the extracts above are very common (in my experience) and are almost always met with indignation by the dyslexic person who defends their right to the label while rejecting the discourse of dyslexia as stupidity. What these students may be calling on in these stories is the identity of striver and survivor offered up by the individualising ideology of the American Dream (see chapter 5, part two). Announcements of being dyslexic in ideological climates which nurture comparison and competition potentially stir up tensions between peers which can be corrosive. In a social environment which prized collectivity, would the described peer reactions even be possible?

Whether or not dyslexic students experience incredulity from peers or face the possibility that people they know less well may assume they are ‘stupid’ upon learning they have the dyslexia label it is understandable that their identification may be something they wish to keep to themselves (see extract 55 below). On the other hand, if they are being positioned as ‘stupid’ in some way by someone who does not know they have the dyslexia label, then telling people they are dyslexic may be some protection against this accusation of inferiority, particularly when one has the academic record to confirm their ability. The positioning as ‘stupid’ may come from the dyslexic individual himself, and even in this case, the dyslexia label can be used for self-protection. Extract 146, FG1 is an example of this: here D says he will ‘mess up something’ and then value the label, presumably in offering him a more socially acceptable explanation than just being someone who keeps messing up (see below, FG1, extract 55, and also see a similar example in FG2, extract 56).

FG2, part of extract 55:

*J: didn’t want people to, I didn’t want family friends or whatever to, I don’t really know*

 *why, but I just didn’t want people to know, whereas now*

 *I feel [not really bothered] I would go up and tell peo[ple.]*

*H: [you’d tell mmm] [did]*

*H: you feel it reflected negatively on [you or something? ]*

*J: [yeah, I think maybe] I think I thought maybe*

 *people would think I was, I dunno, stupid or something.*

*H: yeah.*

FG1, part of extract 146:

*D: it kind of makes me feel guilty because sometimes I feel like I’m faking it, and then*

 *I’ll mess something up you’ll, then you kind of do value whether you do*

 *have it or not.*

The label of dyslexia therefore becomes something valuable, commodity; not something that should be dished out willy nilly, as perhaps the more who have it, the less it is worth. Below S worries that people might be using the label without being entitled to it; who might go for the test without really being dyslexic.

FG1, part of extract 146:

*S: yeah, so they might realise they do have dyslexia, but if they don’t have dyslexia,*

 *then they are giving it a really bad [name]*

*H: [yeah ]*

The relationship between ideas of dyslexia and ideas of intellectual worth are therefore complex in these discussions. A great deal appears to depend upon to whom the dyslexic identity is being revealed, what has just been said, and where the conversation is being had. Students have thus to navigate carefully, to judge how disclosure will be understood and how then this may affect their local identity.

As discussed elsewhere in this thesis (in the above section ‘being intelligent/able’ and also in chapter 5 section 3), in positioning oneself and other dyslexic students firmly as ‘not stupid’ because of the specific nature of their ‘diagnosis’, those who do not qualify for the label, but are ‘just not very good in general’ (see extract below) are left without the same means of protection against accusations of stupidity.

FG2, part of extract 70:

*J: mmm I think, when I went and they tried to describe to me what dyslexia was, it*

 *[was like ] highly above average in some thing and then*

*H: [keep going ]*

*J: like dramatically, having that difference across the, and [test ]*

*G: [yeah] and if you’re just not*

 *very good in general [then you’ve] obviously not got dyslexia.*

*J: [yeah,mmm ]*

*G: hhhhh*

*M: that’s if then stupidity hhh*

M’s final comment above is telling ‘that’s if then stupidity’. ‘stupidity’ is redirected to those other people who are ‘just not very good in general’, not us; we are ok; we are safe. The implications of this positioning are alarming. Perhaps students who ‘miss out’ on an identification of dyslexia are aware of this positioning by omission; and burdened with a label far more damaging than being dyslexic.

Conclusions.

This layer of analysis was long and complex, but the use of Davies and Harré’s (2001) idea of subject positioning was particularly useful in focusing closely upon the ways in which participants drew upon ideas about dyslexia and learning to situate themselves and others in the conversational space. The strength of some of the links between positions taken and ways-of-being was great, and immediately relevant when those positions influenced the ability of students to construct accepting reasonable adjustments and other help as socially and morally acceptable or not. Thus, the ‘choice’ to occupy certain subject positions not only interacted with learning identity, but also influenced the actions students apparently took. If we hold in mind that a position may be offered, or even inflicted, by others, how students actively respond to positionings passed to them by people with power (lecturers, peers, family, psychologists) is an important question to ask. These focus groups were arguably relatively safe spaces: the students were aware I was a specialist teacher for students with dyslexia and were also aware that everyone else present had the same label as themselves. They were probably able to explore questions about dyslexia without fear of being laughed at or insulted. However, if someone they respect as an ‘expert’ within education positions them as a fraud or a cheat, or as someone who should just-get-on-with-it, this is likely to have a powerful influence upon the student’s ongoing learning identity. However, if the student is equipped with an understanding of how discourses can decide who we are, and how they can position and be positioned in a conversation, they may have a weapon with which to defend themselves in situations such as the one described.

The wider implications of the analysis of subject positioning within the focus groups will be discussed together (see chapter six) with those additional implications arising from the second layer of analysis in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Ideological analysis of the focus group conversations

Introduction

Chapter five is a combined analysis and discussion of ideology within the focus group conversations and is intended to address research questions five and six:

5. Which relevant wider discourses and ideologies are drawn upon (implicitly or explicitly) in the conversation and how do these interact and co-construct

participants’ identities as learners in higher education?

6. What are the implications of drawing upon the named discourses and

ideologies for the participants (and others) within higher education?

The analytical process is described in chapter three, and is not reproduced here. However it might be useful to return to those pages for a recap of the questions I used to guide my analysis. This discussion should also be read in the light of my position as a critical realist (see chapter 3). The discussion here crosses over with much in chapter four, but the focus shifts from the subject positions taken up and offered to an exploration of the ideological ‘voices’ these subject positions are composed from. In other words, this chapter represents the second layer of a two-layer analysis. For brevity, I do not always produce a given extract in its entirety, as these are often quite long, though the reader can find the full extract in the appendices.

This chapter is divided into four themed sections. The themes are as follows: education and literacy; neoliberalism, meritocracy and the individual; health, morality and medicine; and positivism, cognitivism and biological determinism. It was not straightforward dividing the discussion into these themes because there were strong ties between them. I talk about such connections, as appropriate, throughout. In the first section I talk about the participants’ apparent preoccupation with grades as an ultimate signifier of intellectual ability and status that places them within a hierarchy of academic worth; I also consider the constructions of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ and consider how these are modified by the achievement of the dyslexia label. What students understand by ‘learning’ and ‘literacy’, and their construction of the written word as a signifier of truth are also discussed in this section. Section two focuses upon a group of ideologies which arguably have their fingers clasped around most of the other ideologies discussed: neoliberalism,eritocracy (with their highly selective use of democratic ideas) and individualism appeared to be the most powerful shapers of identity, and drove much of the positioning within the focus groups. I talk about the links made explicitly and implicitly between hard work, moral worth, and success; the pervasiveness of the American Dream (success in adversity, see discussion later in this chapter) as a story to live by; and the assumption that productivity and competition were necessarily good. I will also write here of the implications of these ways of constructing the world for these students within higher education. In section three I turn to the ideologies which connect ideas of moral worth to ideas about health. This is particularly important for the discussion about dyslexia because of historical links between ideas about ‘mental retardation’ and moral inferiority, but equally because of the arguable moral *superiority* of ‘being’ dyslexic in comparison to ‘being’ ‘stupid’ in modern, western contexts. The intertwining of education and control of people with a label of poor health or ability forms a large part of this discussion. In the final section constructed around the theme of positivism, cognitivism and biological determinism, I discuss the ways participants drew upon ‘science’ within the conversations about ‘the way things are’ in the world, and in our heads. Assumptions about processes as simple strings of cause and effect, and the seemingly automatic construction of the brain and mind as a computer are also a couple of ideas I will be considering. Each of the four themes sections begins with a brief introduction. A deliberately short conclusion is offered at the end of this chapter, as conclusions are covered fully in chapter six.

Theme 1: Education and literacy

In this section I use extracts from both of the focus group conversations to illustrate how ideas about education and literacy are present and powerful in the ways the participants construct dyslexia and in the positions they take up, offer, or resist. I talk about participants’ apparent preoccupation with grades as an ultimate signifier of intellectual ability and status that places them within a hierarchy of academic worth; I also consider the constructions of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ and consider how these are modified by the achievement of the dyslexia label. What students understand by ‘learning’ and ‘literacy’, and their construction of the written word as a signifier of truth are also discussed in this section.

Throughout the focus group conversations the participants’ position within the educational system was the most prominent in the stories they told of being ‘diagnosed’, and ‘succeeding’ or ‘failing’. The initial warm-up type question I asked of ‘when were you first identified as dyslexic?’ (an intentional avoidance of the word ‘diagnosed’, and an assumption about the importance of the date of ‘expert’ identification) was almost always answered with reference to school year (for example, see responses by C, B and S: FG1, extracts 2, 3 and 6; and N: FG2, extract 1). There was probably an element of imitating the answer of a previous speaker, but there was a suggestion on a couple of occasions that age, or other contextual markers, were much more difficult to recall than the school year. Many of the identities produced around the topic of dyslexia were very closely tied to the experiences of being in school or university, particularly prominent in the conversations were grades given for coursework and exams, teachers’ judgments of their ability, and comparison of themselves with peers. I have chosen the two extracts below as representative of some of these relationships; both from the first focus group, C, B and R all share their stories of frustration with the grades they achieved at school. These discussions are part of a conversation about being relieved and happy to be ‘diagnosed’ with dyslexia, which is important for a number of reasons (see also the discussion around the theme of morality).

FG1, extract 16

*C: well, when I was at high school, in, like year year ten or eleven, erm, with my*

 *English teacher, I didn’t really get on with her, and I think it was because maybe*

 *we both didn’t know that I was dyslexic, but my grammar and my English was both*

 *really rubbish, and I was getting like Ds and Cs when I was predicted As, and I*

 *just couldn’t understand, like I was doing everything she told me, like I went for*

 *extra help [and ev]erything [and ] it just got really*

*H: [yeah ] [yeah]*

*C: frustrating that she was, like, no, it’s still wrong. And she wasn’t very positive*

 *about it? And it was really frustrating to be, like, well I’m doing what you’ve asked*

 *me to do, but it’s still [not], still not getting the grades, [erm]*

*H: [yeh] [yuh]*

FG1, part of extract 20

B*: I think it was frustrating with like English coursework, like the, I didn’t seem to be*

 *able to improve [it, erm]*

*C: [yeah, I] had the same*

*R: you know, erm, it would be a C, and I’d rewrite it, erm and then, you know try and*

 *improve and, would there’s be writing all over it and I would you know, rewrite it,*

 *and it would still be a C, hhh. Seemed so unfair*

*R: and it was was just frustrating esp especially because I was in a class for gifted*

 *and talented, class for gifted English people and that that was at the end of year 9*

 *and then by the end of GCSEs I was getting Cs and others in those classes were*

 *getting As and A stars, and I was supposed to be this gifted and talented student*

 *and I was getting Cs (hhh).*

*H: yeah yeh.*

*D: mmm*

In the first of these two extracts, C is responding to my yes/no question about whether dyslexia stood out for her when she was at school. C narrates a largely negative experience with her English teacher. The subject ‘I’ in the first main clause is preceded by a long subordinate clause and introductory words which serve to set the theme of the utterance: ‘well, when I was at high school, in, like year ten or eleven, erm, with my English teacher…’. The ‘when’ of her experience, as marked by her school year, and the presence of her English teacher is therefore presented as the forefront to C’s experience of frustration. ‘[Y]ear ten or eleven’ may be seen deictically here, in that it assumes an understanding in the group of the importance of these years for GCSE exam grades and the run up to A-Levels. ‘I’ as the subject is maintained throughout this conversational turn: ‘I didn’t really get on with her…’, ‘I think…’, ‘I was dyslexic’, ‘I was predicted As’, ‘I just couldn’t understand…’, ‘I was doing everything she told me’, and ‘I went for extra help’. In doing so, C places the focus on her own agency and action, and therefore we can understand the process through which one gets As as out of C’s control; that is, there must have been something else going on. ‘I was predicted As’ says C, using the passive form where the agent, presumably the teacher, is removed. The passive structure here helps to construct the prediction as the fairer representation of her ability because it hides the human (and presumably more subjective) element, and is an obvious mismatch with the grades she was actually getting.

In constructing her story, C also draws on apparently shared understandings of the meanings of grades (Ds and Cs in this case being inferior, and A representing excellence), the role of the teacher in pushing students to raise their grades, and the power relationship between teacher and student in which the former has the role of formally judging the other. We hear the voice of the teacher indirectly with ‘she was, like, no, it’s still wrong’. The response of the teacher, in this story fits ideologically with the conception of teacher control as one of the ‘instruments of normalisation’, (Collinson & Penketh, 2009:10) in that the ‘wrongness’ of C’s work is only something that the teacher can confer, and the student cannot dispute. In this story, however, the power relationship is retrospectively reversed, and C is able to construct the teacher in a way that positions C as unfairly treated, hard-working, and deserving of an ‘A’ grade (‘I was predicted As’). The ‘she’ as the subject refers to the teacher, who ‘wasn’t very positive’ and who apparently unfairly accused C of lack of effort or ability. The ‘I’ is always compared favourably to the ‘she’ in this story. Implicitly, C seems to be saying – ‘if only my teacher and I had known I was dyslexic; it would have been different’. C also uses ‘and’ repeatedly as a cohesive device between clauses, and this creates a corresponding flow to her narrative in which all parts of her story are connected in one stream. This allows C to attach explanations to her reports of her ‘poor’ grades without a pause which might risk her momentarily being recognised by others in the group as intellectually inferior.

A number of assumptions are arguably present in C’s talk in this extract which are maintained by the other participants in later conversational turns: firstly, grades(and qualifications) are generally treated as unproblematic representations of worth and ability; that is, although C did not think Ds or Cs were a fair reflection upon her, she did not question the ‘truth’ of the grades, but questioned herself: ‘I just couldn’t understand, like I was doing everything she told me’ implying she doubted herself at the time – could there be something else I am still doing wrong? It is only the retrospective realisation that she is dyslexic which appears to allow C to construct herself as misunderstood, someone who *was,* in fact, intelligent, and indicates the possibility that had her teacher known ‘that I was dyslexic’ she would have made more of an effort to support C rather than implying she was lazy or stupid (for further discussion on the implications of this, see section below: health, morality and medicine). ‘Being’ dyslexic in this sense was a tool for C to resist others’ constructions of her as someone with low status; she’s ‘safe’ in this story from such accusations. C comes close to blaming the teacher for her difficulties, but even the teacher is forgiven in the understanding that she did not know she was dyslexic. The dyslexia provides a useful explanation for C, and means she need not look further afield for answers (for example, to the system that graded her).

B and R in the second extract presented above, like C, also narrate their frustration about not achieving the grade they felt they were worthy of, and their lack of understanding about how this could be the case when they were working hard, and when they had the ‘intelligence’. The word ‘frustrating’ is used by C, R and B and they each make similar use of the ‘I’ as the agentful subject in their reflections. R uses the modal ‘would’ six times in in a number of connected clauses in extract 20, which adds force to her positive self-construction by producing her effort and determination as something that was a habit for her at that time. ‘Seemed so unfair’ said R (see discussion around ideological theme of democracy versus the American dream), not to be given the grade deserved. The word ‘seemed’ is used in place of the more obvious ‘was’ here. If R had said it ‘was’ unfair, a statement of stable fact, she would have been casting the grading system into doubt, when in fact, at this point in the conversation, the emphasis is being placed upon the dyslexia as the culprit, not the system. The past tense of ‘seemed’ also permits the possibility that it actually turned out not to be unfair; but the fault of the dyslexia. The grade is constructed as hugely important. For C, B and R in this conversation, a C grade or below implied deficiency; grades attached forever to the individual may then hijack a person’s construction of their own ‘cleverness’ for years to come. ‘Gifted and talented’ is recognisable as a phrase popularised by educational policy, and offers superior intellectual status. R’s use of the term provides an avenue into the conversation for discourses of individual differences, biological determinism, and intellectual hierarchy; a ‘gift’ is something you are either endowed with naturally or not, and the very existence of ‘gifted and talented’ pupils automatically produces the ‘rest’ who are ungifted and talent-less. For R, however, her designation as ‘gifted and talented’ appeared to construct her as necessarily lazy, as why else would she not be ‘succeeding’? ‘Being dyslexic’ seemed to have an important role to play in reducing the power of the grade, and in offering an explanation for educational ‘failure’ for some of the participants in these conversations, and this is something I will come back to, but I want briefly to return to the question of why and how grades became so powerful.

The power of institutions like schools to construct us as normal or deficient, and as somewhere on a hierarchy of intellectual and moral worth has received a lot of attention in the literature; particularly since Foucault’s writings on discipline and the institutional gaze (Foucault, 1995). Institutions like schools assign a person a grade, a status marker, and somehow this is transformed into an attribute of the person; a part of their essence and character: ‘The person is produced as a knowable individual in a process in which the properties of a disciplinary regime, its norms and values, have merged with and become attributes of persons themselves’ (Rose, 1989: 124). Apple (2004) argues that the school’s objective of producing people with normalised ‘dispositions’ is part of the enactment of a conservative or liberal ideology (17) (the theme continued in a later section). Schools may behave as ‘industrial plants discharging graded, and sometimes degraded, human beings.’ (Crawford, 2010: 10). Arguably, the way the participants in this study constructed their status in relation to their academic achievements via grades and qualifications is an example of the power of dominant ideologies of liberalism and meritocracy as manifest in educational discourse. In the above extracts, B and C appear to have taken on the ‘value’ of individual, internal merit labels (‘I was supposed to be this gifted and talented student’), and in their apparent failure to fulfil expectations, they are arguably playing a part in their potentially inferior constructions of self. Where criticism was advanced in the extracts discussed above, it was notably not levelled at the educational system as a whole, but at an individual teacher, in C’s narrative where ‘she’ (the teacher) is the subject who treats C in ignorance, and in R’s narrative there is apparent annoyance that other students whom she should be equal to, are getting better grades than she is – comparison with others is a recurrent theme. Apple suggests that part of the power of hegemony here is to produce people who cannot see beyond the common sense structures which they draw upon uncritically in their meaning making (2004: 6). Not only can people not see beyond these structures, but arguably actively reproduce them. In order for the social status quo to be maintained, things like grades become desirable; according to Deleuze and Guitari, the desire for hierarchical markers is a way of repressing other desires (for freedom, self-determination) which threaten the social structure as is: ‘repression, hierarchy, exploitation, and servitude are themselves desired’ (Deleuze & Guitari, 2013: 139).

In these extracts and elsewhere in the focus groups, dyslexia provides some escape from being classified as intellectually inferior; but the label re-places the individual into different, and conflicting positions (‘disabled’, ‘hard-working’ and ‘intelligent’, ‘victim’, ‘sponger’), which are still bound by the same, dominant webs of meaning: so to a degree, the escape is illusory or at best, fragile.

As C told the group her story of frustration with her teacher over her perceived ‘failure’ to get the desired grades, N also talked about conflict in the classroom (see extract 46, FG2 below).

FG2, extract 46

*N: [yeah I’ve] been put in classes where there’s*

*N: [thirty, forty students] and I’ve got a problem, where I’ve refused to*

*J: [and I think ]*

*N: read out in class for English, and they’re like ‘you’ve got to. I’ve got to mark you*

 *for your GCSE’ and I’ve said ‘I’m not reading’. Period. so, I got a D and an E*

 *hahahaha [hahahaha]*

*General: [hahahaha]*

In this story, N’s refusal to submit to the teacher’s instruction resulted in a punishment of an inferior grade. The story constructs the control the educator over the behaviour of students and the power they have to categorise students via the application of grades, as well as the power to separate students into classes – see the passive ‘I’ve been put’. It also tells a story of N’s resistance to being commanded to read, and the consequences of that. The educator ‘has got to’ mark the student, because the system demands it: the student must be graded. Therefore, the student ‘has got to’ read aloud – not because this is an important or useful skill, but because the GCSE system demands it. The use of the modal verb ‘have’ in ‘have got to’ indicates a rules-based obligation (rather than a moral obligation, as ‘must’ might indicate) and a lack of choice for the agent. The teacher is therefore somewhat relieved of responsibility. The teacher here, as a mere agent of the system, was able to separate themselves from responsibility for grade-giving. They were not concerned with the ethical dimensions of the demand for N to read aloud, but in the necessity of the action, because the education system produces the teacher as an agent of the categorisation process; and science and statistics produce the grade as a common-sense quality of the individual. The power of N’s story lies partly in the shared knowledge we have of his reference to GCSEs, D and E grades (as being ‘low’), who ‘they’ are (teachers), and a shared understanding of what it means to stand up in front of a class of peers and the teacher and refuse to read. In this sense, N is producing a figured world of characters and processes which the group appears to recognise – a world in this case in which an ‘us’ and ‘them’ is created; N’s tone is informal, and his use of direct speech brings the listeners into the story in a way that elicits their empathy, and their allegiance. To some degree, N is distanced from any retrospective suggestions of stupidity as N is narrating his story from the perspective of his present educational status (a successful PhD student), and laughs about the experience while presenting it as unfair and ridiculous. This extract speaks about the centrality of classroom measured literacy to concepts of cleverness and academic success (see Colinson & Penketh, 2009 for a similar example). N constructs his own shame at not being able to read well, and has his inadequacy confirmed by the teacher’s, and the institution’s response. N places ‘I’ as the main subject in the main clauses in this extract, so we are centred on his experiences of being in the classroom, his choices and the outcomes for him. N uses ‘and’ to add layers to his story, and completes with ‘so’ as a final conjunction – this latter which produces the D and E grades as a direct result of his refusal to read. Unless N was able to question the meaning of the grade he was assigned, it is hard to imagine N came out of this experience positively. Indeed, sharing it with the other participants after half an hour of discussion can be interpreted as a sign of solidarity with those who shared similar experiences; and as a retrospective criticism of their institutional constructions. It is interesting that N’s story only appeared to go so far in its criticality of the grading system; his own difficulties took some central place too.

N’s story is to some degree mirroring other autobiographical snippets earlier in the conversation, for example, T (extract 44) has also spoken of his dislike of reading aloud in class, and there has been a general theme developing around the helpfulness or not of teachers in school. M has already raised this point about the apparent lack of help in class if you do not have the dyslexia label. Thus, N’s anecdote can be seen as establishing solidarity with others in the group, and adding to a ‘feeling’ of openness in the group and admissions to vulnerability and a sense of unfairness. It also serves to underline the label of dyslexia as a useful one – that is, part of the problem with teachers not being helpful is that they do not know about the dyslexia. Worth a final mention, also, is N’s choice of the present perfect tense in six of the clauses in the extract: ‘I’ve been put’, ‘I’ve got a problem’, ‘I’ve refused’ etc, when a more obvious choice would have been past simple (‘I had a problem’, ‘I refused’). N appears to be talking about a single incident, as he uses direct speech, but his use of present perfect shifts the impression from being one of a particular event, to one of general experience. The use of plural ‘they’ for the teacher figure, over ‘he’ or she’ and the use of ‘like’ to suggest this is a rough summation of the kind of thing a teacher would say, also add to the implication that this was a typical experience for N, and one which then forms a more solid sense of who he was at school – someone who didn’t fit and didn’t conform and didn’t therefore get respected grades.

In another extract, S tells a story about being better at spoken language than written, and about his experience with a particular teacher:

FG1, part of extract 158

*S: and it used to be when I was younger when I was in junior school where it was*

 *mostly like spoke, spoken components of language and I was really good at it, and*

 *then when I went to, it came to uni, came to secondary school and it was like*

 *written components and I was like really bad at it. And the teacher was like ‘no,*

 *you are just being stupid, practise harder’ and I was like ‘no I really just can’t get*

 *my head around the concept. I need some help’*

As for many of the other short narratives in these focus groups, S forefronts the key clauses ‘I was really good at it’ and ‘I was really bad at it’ with detail about his school level: ‘when I was in Junior school’, ‘when I went to, it came to uni, came to secondary school’. The school level according to age may be important because it is a reference everyone understands and arguably creates again a figured world whose rules and systems are familiar at a basic level. The significance placed upon school level by its preceding position in this passage also suggested to me that the move to secondary school from Junior was implicated in his apparent fall in standards. S’s use of the word ‘components’ stands out a little from the informal personal style which characterises the rest of the passage (for example in use of ‘like’ to introduce direct speech and to indicate examples, which is a style of the ‘young’, or at least the under thirties – see Adolphs & Carter, 2003). The word ‘components’ implies that language may be divisible into bits that one studies or masters in formal education, and that ‘written components’ are particularly challenging. Saying one finds ‘written components’ difficult is also a little different to saying ‘I find writing difficult’: the latter is a complete difficulty with a whole, whereas the first is probably only partial. Writing skill is strongly associated with intelligence in our education system and culture, so when acknowledging one’s difficulty it makes sense socially to be cautious in wording.

There is arguably a greater recognition in early years education for different forms of expression as valid; as school progresses ‘we are educating people out of their creativity’ (Robinson, 2006); a reflection, perhaps, of an ideology which underpins our changing cultural constructions of early and later childhood (what I mean here is that in our understandings of child development, we expect the child to grow into more abstracted, more rigid, less imaginative forms of education and learning). In S’s use of ‘and the teacher was like…’ I recognised that S was giving us an idea of the teacher’s response as he wanted to present it. S constructed his story in a way that showed himself as a victim of unfairness, and the teacher as unreasonable. However, it is a story that sounds familiar, and credible, and one that again reflects the shared recognition of the power of the teacher in the story to define S as ‘stupid’ and lazy: S was a ‘bad’ student, and as such ‘the truth and the justification of the system of education system’ (Bourdieu *et al.*  1994: 17) which has the power to categorise him. The refrain ‘practise harder’ is also familiar and echo’s the behaviourist assumption that repetition and practice are the central keys to learning. It does not matter particularly if this incident was ‘true’ or fairly told; it matters that the characters appearing in S’s story fit within a familiar world and helped to create a sense of shared victimhood within the group. Dyslexia was often hovering about as justification for being misunderstood, a retrospective ‘I told you so’ to shout back at the world of the past.

As all of the participants were within higher education at a prestigious university, their learning identities were arguably bolstered by drawing upon the concept of grades as reflections of internal worth. Matching up school experiences that were humiliating, and out of which they emerged feeling inferior, to their current status as high achieving red-brick university goers may have been challenging. Mine and G’s response (‘wow!’) to T’s acknowledgement he did actually get an ‘A’ grade in his English GCSE (FG2, extract 44) is one example of a the way, as a group, we showed awe towards high grades (and to higher levels of education), at the same time as trying to criticise the representativeness of the grades of ‘intellect’. This sense of conflict between critical reflections and deeply embedded assumptions about intelligence, education and worth, was continually present for me when I read through our conversations.

I want to look further at extracts which tell of the power of literacy level in deciding worth. Below are a number of extracts which I have put together because they construct the written word as very important, either as an indicator of ‘truth’, as a reflection of ‘intelligence’, or as a social marker of competence.

I will start by looking at extract 51, FG1, because this short extract is rife with ideological assumptions which interact with the identities that are being constructed (again and again) at this point in the conversation.

FG1, part of extract 51

*R: for me, it’s like my spoken intelligence is a lot higher than my written intelligence,*

 *so when I am doing a piece of course work I don’t feel it does represent my best*

 *[work]*

*H: [yeah]*

*R: so for me, it’s getting the knowledge from in my head, onto the paper. There’s*

 *something that doesn’t quite connect.*

*H: yeah*

*R: mmm*

The ‘for me’ in line one and repeated in line 5, performs the function of constructing the speaker, (R), as non-judgemental of others’ experiences, and also makes her claim to intelligence incontestable (as no one can dispute what something is like ‘for me’). R’s presentation of herself as having high ‘spoken intelligence’ (a subject receiving early emphasis in her utterance) allows her to maintain the concept of ‘intelligence’ as a thing inside her, while providing an explanation for why she is graded ‘poorly’ for written work. The dyslexia is an aid to this construction, because it provides a socially legitimate reason for how the ‘written intelligence’ could be recorded as poor, despite the ‘true’ intelligence being high. In this first line is the hidden story of the place of ‘coursework’ throughout our student lives; the giving of assignments by experts, the frequent ‘pretence’ that you didn’t really try that hard; the comparison with peers over grades; and the recording of your ‘rank’ as an ‘A’grade’, ‘average’ or ‘failing’ student. Your coursework does literally come to represent you – and if it transpires you are not in the ‘A-grade’ category, then there is little available in terms of discursive resources, to combat the flawed educational identity allotted. My argument here is that some discourses of dyslexia tap into ideologies which do allow people with the label to reconstruct their identities in ways which are more socially respected in some contexts (though not without consequence – see section on morality and stupidity).

R tells of her difficulty in ‘getting the knowledge from in my head, onto the paper’, a clear thing-like and ‘in-the-head’ concept of ‘knowledge’ which is a strong theme in the history of education. The importance of getting knowledge onto paper highlights the ultimate respect given to the written word, where it is upheld as a fixed symbol of an individual’s intelligence (to be judged by an expert other). The computer-like metaphor underlying the ‘doesn’t quite connect’ problem R says she has given an avenue in for the discourse of cognitive psychology and its drive to isolate and observe deficiencies in our computational machinery. But what really connects the story in this extract to the narratives throughout both discussions is the centrality of literacy to academic worth. The status of literacy has been explored by Collinson and Penketh (2009) who consider the impact of the ‘lexic’ discourse upon dyslexic students, and consider this to be the ‘dominant discourse that defines academic ability’ (10). From this perspective, R’s construction of herself as intelligent in a ‘spoken’ form, is inevitably inferior, or ‘subjugated’ (Collinson & Penketh, 2009: 10) to a preferred ‘written’ intelligence. Bourdieu *et al.*  (1994) are critical of the assumption that a particular kind of writing equals ‘intelligence’, and suggest this relationship is merely a cover for social inequalities; there is a game students are expected to play, to learn an ‘essay-writing rhetoric (14)’, and if they do not, or cannot play the game, their worth is diminished.

Although for most of the participants in the current study, difficulties with literacy were narrated as very familiar and significant, there were a number of instances where they constructed a high standard of literacy as a necessary part of being ‘academic’. Below are a couple of example extracts which construct the speakers’ recognition of and respect for written literacy, and a desire to be accomplished in it:

FG1, part of extract 122

*D: I mean you have to learn to write, in some respects, so probably [a] little bit*

*H: [yeh]*

*D: is not that bad*

*D: [but] so [oth]erwise you’ll just never learn, or function in society.*

*H: [yeh] [no] yeah.*

The exchanges above between D and H in the extract above follow discussion earlier on in which annoyance was shown by some participants about the way writing and accuracy are so central in education, to the neglect of other abilities and means of expression. D was one of a few participants who, while fully empathising with the complaints of unfairness in the system, were clear in placing value upon educational traditions and in respecting the status of writing within academia. In the extract above, D says ‘I mean you have to learn to write’; he softens his statement (as in some ways it is contradictory to the mood of the conversation so far) with ‘in some respects’ and ‘a little bit is not that bad’, before directly constructing writing as a social necessity, and even as a moral obligation. His discourse here is quite powerful stuff: he begins ‘I mean’ which is not as soft as ‘for me’ or ‘I think’. ‘I mean’ is a device in spoken English which begins statements of self-evident ‘fact’, and not just personal opinion. ‘I mean’ goes with phrases like ‘what you’ve got to understand is…’, or ‘the thing is’, and here D choses an equally strong second clause: ‘you have to learn to write’. Again we hear ‘have to’ for conferring a rule-based obligation, and I wonder according to whom have we to. In fact, D follows through with the warning of what will happen if one does not follow this rule; namely, the general ‘you’ will become socially dysfunctional. This fits well next to the familiar ‘threat’ to our society of spreading ‘illiteracy’ and our resultant edging towards barbarism. The quite unavoidable conclusion is that written literacy is the route to social betterment, and without it we are doomed. D had a very gentle and non-confrontational manner, was extremely polite, and very soft in his discourse. The meaning of D’s utterance as I have interpreted here was not apparent to me during the conversation, but its force seems quite stark now. It is relevant to mention that D was apparently doing very well on the final year of his undergraduate degree, and was hoping to go on to post-graduate study. He mentioned that writing was something he was getting to grips with, and that he had developed strategies to improve his writing. It is interesting to me that D had made a very deliberate effort to become a good writer, and I wondered if there was a link between his personal investment in writing (and therefore in his academic identity) and his construction of writing as a valuable social good in its own right; that is, the degree of ‘stake’ D had in ‘being’ academic to some extent obliged him to accept the ideological backdrop which helps to maintain the high status of literacy.

In the extract below, N narrates his past difficulty with aspects of written literacy. N was undertaking PhD study at the time of this conversation, and like D, had become ‘successful’ in academia. N jokingly boasts about his newfound ability to use ‘bigger words’; arguably, this humour was accessible to the participants and myself because we all recognised the socially constructed link between using ‘big academic words’, normally Latin or Greek and polysyllabic, and high status ‘intelligence’. This recognition is nicely summed up in a chapter by Burn and Finnigan (2003) entitled ‘I’ve made it more academic, by adding some snob words from the thesaurus’; a chapter which talks about access to the academy for students from non-traditional backgrounds, and the power of being able to ‘do’ academic writing. I interpret N’s narrative here as showing a degree of self-awareness he is playing a game in which the trick is to trick the educators. However, there is still the possibility that in his identity as someone who learnt to play the game, he is left with the concern he is cheating. There is constructed a difference between being able to do academic writing ‘naturally’ and just tricking people into thinking you do. On the other hand, by taking an identity as a joker who learnt to play the game, N manages to appear humble and self-berating; he was not implying he was someone who is *really* just naturally academic, as that might have appeared conceited. In his story, he was just someone who had learnt to play the writing game.

FG2, part of extract 3

*N: er grammar wise. I really struggled with my grammar, and possibly sentence*

 *structure, quite long sentences, etc.*

*H: mm*

*J: yeah*

*N: but you know, I learnt a lot, in. yeah. Definitely a positive, [and now] I*

*H: [mm yeh]*

*N: can write really well, and people say I write really well, which is all down to the*

 *support I got in creating my sentences [and I always ] look*

*H: [yeah that’s really interesting]*

*N: for bigger words when I write as well.*

*H: mmm*

*N: like ‘that’s too small; [I can do ]better than that! [where’s the thesaurus?]’*

*General: [hh. Yeah] [hahahahahhhhhhhh ]*

‘[N]ow I can write really well, and people say I write really well’ says N. It is interesting that N separates what ‘I can’ do from what ‘people say’ into two separate clauses; the second clause appears to add validity to the first. We assume that ‘people’ are significant others whose opinion is to be respected, and after all it is others’ opinions of our written work that confers the status. It also reflects the value of writing over oral expression that is well-established within higher education (see Friere, 1996, for a discussion of the neglected role of oral communication within the academy). We write for an audience, and at university this is an audience with a particular set of expectations around what constitutes quality. As for D, now that N has achieved a certain ‘standard’ in this writing that is acceptable to the academy, it serves him to subscribe to the underlying ideological position; in spite of the fact that achieving the academic status he has may have involved difficulties with literacy not experienced by his peers. On the other hand, it may be *because* of the additional effort N has had to invest into his academic identity that his allegiance to particular discourses is maintained. The powerful ideas at work within and around our educational institutions mean that it may be difficult to construct a positive identity when one has difficulties with literacy (see Burden, 2005 for a review of the literature on connections between literacy problems and self-concept).

Not only is the ability to produce erudite ‘academic’ writing a sign of status and intelligence, but the written word is apparently understood to be more solid and truth-representing that other communication forms. In his book Orality and Literacy, Walter Ong writes a persuasive story explaining the place of literacy in Western society (2002). The written word becomes thing-like, argues Ong; we can touch the written word on the paper and as such ‘written words are residue’ (2002: 11). Ong reaches deeply into the history of the move from orality to literacy in society and considers the shift in ideology which this engendered. The written word ‘separates the knower from the known’ and situates ‘facts’ outside of context and time (45) – something crucial to the modern discipline of science; it also ‘encouraged human beings to think of their own interior conscious and unconscious resources as more and more thing- like, impersonal and religiously neutral.’ (Ong, 2002:129). From this perspective, then, dyslexia is a result of the standardisation of print (Shakespear & Erikson, 2001). The way in which G emphasises the realness of her ‘diagnosis’ in the extract below is reflective of the way the written word produces ‘things’. G says ‘[T]hat was the first time I actually saw written down what my dyslexia actually is’ constructs the security of the ‘truth’ of ‘her’ dyslexia following a ‘full’ written report. G placed stress upon the words ‘real’ and ‘full’ here, and repeats ‘actually’, which helped to highlight her construction of the validity of her ‘diagnosis’.

FG2, part of extract 7

*G: But then I finally got a real diagnosis, with like, the full report and everything.*

*H: yeah*

*G: when I came to [uni ]versity, that was the first time that I actually saw*

*H: [yeh]*

*G: written down what my dyslexia [actual]ly is…*

Throughout the conversation the educational histories of and judgements about the participants in these focus group were very present in their positionings and identities. Voices of experts (school teachers, psychologists, and lecturers) were reproduced in many instances, speaking into life the students’ statuses as ‘dyslexic’, ‘lazy’, ‘intelligent’, ‘clever’, placing them upon an academic hierarchy, and deciding whether or not they were fit for university. Such voices were heavily laden with ideological understandings of academic literacy and what counts as cleverness. These ideas fit neatly with linked ideas of meritocracy and individual talent and hard work as central to success, all of which are discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Theme 2 – neoliberalism and meritocracy and the individual

This second analytical subsection discusses the constructive work within the focus group conversations of a web of ideas around the theme of neoliberalism, meritocracy, and the individual. Neoliberalism and individualising ideologies in many ways subsume the discourses of literacy and education discussed in the section above, and the democratic, medical, moral, and scientific ideologies which will be discussed in sections below. Indeed, in addition to subsuming other ideological positions, neo-liberalism and individualism appear to bend discourses arising from other ideological soups to their own ‘will’, so to speak.

It is difficult to untangle the ideological strands from one another; however, here I will attempt to separate the following ideological aspects I have co-constructed with the texts: firstly, I will discuss extracts in which participants unproblematically assume the existence of direct relationships between hard work, merit, and success within the education system; relationships which were presented as obvious, and which very often went unchallenged. Within this initial discussion, I will follow the ideological thread of effort and success to the construction of the ‘rugged individual’ so central to the American Dream (Green, 2008; Rand 1957/1992). Secondly, I will talk about the ways in which I found the participants and I subtly (or not so subtly) located educational success and failure within the individual, and drew upon common sense understandings to isolate ourselves and other individuals from their social contexts. I will argue that our adoption of this group of ideologies via meritocratic and individualist discourse had profound implications for how we constructed our identities in the given context, but also pointed towards particular behaviours and self-concepts which probably persisted beyond the focus group conversations. Thirdly, I will talk about how the rhetoric of the free-market and productivity sit cosily alongside the participants’ apparent preoccupation with competition (via grades, university status, and educational level), and in the construction of identities based upon comparison of theirs and others’ ‘achievements’. I will finish this subsection with a consideration of how the rhetoric of neoliberalism draws upon democratic ideology; and the ways in which the participants and myself are situated precariously between such contradictory ‘ideals’.

Below I consider parts of two extracts, both dialogues between me and S. My position is that both extracts powerfully uphold the notion of the struggling, and succeeding individual.

FG1, part of extract 76

*S: It was something I always felt, well, just deal with it. I mean I suppose it has*

 *influenced me in that when I come to do work I sort of apply masses amounts of*

 *time, and I’ll read twice as, I’ll read five times as much as anyone else does and*

 *do ten times as much research.*

*H: mmm. mmm.*

*S: erm, so that might be overcompensating a bit in and that’s sort of my general*

 *mentality anyway?*

In the extract above, S is talking about how he experienced being dyslexic at school. He said elsewhere in the conversation that school teachers did not really take much notice of his dyslexia – and here S tells us how much effort he put into his work, and how he coped by himself. The line ‘…I always felt, well, just deal with it’ gives the impression of an internal voice, an inner ‘S’ who counselled the ‘outer’ S on how to be. The ‘just’ in ‘just deal with it’ seems to mean ‘don’t make a fuss’, ‘don’t be needy’, ‘just get on with it by yourself’; this implies a situation in which a weaker person might have given up and asked for help, but would not have been seen favourably. S is then emphatic about the amount of effort he puts into his work as a way of dealing with the challenges of dyslexia. The (likely) over-exaggeration in ‘I’ll read twice as, I’ll read five times as much…do ten times as much…’ is put to the task of positive identity construction quite unashamedly (which jarred a bit in the focus group context because it went against the unspoken rules of modesty and self-deprecation others appeared to be following). The use of ‘I’ll’ heads two of his clauses here, and is implied in another; ‘I will’ here is a grammatical structure used to indicate a tendency or habit, something that is common-place for him (rather than its more common use as a future tense). His construction of himself here fits well with the idea of the ‘rugged individual’ (Rand, 1957/1992; Green, 2008), a ‘moral’ individual, and someone who compares favourably to ‘anyone else’ in terms of effort put in. This hard-work ethic is part of his ‘general mentality’: an admirable internal character trait. In this sense, S presents himself, intentionally or not, as the ideal worker, productive and uncomplaining. It also presents his own success as separate from the community he is working within: others appear only present to help identify where in the competitive hierarchy he sits.

This hard-working, uncomplaining, getting-on-with-it self, the ideal self of neoliberalism, is also one who cannot both ask for help and maintain his favourable identity if he remains within this ideological landscape. S repeatedly presents himself as a survivor who doesn’t need any hand-outs, but he does also slip out of this discursive stronghold at other points in the conversation (see discussion of extract 34 at the end of this section). I will talk later about how, when he does present a self that is contradictory to the one presented in these extracts, it is not easy to achieve and S has to do a lot of discursive labour.

In the second of the two extracts (below), I begin by asking the group how they feel about being ‘disabled’ according to British law.

FG1, part of extract 131

*H: … In in the law, dyslexia is a disability, so erm, according to them you are all*

*disabled. I just wondered if you feel like you’re disabled or, or not. Or, if not, what*

 *does it, what does it actually mean?*

*S: personally, no, but I’ve just always had to deal with it. It’s like having having a bad*

 *ham string, you’ve still got to run a race, [run] the race, regardlessly of*

*H: [mm]*

*S: how badly he’s injured. Erm, but I can totally imagine that other people may feel*

 *disabled.*

The way S responds to my question is interesting because he uses the metaphor of the runner with a ‘bad ham string’ to support the argument that he is *not* disabled. This is surprising, in some ways, because one might expect the runner with a damaged ham string to be an excellent example of a person who exactly *is* disabled, particularly in the context of a race. Arguably, this oddness or mismatch between the metaphor and the position it is being used to support is a reflection of the power of the individualising, survivalist ideology to overwhelm socially familiar constructions of (physical) disability. If S constructs himself as the injured runner, battling on through the ‘race’ to educational accomplishment, he appears to be assuming the race is compulsory, and the only honourable way to proceed is without acknowledging his weakness, and without asking for any consideration of the unequal level at which he is participating. He finishes ‘I can totally imagine other people may feel disabled’. In one stroke he elevates himself above the ‘others’ who aren’t as tough or resilient as him, or those who need to rely upon a ‘disability’ label. He constructs disablility as a mere feeling and as something one can therefore decide to overcome with enough strength of character, and, crucially, he entrenches himself in this conversational turn so firmly within this particular ideological position that it takes a good number of conversational turns for him to credibly position himself in any other way. From this position it is arguably impossible for S to say that accepting help is an honourable or socially admirable thing to do: making use of ‘reasonable adjustments’ is likewise incommensurate with the self as survivor. His ideological position also impacts upon the positions other participants can easily take up in subsequent turns because to say they needed help would be to construct themselves as morally inferior under this discursive regime (Dudley-Marling, 2004). This is an example of how assuming a particular ideological stance can have hidden consequences – in this case, arguably, an invisible self-discipline which places all eyes upon on the individual and absolves society of any responsibility.

S is by no means the only participant who draws upon discourses loyal to individualising and meritocratic ideologies: this ideological backdrop was almost always there in our constructions of ourselves, each other, and education to the extent that it was quite disconcerting when reading through the transcripts after the event. S’s identity as the struggling, uncomplaining survivor was conjured again and again by others in each of the focus groups. For example, D says (FG1, extract 36) that in the real world ‘my feeling is that you just need to compensate by being good at something else’ (‘yeah, exactly’ I agree); and later, D again, ‘the reality is you just have to work harder, like, cos people can help you, give you Dictaphones and stuff, give you all the help in the world, but in the end you’ve just got to sit down and work’ (FG1, extract 150). And here is R later in FG1 (extract 134): ‘I don’t see it as a disability at all. I just see it as something that I need to know about, to compensate for … so it’s more for my understanding than for anyone else’s understanding’; and J (FG2, extract 16): ‘you just live with it, you compensate, you just kind of find little ways around doing things’. In these lines there appears to be a kind of echo in the phrasing used; we hear ‘you just have to’, ‘you just need to’, ‘you’ve just got to’, ‘you just live with it’ in which the ‘just’ gives the impression that the action is simple and obvious and should be done without complaint, and the ‘you’ generalises the obligation to everyone who faces a similar challenge. The generalised advice via ‘you’ is often paired up with a personalised edge to the speaker’s perspective through, for example, ‘my feeling is’, ‘for my understanding’, ‘personally’, ‘I just see it as’. The emphasis upon *their* opinions allows them to escape potential accusation of judging others for weakness, yet the use of generalising ‘you’ arguably implies that the speakers were constructing broader condemnation of those who ‘just’ couldn’t deal with it. All of the participants are succeeding academically according to conventional understandings of academic achievement simply because they are students at a ‘red-brick’ university; they are running S’s race despite their dodgy ham-strings and can see the finish line – but there are people behind them, and people who have dropped out of the race who, from a neoliberalist perspective, are not deserving of sympathy; they did not strive hard enough. ‘[T]hose who are strong in the face of adversity and who work hard will succeed’ says the American Dream (McGuinnis, 2009: 62). In subscribing to meritocratic beliefs like this one, individuals are more likely to blame those who do not ‘succeed’ for their own failure, and to give greater respect to those who do ‘succeed’ (see McCoy & Major, 2007, for a summary of the research in this area).

There is additional praise for those who succeed despite ‘disadvantage’ – but only if they do so without special help; and then their ‘disability’ or ‘disadvantage’ becomes a thing of honour. Below is an extract in which R is talking about the benefits of being dyslexic; R draws on the ideology of individual survival to construct herself (and others in the group) as intelligent, as survivors, as heroes.

FG1, extract 141

*H: ok. Thanks for that. Um um, so is there anything good about being dyslexic? I*

 *mean, we may have covered some of those things already.*

*R: definitely. I think erm, I think the fact that you are able to be in higher education*

 *despite the fact that it might take a lot more time to do something, actually I think*

 *is a really huge credit [er ] because it shows that you are really*

*H: [yeh]*

*R: intelligent, and that you’ve worked out ways around something that you do find*

 *quite difficult, and I think that’s really positive.*

*H: yeah. Ok.*

Again we hear ‘I think’, the personal position combined with the generalised ‘you’. The use of ‘you’ here lowers the risk of appearing self-praising which ‘I am really intelligent’ might have encouraged. R is emphatic about the benefits of being dyslexic ( ‘definitely’, ‘actually’, ‘the fact that’). ‘[T]hat you are able to be in higher education despite…’ implies that just getting to university at all is not easy for dyslexic people, but that this is a sign, not of a faulty and unfair system, but an opportunity for the dyslexic student to demonstrate ‘really huge credit’ by overcoming those odds. In this story, R frames the difficulties dyslexic students face as thoroughly welcome, because without these challenges, how would she have demonstrated her intelligence as well as she has? R stresses the word ‘are’ in the phrase ‘it shows that you are really intelligent’. It is interesting that she does not stress the word ‘really’, which would have emphasised the degree of her intelligence; instead, the stress upon ‘are’ speaks against an imagined or previous accusation that she may not be intelligent. This implies that her story of survival and success in a hostile academic world is two fingers up to anyone earlier in her education who doubted her ability. What the narrative also does is ensure attention never falls upon the institution or upon wider society in perpetuating an educational system which is not suited to her strengths: individualist ideology triumphs.

The same ideological position is apparent in the extract below in which I and J talk about the positives of dyslexia:

FG2, part of extract 85

*J: mmmm hmm, and, mmm, yeah, I’m quite proud of it now, cos I’m doing, I’m at uni*

 *and, I don’t think too much like that, but I kind of think it’s inspiring,*

 *[it shouldn’t] stop you from doing anything I want [to do].*

*H: [yeah so ] [so it’s] it’s your, like when you*

 *go for job interviews*

*J: mmm*

*H: and you’re saying that, I’ve I’ve got this label, but I still like done really well*

 *at all [of this] stuff and so you’re proud of it, um.*

*J: [mmm]*

*J: yeah, well. Not necessarily something to be proud of, but not something to be*

 *ashamed of either .*

*H: mmm*

*J: yup.*

‘[I]’m quite proud of it’ says J, though she contradicts this a few lines down. Her pride is linked to the context of being at ‘uni’ and dyslexia is presented as a symbol of her merit and motivation. ‘I think it’s kind of inspiring’, J goes on, and so presents herself as the struggling hero (softened by ‘kind of’), there to encourage others with a similar label to keep on trying, because they can get there in the end. J does not want to make too much of her pride. She plays it down by saying ‘I don’t think too much like that’ and ‘not necessarily something to be proud of’, which speaks of the uneasiness in taking on a self-congratulatory identity. The rugged individual does not get to say that he himself is inspiring; it is others who get to name him hero.

However, for N and M at certain points in the discussion, being constructed by others as a ‘hero’ is rejected. In the first extract below, N tells us how he does not like being framed by his partner’s parents as some sort of hero because he is doing a PhD even though he is dyslexic. ‘[T]hey think it’s brilliant’ says N ‘they’re like, “ooh! It’s great”, whereas N’s response is ‘no, please don’t, don’t tell me that’. It is interesting that N does not want to be placed as the hero (at this point in the conversation) and R does (in the extract above). Why? Perhaps because, in N’s narrative, such an emphasis is placed upon the dyslexia that attention is taken away from the other aspects of the individual’s identity. I respond to N’s story with ‘you mean like “even though you’ve got this terrible thing, you can still survive it”’, which is perhaps recognisant of the omnipresence of the survivalist discourse in which the individual’s identity is all about the ‘disadvantage’ or ‘disability’ and overcoming the odds. However, N’s identity is not enhanced by appearing to be someone who deliberately courts sympathy. It is embarrassing, not only because one may want to appear humble in a social situation, but because of the awareness that not everyone will share the view of the successful-despite-dyslexia discourse without criticism. Dyslexia is still sometimes constructed as a cover for stupidity and laziness – not something that N may want to broadcast.

FG2, extract 56

*N: mm I found a great contrast [there] cos, my partner’s parents*

*J: [mm ]*

*N: they think it’s brilliant that I’m doing a PhD and I’ve got dys[lexia]*

*J: [mm ]*

*N: and I’m just like, well, you know, ‘don’t’, they’re like ‘ohh! It’s GREAT’, and you’re*

 *thinking well ‘no. please don’t’, [don’t tell me that]*

*J: [that you’re, yeah]*

*H: [you mean like ] ‘even though you’ve*

*H: got [this terrible thing, you can still] [survive it’ yeah]*

*N: [yeah, IT IS, hhhh ] hhhh [yeah hhhhhhh ] [hhhhhhh]*

*J: [yeeaah! ] [you’re just you] [aren’t you]*

*M is similarly dismissive of the ‘hero’ construction:*

FG2, extract 96

*M: see I I don’t see dyslexia in that kind of, I see I I see what you are*

 *saying, you know, in this kind of sense that you’ve got this label even*

 *though you’ve got this label, but you know, like, cos I didn’t have*

 *dyslexia until like 24 and stuff, I almost feel like you know I‘ve*

 *got the same, I’m very pleased I got my degree and my masters*

 *and all this, but then it’s like everyone’s like, ‘oh and you did it with*

 *dyslexia all this [time’ and I’m like ‘that’s got nothing to do with it!’]*

*General: [ yeah hhhhh mmmm yeah yeah mmmm ]*

*G: yeah.*

*M: You know I’m [not]*

*H: [Oh] really? So that’s similar [to ]*

*M: [it’s] it’s not, I mean , it is patronising,*

 *it’s almost like dyslexia is taking some of the glory or the*

*General: [hhhh yeah hhhhhhhh]*

*M: [It’s like you know, it’s]*

*H: [hhhh yeah ]*

*M: it’s nothing to do with that, you know, I am who I am, I’ve done what I’ve done,*

*H: mmm*

Throughout FG2, M is someone who most consistently presents dyslexia as a myth, as something which should not attract particular attention or help. Here he is explicit in explaining his dislike of the ‘hero’ discourse: ‘it’s patronising, it’s almost like dyslexia is taking some of the glory…’. From this position, it is the dyslexia that is the main focus of the achievement, not M: ‘it’s nothing to do with that, you know, I am who I am, I’ve done what I’ve done’. He seems to say ‘I don’t need any label to succeed – I don’t need a crutch’. It is possible that M and N are wary of the assumption that because they are dyslexic, others will assume they had special hep, or that they are intellectually inferior. The word ‘glory’ is also telling of the status having a PhD bestows.

A little earlier in the focus group conversation M implies that focusing upon the organic causes of dyslexia can allow dyslexic people to be distracted from their responsibility for their own success. Finding out what ‘causes’ dyslexia can make it easier for the ‘average’ dyslexic person to ‘not combat’ it; in other words, believing that dyslexia has a particular, internal cause can be used as an excuse not to work hard to overcome one’s own weaknesses, or as G says, to ‘deal with it, deal with it.’:

FG2, extract 82

*M: Now obviously if you are a researcher of dyslexia, it’s very interesting to find out what causes [it, but for the] average dyslexic person.*

*H: [so what is ]*

*M: but it can be useful for the average dyslexic person because it makes it much easier to not combat it, cos, that sounds really aggressive, but if you know how to combat [something, to] makes it [easier to ]*

*J: [to build ]*

*M: but if someone could say to me*

*G: deal with it, deal with it.*

It is a damning judgement upon people who refer to their disability in order to argue for reasonable adjustments and a fair playing field, people for whom an organic ‘cause’ might be crucial. In M’s discourse, the individual is ultimately accountable for their own success, and is to be blamed for their own failure. McGinnis (2009) summarises this ideological perspective:

*The assumptions of the ideology are that of the individual as an autonomous self, while education is seen as neutral. Hence focus is placed on the individual students to be agents of their own success or failure. The placement of this burden on the individual diverts attention away from the role institutions play in this construct of success or failure, ignores structural determinants, and fails to recognize the multiple ways the self is constructed.*

*(62)*

Instead of encouraging a sense of support and connectedness within the student community, individualising and meritocratic ideologies help to create isolated, competitive individuals who measure their own success through narrow comparison with others (i.e. according to educational institution, level and grade). This encourages overt criticism of peers and creates an atmosphere of judgement and condescension which leaves little room for collaboration and cooperation. Some of the participants found themselves straddling a rigid, dominant individualism and another ideological position which said, in essence, ‘it’s not fair’. There was at once an impression that all obstacles should be individually overcome without fuss, and the contradictory sense that the educational context was leaving them severely and unacceptably disadvantaged. I am going to discuss a few extracts in which this sense of competition and unfair advantage/ disadvantage were foregrounded.

The extract below (119) begins with my question which leads on from a discussion about fairness at university for dyslexic students. With this question, I shift the ideological frame away from the focus upon the individual as survivor, and onto the environment (i.e. how students are assessed). R is then able to construct herself as unfairly assessed:

FG1, extract 119

*H: [yeah ] yeah, well we’ve talked about the the difference*

 *between coursework and exams, but are there any other ways you would like to be assessed?*

*R: Well, I think for my degree, doing languages, you’d think it would be more important speaking than wri[ting] but I feel so completely writing assessed*

*D: [yeh]*

*R: that it’s not at [all ] representative of whether I’m fluent, which I am, but*

*C: [yeh]*

*R: a [lot of other students] aren’t at all*

*H: [(unclear), yeah ] yeah*

*R: but they’re gonna get better [degrees]*

*H: [degrees] yeah, isn’t that interesting*

In the last few lines of this extract R extends the construction of unfairness with her complaint that other students will get ‘better degrees’ than she will, simply because of the way their work is assessed. ‘[I]t’s not at all representative’ of her true standard, argues R; but the key things appears to be that in the end she will not compare well to others in terms of the degree she is awarded, and in a world where grades are taken to represent inner worth, this is a blow.

The construction of the self in comparison and in competition with others is a strong theme throughout the focus group conversations. This group of constructions appears to straddle the idea that things should be ‘fair’, and that ‘it’s all about hard-work, so stop complaining’. Below the focus is again on grades, and for N there is an injustice in the education system that judged him on exam performance instead of coursework. People in N’s community have got ‘distinction’ for their Master’s courses, but he has merely passed, which for N, in this extract, clearly is not fair:

FG2, extract 118

*N; [it is ] sometimes, I I know people who do*

*N: masters degrees that were all [course]work based, and they got a*

*J: [mmm ]*

*N: distinction, and er and all the coursework that I’ve ever done has been distinction on [ but ] so I might sound grudge, or someone whose been totally*

*G: [mmm]*

*J: [mmm]*

*N: exam with absolutely bare pass at 50 or whatever, just cos it’s all exam based – and that, your average [just goes pfthhh]*

*H: [yeah ]*

*J: [mmmmm ]*

N constructs the value inherent in the grade, yet at the same time suggests the value of *his* grade is questionable. He has been hard done by, and it is not fair. ‘I might sound [as though I hold a] grudge’, says N, possibly in recognition of the fact that his complaint might make him appear as someone who expects to be treated in a special way, or someone who couldn’t ‘deal with it. deal with it’ (G, FG2, extract 82). His language appeals to the group to recognise the injustice of a situation in which someone (he) is not given the correct place in the competitive hierarchy, and is being forced to accept a lower status.

Constructing a situation as unfair, particularly when the frustration is directed towards others who are apparently more ‘successful’ is problematic because it can be interpreted as jealousy. This area of ‘feeling’ is complicated because there is arguably an important difference between the constructions of ‘resentment’ and ‘envy’ as kinds of jealousy; the former being more socially acceptable than the latter (Ahier &Beck, 2010). Where ‘resentment’ might be understood to construct a moral position about (un)fairness, ‘envy’ can be understood, unattractively, as ‘enabling the inadequate to shackle the enterprising’ (Ahier & Beck, 2010: 324). From this perspective, N would not benefit from appearing to be envious; and he takes care to situate himself in the ‘justifiably resentful’ position, as do the other participants. We might consider that the ‘envious’ position draws upon neoliberalist, individualising ideology, which legitimises the status quo (MacCoy & Major, 2007); and the ‘justifiably resentful’ position draws more upon those discourses of equity and democracy which support value the idea of a level playing field in education. The distinction is important: ‘other people hadn’t tried at all and had done loads better’ explained R, when talking about A-level grades (FG1, extract 5). The fact that they had not tried, but she had, is essential to her positive identity here, and avoids her appearing merely envious. She shifts the blame onto the system (and, implicitly, onto those ‘other people’ who took their high grades without questioning the fairness) and so steps momentarily out of the individualist, meritocratic ideological position. ‘[I]ndividualism ends up reinforcing the existing structures because it ignores the reality of social structures and reduces all structural problems to personal problems’ (Baro, 1994: 22), and so to construct the situation as structural, rather than personal, R had to turn to alternative discourses.

Nowhere is the fine balance between egalitarian, democratic, meritocratic, individualistic, and neoliberal ideologies more apparent (in these focus groups) than when participants are discussing the use, or not, or the fairness, or not, of ‘reasonable adjustments’. ‘Reasonable adjustments’ is the term used to refer to institutions’ legal obligation to try to create a level playing field for participation; that is, it is required that the university put in place adjustments in assessment and teaching, for example, to reduce the disadvantage minority groups experience during their studies. Dyslexic students are legally ‘disabled’ and they therefore have the right to adjustments like extra time in exams, considerate marking, a specialist dyslexia tutor, a computer and assistive software, lecture notes before the lecture, and sometimes a proof-reader, scribe, or mentor, amongst other things. In both focus group conversations the use of such adjustments is a topic for heated discussion.

I want to start by looking at the ideological presence in example extracts in which the participants construct the use of adjustments as negative, unfair, or dishonourable. First, here is R in the second focus group, responding to my request for clarification about his position on reasonable adjustments:

FG2, part of extract 128

*H: OK, I’ll ramble on till then [then] but you were saying that you didn’t want*

*M: [yeah]*

*H: anyone to make any adjustments for you. Is that right?*

*R: yeah. I consider a degree a bit like becoming a medical doctor. If you’re, if you*

 *don’t have that standard, I don’t see how I should qualify.*

*H: ok.*

‘[Y]ou were saying that you didn’t want anyone to make reasonable adjustments for you’ is not neutral. It does not invite disagreement, partly because of its emphasis upon ‘anyone’ and ‘you’. My utterance implies that reasonable adjustments require someone’s effort on behalf of ‘you’. The ‘you’ is constructed passively as the receiver of the kind tolerance of ‘anyone’. There is a hidden judgment upon those who *do* need other people to let them off, or give them a leg up. I could have framed the adjustments as ‘for’ the benefit of all students, ‘for’ a fairer system, and not *done* by anybody *for* someone else. My introductory statement or question was spoken in the light of R’s previous positioning of himself in opposition to reasonable adjustments, but it nevertheless implicitly endorses R’s expected meritocratic position. R responds ‘I consider a degree a bit like becoming a medical doctor. If you’re, if you don’t have that standard, I don’t see how I should qualify.’. I want to unpick these two sentences because they contain a number of powerful ideological assumptions and do some important rhetorical work.

First of all, ‘becoming a medical doctor’ is upheld as the ultimate in academic and moral achievement (still popularly understood as an occupation of the elites, see Mathers and Parry, 2009), and a standard against which other achievements may be measured. The assumption is that one cannot become a doctor without a good deal of individual merit. Furthermore, a ‘standard’ is something that you ‘have’; that is, either it is contained within you, or it is not, and tough luck if it is not. The standard you are set at is understood to be fair and accurate, and conveniently allows comparison between individuals. This may seem democratic, but, argue Carr and Hartnett (1996) is an ‘elitist conception of democracy’ (171) and one which only imitates egalitarianism. Having a degree is lifted to a similar intellectual and moral status to becoming a medical doctor; it is a symbol of worth that would be tainted if people were to come by such an accolade without the correct ‘standard’. My interpretation of R’s position here is that making ‘adjustments’ would lead to just such a taint.

The role of the institution which provides the degree course and ultimately awards degrees is missing from this story. We only have ‘I’ and the universal ‘you’ to measure and label according to individual ‘merit’. R’s position may seem like common sense. We are used to constructing ourselves according to our qualifications, and those of us who have been ‘successful’ in education have a vested interest in maintaining the illusion of true meritocracy (see Deleuze & Guitari, 2013 for more on people’s role in their own repression). Nevertheless, R uses his words carefully: for example, ‘I consider’ introduces R’s position, and as it is only his personal consideration or belief, what he says cannot easily be counteracted. It is also of note that R shifts his subject from ‘you’ (‘if you don’t have that standard’) to ‘I’ (‘I don’t see how I should qualify). On the surface, this shift makes his sentence nonsense, as why would ‘your’ inability mean ‘I’ should not qualify; but obviously, this is not what was meant. The shift to ‘I’ can be seen as a rhetorical device to reduce the potential offensiveness of R’s position (that some dyslexic people just will not have the right standard) because he is now apparently only making a judgment about his own hypothetical self.

R produces a similar ideological position in the extract below:

FG2, part of extract 122

*R: Frankly, I wouldn’t expect to be marked any more generously than anyone else on*

 *the basis of what I have. I mean if someone was er had Down’s Syndrome and*

 *they weren’t capable of doing a history degree or a biology degree then they*

 *can’t. Simple as that.*

*H: mmmm*

*R: I don’t expect allowances*

‘I don’t expect allowances’, says R. ‘I stand on my own two feet and don’t expect hand-outs’, and ‘I don’t think anyone of integrity should expect allowances’ are what might be inferred from his statement. Again, R misses out the ways in which institutional practices limit participation of students who do not conform to traditional stereotypes; dyslexic people, for example, who might struggle to express understanding in the traditional formats, and therefore risk being churned out of the institutions quite literally ‘degraded’ (Crawford, 2010: 10). R’s approach is hard-line, ‘firm but fair’ in appearance. Again what R says is hard to resist, particularly because he is dyslexic himself, and is applying hard-line expectations to himself. If others in the group disagree, then they risk seeming needy and could diminish the value of their academic achievements; after all, ‘[h]ow can anybody be against a meritocracy’ when it makes such intuitive sense? (Crawford, 2010: 4). The ideology R relies upon for his position in these extracts is one which isolates individuals from context, and helps to construct a society of individuals, of individual blame and responsibility (Bauman, 2001, Sampson, 1989). In this sense, R’s discourse ignores the possibility of communality between individuals which social models of disability attempt to foster (Priestley, 1998). Interestingly, at points in this conversation, G draws heavily on the social model and also upon medical constructions of dyslexia and disability to counter some of the individualist constructions that R and M and others put forward.

Before I turn specifically to the ways in which individualism is resisted in the discussions about reasonable adjustments in the conversations, I want to look at an extract which begins with R talking about the value of rote-learning, and continues with J and M affirming his ideological position. It is an important extract to include because it illustrates how ideological assumptions can have implications for identity and action.

FG2, extract 129

*R: look, I think, [it’s not easy] and it’s not easy for dyslexics, but I think*

*J: [hhhhh ]*

*R: rote-learning does have a place in this in this education that we’re doing now. I*

 *think it’s just a reality that we find hard.*

*J: I think, cos I wouldn’t want to get a first, and know that it was because I had*

 *dyslexia, when I [get that] I want to know that it’s because I’ve done it*

*M: [mmm ]*

*J: and to the same, to like their standard*

*M: mmm*

*J: and so like, I agree. [with what you’re saying]*

*M: [mmmm you want your ]*

*J: [yeah you’ve got a degree and you’re dyslexic ] or*

*M: [first to be the same as this person’s first or that person’s first ]*

*J: you got it [cos] you’re dyslexic, you wanna know that you*

*M: [mm]*

*M: mmm*

*J: achieved it the same [as ]*

The phrase R uses - ‘I think, it’s not easy for dyslexics, but…’ might give the impression of sympathy, but in fact works to set up the idea that dyslexic students should nonetheless get on and cope. And R’s introductory ‘look’ constructs his talk as being frank, honest, and straight to the point, and therefore difficult to resist. R does not say that all learning should be rote-learning; he says it has ‘a place’ – once again this is hard to resist because it would be fairly extreme to argue that all rote learning should be outlawed. He then presents rote-learning as a ‘reality’ of university education. Rote-learning in educational institutions, argue Carr and Hartnett, was about efficiency in a market-driven system (1996). Under this market hegemony, there was a move towards knowledge transmission over inquiry based learning (Carr & Hartnett, 1996), a move which gave pride of place to memorisation and learning by rote. Moreover, it is common sense that what is ‘reality’ cannot be changed; so for R, there is no alternative but to fit in with the system as best as you can. If R did not have the dyslexia label, his comment here (in a group of people with the label) might have produced a retort such as ‘what would you know?’, but as he is dyslexic, R’s position is beyond easy criticism.

It is interesting that J and M respond immediately with a similar stance to R. J says ‘I think, cos I wouldn’t want to get a first, and know that it was because I had dyslexia, when I get that I want to know that it’s because I’ve done it … and to the same, to like their standard’. From this perspective, reasonable adjustments are considered a threat to the independent success of the dyslexic student and a risk to the worth of their degree. They are also constructed as fundamentally unfair, in line with an understanding that in a ‘democracy’ everyone should be treated equally (which obviously ignores the fact that ‘equal’ may not mean ‘fair’). This version of democracy again fits with Carr and Hartnett’s idea of ‘elitist’ democracy (1996); one in which it benefits the most privileged in a society to uphold the idea of fair treatment for all, as long as this ignores the disparity in individuals’ circumstances and degree of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991). It is also worth noting here the language of ‘getting’ or ‘having’ a degree, the idea of a degree as something you possess, and this possession as more valuable than the learning process; ‘students seek to “*have* a degree” rather than “*be* learners”’ (Molesworth, *et al.*  2009).

In a study examining racism in the conversations of white Australians around the topic of ‘affirmative action’ (giving advantage to minority groups in education or employment to ensure fairer participation) for indigenous populations, one research participant explained her opposition to affirmative action by drawing on meritocratic and democratic ideologies (Augustinos, Tuffin & Every, 2005). This participant’s wording comes very close to J’s in the extract above. Here is an example of what she says (the ‘they’ in this extract refers to the hypothetical individual from a minority group):

*A: I think although too that they must ask themselves because I know I would that are they getting it because of their merits or are they getting it because of what they are…and I know if I was put into that situation I would probably prefer not to take that job because I wouldn’t have, I’d never know whether I got the job because I might be male or because I’m white so I think it’s a very difficult line to walk.*

(participant A, Augustinos, Tuffin & Every, 2005: 324, italics added)

The authors of this study argue that A is speaking from a liberal-egalitarian position which enables A to avoid accusations of racism by constructing a need to rely upon individual merit alone; the speaker is legitimately able to imply ‘that persons accepted through affirmative action programmes automatically lack merit and capability.’(324). In the current study J takes an almost identical ideological position, but in her case she herself represents the minority group. She therefore compounds and legitimises a system to the detriment of her own ‘success’.

In the extract below, M constructs the same ideological restrictions upon his rights to adjustments. Individual blame is emphasised, and even though in this case it is himself he is hypothetically holding to account, we understand that this is a judgement upon all dyslexic people who ‘use’ their label as an ‘excuse’ for more favourable treatment.

FG2, part of extract 61

*M: it shouldn’t be an [excuse]. If something’s due in at a certain time or if I’m*

*J: [yeah ]*

*M: supposed to be at a meeting, and I’m not, it’s my fault. It’s*

 *not [the dyslexia’s] fault, you know?*

*J: [mmmm, yeh ]*

Although some participants maintained their ideological stance on reasonable adjustments relatively consistently throughout the conversations, individual participants appeared to be torn upon the issue. Here is C half way through extract 35, talking about how she felt about the ‘free stuff’ she received after being identified as dyslexic:

FG1, part of extract 35

*C: …well, when I was diagnosed, I got all this equipment through and people were like that’s*

 *ridicu[lous ] like [hh ] why do you get a*

*S: [mmm] [mmm]*

*C: printer just cos you’re dyslexic? But it has really helped to like, print out your lecture notes, when you go to the lecture and that, so, [but ] you do feel*

*S: [mmm]*

*C: a bit unfair because I am getting all this stuff for free. But then I guess you do need it, but then I have managed without it, before.*

*H: yeah.*

*C: so. I don’t know, but. I’m like, well, I’m entitled to it, so I’ll have it.*

*H: yeah.*

*C: so*

*H: yeah*

In the extract above we hear C trying to manage the connected ideals of fairness and merit, and struggling to reach a conclusion about what these ideals mean for her behaviour. C begins by referring to the response of other people: ‘they were like, that’s ridiculous like why do you get a printer just cos you’re dyslexic?’ and so she is under pressure to justify the equipment she was given. ‘[I]t has really helped’ says C ‘but you do feel a bit unfair’; ‘But then I do need it, but then I have managed without it before’. C repeatedly switches between constructions of entitlement and guilt. This uncomfortable switching is arguably reflective of the tensions between egalitarian-democratic and meritocratic ideological positions. The former allows C to justify her adjustments on the grounds that she has a greater need than others, while the latter condemns any means of getting ahead which does not come from an individual’s merit or hard work. British Law on ‘equality’ here is in danger of being eclipsed by the unwritten laws of meritocracy and capitalism. ‘These contradictory tensions between the ideals of egalitarianism on the one hand, and individualism, on the other, are embedded in the very fabric of western liberal democracy’ (Augustinos, Tuffin & Every, 2005: 337).

Staying on the topic of reasonable adjustments and fairness, I want to consider next a longer extract (below) in which N, G and I talk more about the fairness of getting additional support.

FG2, part of extracts 48 and 49

*N: …….. I use it terribly, I mean [I,I I ]*

*G: [that’s a new] thing though*

*N: [I have a laugh ]*

*G: [dyslexia didn’t use] to be like that. It wasn’t something that would get you*

*H: yeah, it didn’t*

*G: lots of help. It wasn’t [something people would give you]*

*N: [t’s not just help you get though ], it’s leeway.*

*G: yeah*

*N: like, that’s what I got, I got, I would say I’m dyslexic, and they would go ‘urgh’ and run a mile and I would use it. It’s terrible. But [I do! I use it to get]*

*General: [hahahahahaha ]*

*N: away with stuff.*

*H: like what?*

*N: so, say I’m late for meeting, or time management, or say I’ve not, or I should have done some analysis to show my supervisor and I’ll say ‘oh it’s not, it’s taken me a bit longer, a bit longer to read, and you know I’m dyslexic’ and he’s like ‘yeah, send it me when you’ve done it’ type thing. So [you know]*

*H: [yeah but ] that’s also, I mean, how do you know when you are using it like that and when you are using it because it really did take you longer, I mean, it actually probably does, doesn’ [it?]*

*N: [er ] well, I work really hard, so, it. I never missed a deadline, in my undergrad degree*

*H: yeah*

*N: and people did, you know, who didn’t have dyslexia. But I just worked. I worked till twelve or two in the morning. Get up next morning, in uni for nine O’Clock, and did he same kind of thing again, so. You adapt, you know, because you are [gonna]*

*H: [yeah ]*

*H: yeah*

*N: lose marks because it’s a rigid rule that’s in place*

*H: yeah*

*N: You’ve got to get it [in on ] time. It doesn’t matter [what you’ve got]*

*H: [yeah ] [yeah, no ]*

*N: so, you do it.*

*H: yeah*

*N: whereas, if you’ve got a little bit of leeway, [you] might,*

*H: [yeh]*

*N: you’ll take that [inch and then you’ll take that mile].*

I want to begin with N’s opening lines: ‘I use it terribly, I mean I,I,I…I have a laugh’, and his lines a little further down: ‘It’s not just help you get though, it’s leeway, like, that’s what I got, I got, I would say I’m dyslexic, and they would go ‘urgh’ and run a mile and I would use it. It’s terrible. But I do! I use it to get away with stuff.’. ‘Using’ something implies a tool of some sort which helps someone to do something else. N puts into doubt the fairness of his ‘use’ of the dyslexia label through the words ‘terrible’ and ‘terribly’. Why is it ‘terrible’? From a democratic perspective that praises efforts to place individuals on as equal a footing as possible in education, declaring dyslexia and accepting adjustments would be just and expected. However, the strain of democracy which is used to justify neoliberal individualism conveniently ignores the moral imperative for a ‘level-playing field’, and instead upholds a fuzzy ‘equality of opportunity’ ideal. From this second perspective, N might be accused of ‘using’ his label to ‘get’ educational status that others have had to ‘get’ all by themselves. N constructs the resulting ‘leeway’ he is given as something that it is morally questionable of him to take. The suggestion is that, regardless of the legal position on adjustments, and of an individual’s willingness to give him ‘leeway’, it is somehow not honourable to accept these concessions. For N then, in this case, accepting help means accepting guilt, and enduring society’s quiet condemnatory gaze. On the other hand, N manages to soften his self-condemnation with humour. By saying ‘I have a laugh’ and ‘I use it to get away with stuff’ N is calling on a different ideological position; one in which getting one over on someone superior to you (a boss, for example) is something admirable, and cheekily attractive. If you’re doing it ‘for a laugh’ then the motivation for using the label appears to shift; it becomes a playful experiment to see how far you can hoodwink an ignorant boss or a dominant system. The ‘use’ of the label then becomes a light-hearted jape deserving of a boyish respect and a feeling that the rest of us have somehow been let-in-on it; it is not really very serious. I and the other participants all laughed along with the joke; after all, who would not try to get away with the same thing?

But, in the end, the use of humour nevertheless confirms N’s ‘use’ of the dyslexia label as actually unfair, even though the getting-away-with-it perspective is possibly less shameful. N’s constructions are therefore surprising: why would someone apparently choose an ideological position which presented him in a negative way when there were other ideas available? In the middle of the given extract I say ‘yeah but that’s also, I mean, how do you know when you are using it like that and when you are using it because it really did take you longer, I mean, it actually probably does, doesn’t it?’. My reaction to N’s self-construction arguably allowed him to take up the third, and more positive ideological stance from which he could ‘be’ a hard-working person deserving of reasonable adjustments: ‘But I just worked. I worked till twelve or two in the morning. Get up next morning, in uni for nine O’Clock, and did he same kind of thing again’. N appeared to need permission (in the form of my question) to present himself as deserving. Arguably, presenting oneself as deserving of additional support is subtly understood as dangerous territory in a society where individual merit and effort are regarded as the sole means through which one should reach success; and so, unless it is made explicitly acceptable in a given context (like this focus group) to acknowledge additional needs, individuals may find it too socially risky to present themselves as justly making use of reasonable adjustments. Interestingly, although N momentarily allows himself to be deserving, he quickly slips back into an emphasis on his individual responsibility (and implies everybody’s individual responsibility with his universal ‘you’) with his comment ‘you adapt’ and ‘it doesn’t matter what you’ve got’. N finishes this extract with the warning ‘you’ll take that inch and then you’ll take that mile’; a damning characterisation of individuals, and of a society that allows them that freedom to ‘take’. N’s fluctuation between subject positions and his apparently habitual return to a position which maintains his role as ultimately responsible for his own difficulties and success arguably tells of the identities (the more persistence ideas people have about themselves) people bring with them to local conversational contexts. While it is possible to take up multiple and contradictory subject positions within a conversation, not all people have equal access to, or can equally maintain, the same range of subject positions as others. It is not simply a matter of choosing this position over that one. Repeatedly being offered the same position in particular educational contexts arguably means that that position is one you unintentionally default to across contexts until it becomes what might be described as a more enduring identity. The personal histories each participant brought with them to these conversations were quite apparently a key influence in the patterns of positioning.

In other places in the conversation, N does openly resist the idea that dyslexic people should not be given or should not ask for reasonable adjustments. Here he is responding to another participant’s suggestion that it is not ok for dyslexic people to ask their employer for more time to write a report:

FG2, part of extract 30

*N: [urgh ]*

*T: [I, sorry]*

*N: sorry. I disagree with that, if you’ve got time constraints.*

*J: yeah*

*N: If you’ve got a job with time constraints, Y wants a certain job done by x time and date etcetera*

*T: mmmm*

*H: mmm*

*N: You may not physically be possible to get it to that date, so, you have to negotiate, you have to go to your boss and say, ‘you’ve asked me to do this task in this time’ you’re gonna have to say ‘look, my dyslexia means that I am a little bit slower at reading, little bit slower at writing. [is ] there any leeway*

*H: [mm]*

*N: on this?’*

*H: yeah. Yeah but, yeah.*

N is very clear in supporting the right of the individual to ask for and accept additional ‘leeway’ purely on the basis of the disadvantages dyslexic people may experience in the workplace. Here, N takes ownership of the dyslexia: ‘my dyslexia means that…’, and although he still constructs the problems as his own (rather than belonging to an environment which has particular expectations which are not always compatible with his skill set) he is nevertheless able to confront the employer directly in this hypothetical scene. Repeatedly in the second focus group, N sits in a fluctuating ideological position on the matter of fairness and reasonable adjustments, aligning himself at different points with G who is consistently battling for social justice, and M, who appears a staunch individualist and meritocrat. Below is the second part of the extract discussed above as another example of the interplay between the ideologies discussed in this section so far that is representative of the focus group as a whole:

FG2, part of extract 30

*M: [but, surely ], regardless of if you have dyslexia or not,*

*M: everyone’s going to come face-to-face with a deadline [they ] can’t meet.*

*J: [mmm]*

*M: like, they could be the quickest, smartest, brightest person on the planet, and still end up having a deadline you can’t meet. You can still go to your boss and say ‘I don’t think’*

*G: but that’s just about time management.*

*M: well it [is, but it’s surely ] [having dyslexia ]*

*G: [like if that’s just about time-management, then] [it’s just expectation]*

*M: you just have to be very good at time-management.*

*N: not necessarily, you know, you’re slower at reading*

*G: mmm*

*N: you know, how can you make time for that? If you’ve only got x amount of time for that, [it, you know, exactly ]*

*G: [it depends on the task] It depends upon the organisation. They have to understand that if someone’s dyslexic it might take them longer and it’s reasonable to allow them [to have longer ]*

*J: [I’d feel, I wouldn’t] want to ask, I wouldn’t want to say that to my boss. I wouldn’t want to say ‘can you give me extra time because I’m dyslexic?’ In an academic environment, I wouldn’t have a problem with it,*

*M: mm*

*J: but, I don’t know why, but I wouldn’t [want to feel ]*

*G: [cos there’s stigma]*

*J: yeah. And I wouldn’t want them to think I was incapable, or something like*

 *[that ] yeah.*

*H: [yeah]*

*N: It’ll all come down to the boss you’re working for*

*J: yeah*

*N: so, I mean.*

The speakers in the above extract are divided in their positions on the rights dyslexic people have to additional adjustments in the workplace. J and M form one camp, and N and G, the opposing camp. Here I am going to have a closer look at the discourse they are using which reflects wider ideological standpoints. Here is M’s opening sentence: ‘but, surely, regardless of if you have dyslexia or not, everyone’s going to come face-to-face with a deadline they can’t meet.’ M’s ‘but’ indicates he is going counter the perspective of the previous speaker who was arguing asking for additional help due to dyslexia was fair – ‘but’ is actually not essential, grammatically speaking (i.e. the sentence makes perfect sense without it); ‘but’ then suggests the speaker intends the other participants to know he offering a counter position.

The use of ‘but’ is less obviously confrontational than beginning ‘I disagree’ because it does not wholly reject the previous speakers position, but implies there is more to consider. It also arguably indicates a certain self-awareness that others will perceive M in a particular way because he is opposing a previous stance, and acts to counteract these potentially negative perceptions (Schriffin, 1987: 158). ‘[S]urely’ appeals to others’ common sense; it sets up his subsequent utterance as one which no reasonable, right-thinking person would sensibly dispute. It is difficult to deny that ‘everyone’s going to come face-to-face with a deadline they can’t meet’ and this makes M’s argument stronger. The underlying assumption seems to be that if this is a difficulty which affects everyone at some stage in their working life, there is no reason why it should only be people with a dyslexia label who are given leeway here. In essence, M appears to be saying that the dyslexia label is not important, or relevant; everybody should be treated equally. Being treated equally is a respected moral position associated with egalitarian principles apparently underpinning democracy (Carr & Hartnett, 1996). If participants oppose M’s discourse here, they risk being positioned as anti-democratic, particularly as they themselves would be arguing for ‘unfair’ help for themselves as bearers of the dyslexia label. One of the ways to avoid such a negative identity is to draw on a social justice discourse which presents people with disabilities as disadvantaged in a system which treats everyone equally; and therefore emphasises the moral imperative of working towards creating level-playing fields for participation as the precursor to equal treatment.

G is the participant who most confidently opposes M’s position on adjustments in the workplace. She responds to M by saying ‘but that’s just about time management.’. The ‘but’ is placed at the beginning of her statement and spoken very quickly after M’s turn, indicating her disagreement. Here use of ‘just’ suggests that M’s assertion is too simple; that this situation is about more than time management. It suggests M has missed the main question. In not accepting M’s position on fairness in the workplace, G is also rejecting his ideological position on fairness in general (that it is created by treating everyone equally). M immediately speaks again, beginning ‘well it is, but it’s surely, having dyslexia, you just have to be very good at time-management’. ‘Well’ can be used to re-emphasise a point just made and often begins statements which counterpose what a previous speaker has said (Schriffin, 1987). This seems to be the case here, as M returns to his common-sense appeal using ‘surely’, and again allocates responsibility to the individual dyslexic person to be ‘very good at time-management’ and so resists G’s implied stance.

At this point in the conversation N speaks: ‘not necessarily, you know, you’re slower at reading’ which aligns him with G. ‘[N]ot necessarily’ allows N a degree of resistance without submitting to the identity of someone with no common-sense; ‘not necessarily’ gives some room for M’s assertion that dyslexic people should ‘be very good at time-management’ to be correct – just not in all circumstances, or not to such an extreme degree. ‘[Y]ou know, you are slower at reading’ N asserts. The ‘you know’ refers to what N is constructing as generally understood information (‘you’ representing the universal ‘one’), so here, N is referring to the generally accepted knowledge that people with dyslexia can’t read as quickly. If you are slower at reading, argues N, then it is not necessarily true that you will be able to complete a task at work in the same time as other people. N’s repeated ‘you know’s in the following few lines help to construct N’s version of fairness as widely understood, and obvious, which resists M’s common-sense view. N says ‘exactly’ in overlap to G’s speech, in the expectation that G will be supportive of his position, and in solidarity with her. G does expand upon her idea of fairness in such a situation with, ‘[t]hey have to understand that if someone’s dyslexic it might take them longer and it’s reasonable to allow them to have longer’. ‘They’ is used to refer to the organisation, and G’s ‘have to’ implies that they may be compelled to act in a particular way, and therefore constructs ‘they’ as not omnipotent, but subject to laws about equality for people with disabilities in employment. The responsibility is therefore shifted away from the individual (where M places it), towards the institution, and as such fits with ideologies of equality which support social justice and disability rights. Moreover, G’s use of the words ‘it’s reasonable’ fulfils a similar function to M’s ‘surely’ in that any counter-comments risk being constructed as ‘unreasonable’.

Nevertheless, J manages to avoid appearing unreasonable in her subsequent opposition by using the words ‘I’d feel’: ‘I’d feel, I wouldn’t want to ask, I wouldn’t want to say that to my boss. I wouldn’t want to say “can you give me extra time because I’m dyslexic?”’. By talking only about her own feeling, and her own hypothetical action (using ‘I’), J rejects G’s argument and draws upon the individualistic discourse of surviving-on-one’s-own. J implicitly constructs anyone who asked for help on the basis of dyslexia as morally inferior, but avoids being accused of this through focusing only on herself. N diffuses the tension in this part of the conversation (as he frequently does elsewhere) with ‘[i]t’ll all come down to the boss you’re working for,’ which takes the attention away from the individual agency, and moral choice, and creates the impression that no one is necessarily ‘wrong’ here.

I am going to end this section with a look some extracts in which discourses of fairness and democracy are interwoven with discourses of individual merit. The first of these extracts is dominated by S. Throughout the conversation, S was one of the participants who appeared to shift most frequently between different ideological positions which presented him with discourses of entitlement at certain points, and suggested discourses of the hard-working individual at others (see discussion earlier in this section for S’s construction of the ‘rugged individual’). In this following extract, S quite vehemently presents himself as entitled, and appears to battle with the unspoken accusation that he is getting an unfair leg-up because of his dyslexia label.

FG1, extract 34

*H: I guess you, I guess it’s always been a part of your life?*

*S: Um, I spose, at school it never really came up, and at uni my friends, it might*

 *have been gentle good humour, but they seemed always, I don’t know. Their*

 *reaction was always well, I came out thinking, I am going to quite happily take*

 *whatever advantage I can to get ahead in life, and if, because I’m dyslexic, I get*

 *extra time, I get a computer and I can get a better grade, that’s [fine ] and, if*

*H: [yeah]*

*S: you’ve got a, oh. I don’t know why. It’s almost a weird sense of superiority over*

 *people, you sort of, you feel jealous of me because I am getting all this extra time,*

 *well I’m getting better marks than you, you know, it’s not. I’m dyslexic, then fine,*

 *but the simple fact is I’m better than you!*

*H: hrmm*

*S: you just don’t like that, and you’re trying to find a way to, sort of, pin it, as it were.*

 *[To say], oh you get extra time but you don’t really need it, I’m like NO*

*H: [mmm]*

*S: I have the extra time because I DO need it, and when I have, when I’m on an*

 *even playing-field with you,*

*H: yeah*

*S: I’m better than you,[so ]*

*H: [so you] have no, er, you have a very strong feeling that um of,*

 *that you are entitled to this because you have these difficulties?*

*S: hmm*

I remember that this part of the conversation was a bit of a surprise to me, mainly because of the vociferousness, and loudness with which S’s words were spoken. The loudness level of S’s voice increased as the extract went on, and others’ faces appeared to show a surprised reaction too. In the first three lines of S’s speech here, he seems on the verge of explaining exactly what his uni friends’ reaction was to his dyslexia label, but somehow doesn’t quite say it: ‘they always seemed’, ‘[t]heir reaction was always well’ are left incomplete. However, we get a sense of what S missed out through his use of ‘but’ following ‘it might have been gentle good humour’ which suggests their reaction was very unlikely just gentle good humour, and was in fact more negative. This impression is confirmed as S goes on ‘you feel jealous of me because I am getting all this extra time’. What S seems to be doing here is constructing a personal defensive position against past or potential accusations of being a fraud, of taking on a meaningless label in order to score more points and gain unfair advantage. It is interesting that in order to support his defensive position S draws on a democratic discourse of social justice by using the term ‘even-playing field’. His extra time means he is participating more equally than without it. This is a very different position from the one S took in his ‘ham string’ narrative earlier in the conversation (see the beginning of this section). This ideological position allows S to defend himself, and possibly allows him to make use of adjustments without concern that this is unfair. Nevertheless, I wonder if S’s vociferousness, and strong self-alignment with individualistic and American Dream ideologies in other parts of the conversation point towards an insecurity and doubt about using adjustments. It must be particularly difficult if it is one’s friends who are suggesting you have it easy compared to them and who therefore think your high grades are fraudulent. S does make use of extra time in exams, and so there is pressure on him to justify this to himself and to peers; the rhetoric of the American Dream binds him to continual self-doubt about the genuineness of his academic achievements; while social justice exonerates him, and allows him to speak out. In some ways this extract is an example of a battle between the different ideologies for supremacy in making sense of the world and identity. I wonder also how much choice students like S have in taking up adjustments or not. One can imagine a situation in which S bowed to pressure and decided that it was fairer not to take his extra time. Would this be his decision, or is that decision made by the dominating ideology and the discourses it produces? Giroux writes ‘ideology works on and through individuals to secure their consent to the basic ethos and practices of the dominant society’ (1997, 77). At times S consents to the American Dream ideology, and at times to discourses of social justice.

A similar justificatory and slightly defensive tone is taken by N in the following extract in which he explains to the group his reasons for deciding to take his conference paper into his presentation with him, rather than presenting it purely from memory. N narrates his brief personal struggle in making this decision, and tries to work out how ‘fair’ this was in light of dyslexia. This is a long extract and I will not be analysing it all in detail; I have included the full thing to show the context of the discussion around fairness more clearly.

FG2, Extract 52

*J: but then, I think, quite a lot of people, especially if you are presenting in front of*

 *other people, it’s just whether you’re used [to it or whether you’re]*

 *G: [mmmmmm ]*

*J: confident, cos*

*N: when I, it’s weird, cos I’ve just been to an international conference and delivered a*

 *paper on my work, but I had a script, basically. I wrote that presentation, I’d read*

 *it twice a day for several weeks, and could I remember it? No!*

*General: hahahahaha*

*N: and so I had to use my script, and I thought, well this is just weird, cos, when I*

 *worked at XXXX, I used to be a training instructor, and I had to trade to people,*

 *and I had to do all the different jobs, I gave presentations to people every week,*

 *[different people] [properly ] but I don’t know if that’s just*

*H: [yeah yeah ] [yeah yeah]*

*J: [yeah ]*

*N: a matter of time [cos I’d done the job for so long that I knew]*

*General: [yeah mmmmm yeah yeah yeah ]*

*N: what I was [on about] so, at this conference I had to say ‘you’re*

*General: [mm yeah]*

*N: gonna have to bear with me, I’m gonna read he script because I’m dyslexic*

*H: so you actually said [ that? You]*

*N: [yeah, well ] I actually, you know, the German person or the*

 *Chinese person that actually use their script, and I thought, well, bugger it, I’m*

 *gonna do it, and I know I probably shouldn’t, and I felt a little bit bad but I thought,*

 *well, ‘NO’ ‘my working memory’s not as good’, cos I was looking at this thinking*

 *[why] can’t I remem[ber] this? [why?], and what, what, and I’m*

*H: [yeh ] [yeh] [yeh ]*

*N: looking through all this stuff on dys[lexia] and [mem]ory and I think ah! It*

*H: [yeah] [yeh ]*

*N: must be working [mem]ory, ‘n that’s [what I’m really bad with ]*

*H: [yeh ] [yeah yeh, and it’s interesting really]*

*N: and I know I’ve got really bad short-term memory as [well, [so ]*

*H: [yes, [it’s ]*

This extract follows the lines of the preceding conversation in constructing an intra-group tension around ideas of ‘fairness’: is fair about everybody being treated equally, or is fair about creating an even playing field for those who take part from a disadvantaged position? Each of the respective discourses around these ideas of fairness is powerful, and not only did those in the group not agree, but participants appear to battle with these two positions themselves in their individual stories. The extract begins with J, ‘but then’, who offers a counter point to the previous suggestion that presenting might be harder for dyslexic people. ‘[Q]uite a lot of people’ she says, and I assume she means ‘quite a lot of people find giving presentations difficult’. The ‘quite a lot of people’ appears to refer to the general population, not just dyslexic people; the implication being that dyslexic people do not have the right to claim difficulty with public presentations as their own special problem. J then goes on to offer an alternative reason why some people struggle with presentations: ‘it’s just whether you’re used to it…’, or it’s about being ‘confident’. Her ‘just’ suggests that this is a simple and common reason, and much more likely to be the culprit than dyslexia. The unspoken conclusion is that dyslexic people should just get on with it like everyone else has to. In light of this discursive construction, one might have expected N’s story as one which was hard to share at this point for fear of judgment as someone making excuses or someone lacking ‘confidence’ (not attractive in our culture). However, N firmly expresses his right to take the script in to the conference and justifies this as the fair thing to do. He does this partly by drawing on an ideological position which constructs ‘fairness’ in a different way to J.

The first two parts of N’s story carefully construct an identity of someone who is accomplished, hard-working, and confident and so N resists J’s implied positioning. The ‘international’ N adds before ‘conference’ serves little purpose other than to emphasise the status of his work; the line ‘delivered a paper on my work’ also places N at a high academic level. J, as an undergraduate, is unlikely to have produced a ‘paper’ let alone delivered one. N’s status as a high achieving academic constructed here arguably makes a weakness in memory more acceptable because it cannot put into doubt his intellectual ability in such a context. N also produces himself as a confident and practised presenter from his work at Next. N uses the word ‘weird’ twice to describe the problem he had with this presentation, ‘weird’, I might assume, because there seemed no sensible explanation as to why he could not remember his script when he had both the intelligence and the confidence: and so the only reason left is the dyslexia. From this position, not being able to remember his script is something he cannot control; therefore, it is not his fault. Rather than an ideology which says anyone can make it if they try hard enough, N draws on an ideology which says it is fair to make concessions to people who have particular disadvantages. He strengthens this position in referring to the ‘German or the Chinese person’: ‘you know, the German or the Chinese person that actually use their script’. Here he aligns his difficulty remembering the written word with the difficulties a non-native speaker of English may have with remembering their scripts. N appeals to others’ sense of fairness, and their knowledge that dyslexia does mean your working memory is ‘not as good’, and so he combines the fairness argument with science in a convincing manner. Nevertheless, N still wobbles slightly in the middle of his story: ‘well, bugger it, I’m gonna do it, and I know I probably shouldn’t, and I felt a little bit bad’. Here N may be paying heed to the other ideological positions circulating in the conversation, and ensuring others do not assume he took this decision lightly, but it could also suggest N was insecure in his ‘fairness’ perspective, and vulnerable to arguments which constructed him as taking an unfair advantage over other conference speakers (see Bakhtin, 1981: 79 on the struggle between different ideological positionings).

This section has discussed a group of ideologies which dominated in the participants’ discussion in these focus groups. The common sense understanding that success is based upon merit and hard work frequently shut down other ways of constructing achievement and fairness in education. On a number of occasions students in this study found themselves uncomfortably stuck between democratic, social justice, and meritocratic ideals, and with tension, swung between different social identities which were only acceptable if the conversation were blowing in a particular ideological direction. In section three, following now, the ideas of intelligence and status continue to take centre stage, but they are discussed in the light of a new set of discourses around health, medicine and morality many of which we have inherited from the 19th century.

Theme 3: Health, Morality and Medicine

In chapter one of this thesis I talked about the history of categorisation of people by medical or psychological professionals under labels such as ‘idiot’ or ‘imbecile’ or ‘feeble-minded’ while more recently we have ‘educationally subnormal’ or ‘mentally retarded’ (meanings not necessarily transposable from one period to another). As these labels were largely reserved for the poorer classes of people, and for those who were feared (e.g. black people) or for those who could not be controlled according to dominant cultural expectations (e.g. unmarried mothers), they had strong associations with supposed and invented immorality. Dyslexia has also been called ‘reading retardation’ (Benton & Pearl, 1978), and is still at risk from associations of moral inferiority perhaps partly because of historical associations with ‘retardation’ or other physical or mental ‘abnormalities’ and moral degredation. Even as late as the 1970s there are discussions of dyslexia in peer reviewed journals that might appear shocking today; for example, dyslexia is viewed as a likely ‘manifestation of a specialised type of cerebral immaturity.’ (Critchley, 1970:13), which for me echoes the closer-to-nature argument sometimes levelled at children and women a hundred years ago; another journal article of the 70s has a subheading ‘Specific dyslexia as a social problem’ under which it proclaims, ominously, ‘[a]ny degree of reading retardation today has grave consequences, not only for the dyslexic, but for society as a whole’ (Klasen, 1972:5) and goes on to suggest a lack of ‘inclination’ (laziness?) on the part of the child may be a possible explanation. Along with talk of dyslexia as a ‘disease’ (e.g. Rutter, 1978), and its neat measurement and statistical description following psychometric tests, dyslexia arguably became one of those ‘things’ made by science and meant those labelled became available to ‘education’ (treatment). Medicine and education were closely connected areas of theory and practice, arguably right up until the 1960s (Miles & Miles, 1990), and even for dyslexia, there was (and still is) common use of the word ‘diagnosed’ and ‘treatment’ as though dyslexia were a disease to be clinically defined and fixed (ibid). Dyslexia is constructed in the focus groups as a moral label, though this is arguably obscured by its primary construction as a scientific category. Such scientific categories or ‘natural kinds’ as Hacking names them ‘usually present themselves as scientific and hence as value-free, but they have often been brought into being by judgements of good and evil’ (Hacking, 1995: 354). This is no less the case here.

Of interest in these focus groups, and in many of the discussions I have with the dyslexic students I work with, is that dyslexia is often constructed as something to be proud of; by no means a stigmatised symbol of moral inferiority (i.e. an indication of stupidity or laziness). This is not always the case, and frequently, as participants we shifted uncomfortably between the possibility that dyslexia might still be connected to laziness or stupidity and its conception as a ‘badge of honour’. There are a number of well-established discourses around dyslexia which might help to explain its status as a morally acceptable or even desirable label: firstly, until recently, dyslexia was apparently only diagnosable in people with above average intelligence (according to *IQ* ), and thus being labelled dyslexic served as a confirmation of one’s intelligence; secondly, there is a sort of ‘common knowledge’ that ‘geniuses’ like Einstein and successful entrepreneurs like Sir Richard Branson were/are afflicted with dyslexia and so, as with popular ideas about autism, there appears to be an assumption of exceptional giftedness in those labelled (reminiscent of 19th Century ideas of the idiot-savant); and thirdly, having the reassurance of a medical-type ‘diagnosis’, (usually) given by a professional of psychological science which identifies a specific, neurological deficit not only removes the blame from the individual, but also safely removes him from the far more damaging threat of being labelled ‘just stupid’, or ‘backward’. Reports in the media of dyslexia as a middle-class myth can be rebuffed with a quick wave of the diagnostic report, or as one participant said

‘anyone who says something like that should have a look at the assessments we had to do and see if someone can get ninety nine per cent on one thing and one per cent on another’ (FG1, part of extract 152).

And thus, being dyslexic (as a student at a high status university) can be constructed as being part of a special, intelligent group of people and can have a different ‘feel’ than a label of ‘educationally subnormal’ which is less specific and more easily connected to older ideas about ‘bad genetic stock’ and moral and intellectual inferiority (see for example, the impact of The Vice Society in the 19th Century and medical definitions of ‘moral imbecility’ which included laziness as a symptom – Rimke & Hunt, 2002).

In this section, therefore, I am interested in the ways in which ideologically driven discourses of health, medicine and morality interweave in the focus group conversations with the individualist and individualising ideologies and ideologies around education, literacy and meritocracy discussed in the two sections above. I will explore first how low academic status, or apparent academic failure are constructed as morally negative, and how the participants’ conceptualisations of dyslexia often appeared to allow these students to avoid this stigma. I will also talk about places in the conversation where the dyslexia-as-desirable discourse began to slip, particularly when the conversation moved onto the topic of disability, and what it means to be disabled. Finally, I will talk about how medical discourse is drawn upon by the participants, for example, in discussion of ‘curing’ dyslexia, and how this is sometimes at odds with constructions of dyslexia as ‘difference’ not ‘disability’.

I begin with an extract I have discussed before both in the analysis of subject positions and in the sections above. I am returning to it now because of the final six lines of the conversation in which C is explaining why it was ‘nice’ to be told she was dyslexic.

Part of FG1, extract 2

*C: Erm,hgm, I was identified in my second year, erm, and it sort of felt like, I sort of*

 *new I was dyslexic but it was nice to be told like you are dyslexic. and here’s the*

 *help and [support] sort of thing.*

*H: [yeah ye]*

*H: Why was it, why was it nice to be told?*

*C: because er I struggled with my grammar and that and and spelling and that, and I*

 *just thought I wasn’t that good at it, but it’s nice, like, I ’have like a reason why I’m*

 *not very good at it, if that makes [sense].*

*H: [Yes ].*

*H: [yes ]*

*C: [so it’s] not like my fault as such, like. [ugh, huh]*

She says she used to think the reason she struggled with grammar and spelling ‘and that’ was because she was not very good at them: ‘I just thought I wasn’t that good at it’. This is subtly constructed as a bad thing, and something which she would carry the blame for. Just not being very good at it is produced as a bad thing when C uses the word ‘nice’ in the same line: ‘it’s nice, like, I have like a reason why I’m not very good at it…’. The use of ‘nice’ for the reason being ‘dyslexia’ correspondingly constructs the other reason – just-not-being-that-good-at-it – as not nice, and also not an acceptable reason. The vocal emphasis upon the word ‘reason’ indicates the realness, or acceptability of this reason, in comparison. C’s line ‘it’s not like my fault as such’ likewise implies that without the dyslexia, it would be her fault. This is all nicely confirmed by the reported reaction of the educational institution in being willing to offer help after dyslexia was confirmed – ‘and here’s the help, sort of thing’. We therefore understand that if a student is struggling through their own lack of ability (i.e. through assumed stupidity or laziness) they are not entitled to help, but when they are granted the label of dyslexia, their difficulties are accepted as completely understandable, not the student’s fault, and resources are put forward to put in place additional support. The student’s conception of moral worthiness is therefore reflected back by the institution.

In fact, this moral judgment is not only reflected back by the institution, but the institution helps to confirm her earlier negative view of her ability in the first place. I return again to the extract in which C narrates her experience with her English teacher.

FG1, part of extract 16

*H: did you feel, did you feel that she felt that you were being lazy or*

 *[something]?*

*C: [yeah ], that I was being lazy and that I wasn’t putting the effort in, you know?*

 *Th’ I was poor student and stuff. And it actually got to the point where, um, I*

 *didn’t like going to the classes, and like, my mum was involved in like, having*

 *conversations with her, and that. Erm. But it was just really annoying because,*

 *she wouldn’t, she wasn’t very supportive. But obviously, she didn’t know that I*

 *was [dyslexic, she] just thought, uh, that I just wasn’t trying hard*

*H: [yuh, yeah ]*

I analysed the above extract in more detail in the section above, so I will not go into any depth again here, but as I concluded before, the implication in C’s narrative with ‘[b]ut obviously, she didn’t know that I was dyslexic, she just thought, uh, that I just wasn’t trying hard’ is that with hindsight, the teacher could not really be blamed for such a reaction. That is, if a teacher is not in the know about the dyslexia, they cannot be blamed for making a moral judgement when someone is not performing as expected. To some degree, dyslexia exonerates the student and the teacher, and without the label, laziness is an accepted culprit.

Below, C is talking to the group about doing the dyslexia test.

FG1, part of extract 7

*C: An’ also, like, I guess because I found that so difficult, it kind of made me feel like*

 *I wasn’t wasting their time? and I wasn’t going I dunno, be like, well, you’re not*

 *dyslexic, n’ you’ve wasted a whole day. Like, it was nice, [like ]*

*H: [yeah]*

*C: again, to feel, like, it’s sort of like, understanding that you have got it, sort of*

 *[thing].*

*H: [mmm] yeah. yeah*.

‘[T]hat’ in the first line above refers to the dyslexia assessment, and ‘their’ in the second line presumably refers to the psychologist who administered the test; ‘their’ can be used as a reference to a single person when one doesn’t want or need to mention the gender (i.e. ‘his’ or ‘her’) but it may also mean that C considers the psychologist one representative of a specific group of professionals who are involved in her diagnosis, or to mean that psychology itself is a ‘they’ or a ‘them’, an indeterminate body of experts. ‘[I]t kind of made me feel like I wasn’t wasting their time’ says C. It is interesting that C talks of ‘their’ time being wasted, rather than her own, as this arguably constructs the ‘expert’s’ time as more valuable than hers, and by implication, the expert as more important. This line also suggests that if she hadn’t found the test difficult and had been found not to be dyslexic, the assessor would have thought C to be some kind of fraud not worthy of the attention she had got, and a time-waster. For C in this story, the assessor has the power to tell her for certain whether or not she has ‘got it’. ‘[G]ot it’ places the dyslexia as a thing (an ‘it’) which C possesses, and in having this thing, C cannot be a time-waster, but someone who was worthy the whole time. There is certainly little doubt that in this story, C wants to be ‘diagnosed’ as the alternative may have negative implications for her identity.

In the extract below, it is J, G and M who talk about the meaning of dyslexia according to the ‘diagnostic’ test.

FG2, part of extract 70

*J: mmm I think, when I went and they tried to describe to me what dyslexia was, it*

 *[was like ] highly above average in something and then*

*H: [keep going ]*

*J: like dramatically, having that difference across the, and [test]*

*G: [yeah] and if you’re just not*

 *very good in general [then you’ve] obviously not got dyslexia.*

*J: [yeah,mmm]*

*G: hhhhh*

*M: that’s if then stupidity hhh*

In this case, unlike at other times in the conversation, J, G and M are in agreement about what the test results mean. J says ‘I went and they tried to describe to me what dyslexia was’: the ‘they’ we again assume is the singular psychologist or a reference to ‘them’ as a plural expert group; this preamble to J’s definition of dyslexia gives it clout, and places her understanding as difficult to dispute (as it came from the mouths of experts). The idea that they ‘tried to describe’ to J what dyslexia was might either imply that they failed in the attempt (compare with ‘I tried to play hockey’ or ‘I tried to talk to her’ both of which lead one to expect a subsequent ‘but’); or perhaps more likely here, as J does appear to have understood the description, it implies that they did their best as experts to explain a complicated condition to a lay person, and that what she is therefore relaying here is the gist of things (the experts would obviously explain it with more detail and finesse). J explains her definition ‘it was like, highly above average in something and then like dramatically, having that difference across the test’. Referring to averages constructs psychology’s norms and measurable individual differences as truths and common sense. Although J only states the ‘highly above average’ part, I assume everyone recognised the missing ‘and greatly below average in other things’ which was left unspoken. It’s interesting that it’s the ‘below average’ part that got left out of the utterance, and the ‘above average’ made it in, giving it that little bit more emphasis. J’s ‘dramatically’ also emphasises the specialness of the diagnosis, and suggests it is not something anyone can get (see Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014 for the label as covetable).

I find G’s response telling of the dyslexia identity as a moral good: her ‘yeah’ immediately aligns her view with J’s, and her line ‘if you’re just not very good in general then you’ve obviously not got dyslexia’ is interesting in what it misses out. G might equally have said ‘if you’re just very good in general then you’ve obviously not got dyslexia’ (first ‘not’ missing). In her use of ‘not’ G separates herself and the other participants (and others who are dyslexic) from the group of people who are ‘just not very good in general’. Her ‘obviously’ places the separation as beyond doubt and clear for anyone to see. M finishes off with what seems to have been an understood but as yet unspoken sentiment ‘that’s if then stupidity hhh’. He states the point they have gradually constructed together, that you cannot be dyslexic and stupid, that being dyslexic is associated with being ‘above average’. However, for quite some years, and certainly by the time M and J were ‘diagnosed’, the ‘above average’ criteria in dyslexia assessment has not been the accepted standard. In fact, as long as there is statistically significant difference between certain of the subtests, all of the scores obtained from the test may fall in the average or below category. This means that someone who has been identified with ‘general learning difficulties’ may additionally be identified with ‘specific learning difficulties’ such as dyslexia, within the broader ‘diagnosis’. Perhaps the participants did not have access to this ‘knowledge’, but it certainly doesn’t agree with the conception of dyslexia going together with a high *IQ*  score, or with being ‘above average’ in some areas.

Here is A talking about ‘stupid things’ she does that she isn’t sure are down to the dyslexia, or just her (or so she implies).

FG1, extract 56

*A: well, I’m not really sure what it is either, cos, I dunno, I just know I sometimes put*

 *things down to my dyslexia, and I don’t really know whether it is or not, like, it’s*

 *stupid things, like when you get a train ticket, they give you a code, and I always*

 *write the code down wrong. So I’ll get to the train station and I’ll have written the*

 *code down wrong, and I have to ring my dad to go on my e-mail, and it’s stupid*

 *things like that, like I can’t copy one code to another piece of [ pa]per without*

*C: [hhh]*

*A: making a mistake, but well and I, I don’t know whether that’s dyslexia, or, I mean*

 *it feels like it is, cos it feels like you should be able to do [that].*

In this snippet, dyslexia is produced as a sort of comfort to reassure A that there is a legitimate reason why she does ‘stupid things’ like copy down train ticket codes incorrectly. She uses the phrase ‘stupid things’ twice and says of the code-copying ‘you should be able to do that’. The generalised ‘you’ in this clause constructs ‘that’ as something people in general should be able to do, presumably because it is not meant to be difficult, but something basic. If it’s something people ‘should’ be able to do, and A cannot do it, then she is left with two viable explanations: she is inept and ‘stupid’ as someone who does ‘stupid things’, or she is dyslexic. It is understandably better for one’s sense of identity if one assumes the latter. Nevertheless, A does not appear convinced of this: ‘I don’t know whether that’s dyslexia’ she says and the line ‘like I can’t copy one code to another piece of paper without making a mistake’ was spoken with a tone of frustration and self-criticism. It had a why-can’t-I-ever-do-anything-right ring about it. Moreover, A presents this experience of one example of other ‘stupid things’ she finds herself doing, and so perhaps comes to the question of what is down to dyslexia and what just to ‘me’ fairly frequently. It is probable that a strong confidence in the reality of dyslexia as a medically specific explanation is helpful in framing such experiences as acceptable and ensuring they don’t build up an ‘I’m just a bit stupid’ identity.

The extract below in which C talks about the reaction of a school mate to the possibility C might be dyslexic can be interpreted in a couple of ways. For me, her story underlines the desirability of the dyslexia label is this situation, rather than showing, as C concludes, that a lot of people think dyslexia means you’re stupid.

FG1, part of extract 27

*C: there was one girl at.. at um, who. I said that erm I was going to be tested, um,*

 *and she was like well you probably haven’t got it cos you’ve got this far, like, and*

 *you’ve done really well, and you probably haven’t got it. And I know, and then I*

 *(?) get, and I told her I had been diagnosed and she was like well, you obviously*

 *can’t be that bad, because, you’ve you’ve done this well, you’ve got really good*

 *grades and that so you can’t really be that much affected. And I thought that was*

 *a bit like, well, that’s not, that’s ( ) just because I got good grades doesn’t mean I*

 *can’t be dyslexic. [you know ]*

*H: [yeah yeah]*

*C: and I think a lot of people assume, you’re dyslexic, you’re thick [basically]*

*H, A, D: [yeah yeah]*

*S: mmm*

*C: yeah, so. I don’t know about everybody else here, [I ] I like telling [people ]*

*R: [mm] [I like telling] people [too ]*

 *[(general agreement noises)]*

*D: yeah, like you work really hard*

*C: yeah*

*D: to get the same grades as everyone else, so.*

*C: yeah [yeah]*

*R: [yeah]*

C tells this story by directly reporting the speech of her classmate. The way she uses intonation and tone in the classmate’s ‘voice’ is significant: C presented this voice with an accusatory tone, one that might be described as ‘catty’ and implied, along with the words her peer was reported to use, that she did not want C to be ‘diagnosed’ with dyslexia, and furthermore, that if she was told she was dyslexic, this was somehow not fair. Although she does not state her peer thought it unfair C was dyslexic, this is the strong impression I got, and has arguably got an ideological basis. ‘You probably haven’t got it cos you’ve got this far’ does not deny the existence of an ‘it’ but does suggest that someone who has ‘got this far’, i.e. who is comparatively academically successful, is unlikely to be someone who is dyslexic. This impression is cemented by the next reported line ‘like, and you’ve done really well, and you probably haven’t got it’. Now, if we assume that her peer understood dyslexia to be a wholly negative label that designated stupidity, then her response ‘you probably haven’t got it’ would appear a kind piece of support and reassurance. However, the tone in which the peer’s voice was reported makes this meaning unlikely. It is also unlikely because I assume that C did not talk about her intention to ‘be tested’ in a negative or apprehensive way, but in a positive, it-would-be-good-to-know type way. With these in mind, the peer’s reaction is an odd one, unless we understand the peer to have conceived dyslexia as a desirable label that conferred additional, and undeserved praise on its bearer by suggesting she had overcome the odds and was probably even more intelligent than their grades proclaimed. As the extract unfolds, this interpretation appears increasingly compelling. When C tells her peer of her ‘diagnosis’, she responds ‘well, you obviously can’t be that bad, because, you’ve you’ve done this well, you’ve got really good grades and that so you can’t really be that much affected.’ Even in accepting C’s diagnosis, the story shows C’s peer to want to diminish the relevance and severity of dyslexia for C. If she accepts C’s dyslexia is ‘severe’ or ‘significant’, it would mean accepting also that C has greater fortitude and determination than she and probably her teachers have given her credit for (see discussion on the struggling-against-adversity discourse). In a competitive school environment, something which raises the status of your classmate above your own is not desirable.

This is C’s story, and so we hear this other voice through C’s own. What the excerpt achieved for me as a participant was to construct dyslexia as a desirable label which placed the labelled person in a more positive light than before the labelling. Furthermore, dyslexia is constructed as something that others might be jealous of because of its conception as a ‘badge of honour’ (see my phrase further on in this extract). Although C suggests others often assume dyslexia means you are stupid, she does not appear concerned about this, and this position contradicts the rest of the story. She defends the label: ‘just because I got good grades doesn’t mean I can’t be dyslexic, you know’, and so justifies her right to it. Her ‘you know’ appeals to the general understanding of the group in her expectation of support here, which we gave. ‘I don’t know about everybody else here, I, I like telling people’ says C, which R immediately echoes and D further supports with his understanding that ‘yeah, you work really hard to get the same grades as everybody else’. It is difficult to imagine C being proud of telling people that she was ‘educationally subnormal’ or ‘a bit slow’. I realise this is an obvious point, but it is nevertheless interesting how differently dyslexia is conceived, and that actually, in many situations, it is absolutely not thought to be related to stupidity, and in fact, is a ‘good’ thing to be.

When constructed as a socially acceptable ‘diagnosis’ that is in some cases desirable as an explanation, the label itself becomes valuable and something worth protecting. I want to look at a couple of extracts in which this value is apparent. First, S is talking about people who disingenuously ‘went for’ the dyslexia label for the resources they thought they would get.

FG1, part of extract 145, and extract 146

*S: when we did it in house, a lot of people weren’t, weren’t. I mean I might be, like,*

 *largely biased, but cos I knew there were a lot of people who went for this were*

 *sort of very lazy arrogant [people] who would take the piss out of you*

*H: [yeah ]*

*S: having [dyslexia] but you know, as soon as they realised you could*

*H: [yeah ]*

*S: (unclear)*

*H: yeah that’s quite scary.*

*D: mmm*

*S: yeah, so they might realise they do have dyslexia, but if they don’t have dyslexia,*

 *then they are giving it a really bad [name]*

*H: [yeah ]*

*D: [it ] kind of makes me feel guilty because*

 *sometimes I feel like I’m faking it, and then I’ll mess something up*

 *[you’ll, then ] you kind of do value whether you do have it or not.*

*S: [yeh but you don’t]*

S’s first few lines in this extract paint a picture of the ‘kinds’ of people who S thought went for the dyslexia label dishonestly before his school provided the testing ‘in-house’. S says ‘when we did it in house, a lot of people weren’t, weren’t’ and we assume he means ‘weren’t really dyslexic’, or ‘weren’t going for the test out of genuine need or difficulty’. He continues a few words later with ‘but cos I knew there were a lot of people who went for this were sort of very lazy arrogant people who would take the piss out of you having dyslexia’. We are left to make the connection that it is the same people who went for the test disingenuously who were also lazy and arrogant and who took the piss. ‘I knew’ is an expression of certainty, and ‘lazy’ and ‘arrogant’ are here presented as factual descriptions of these people. They are further constructed as morally undeserving of the dyslexia label because they ‘would take the piss out of you having dyslexia’. ‘[A]s soon as they realised you could…’ S goes on, and this is followed by something which I could not hear in the recording, but my response ‘that’s quite scary’, and my memory of his utterance mean I am fairly certain that S said something like ‘as soon as they realised you could get extra time and resources’. S acknowledges that ‘they might realise they do have dyslexia’ and therefore, are genuine, ‘but if they don’t have dyslexia, then they are giving it a really bad name’. This last line makes dyslexia a valuable label, worth protecting from imposters, and it also suggests that being dyslexic is something you can fake. If the latter is the case, it casts doubt upon the air-tight ‘diagnoses’ of scientific professionals. It is also possible that the more people ‘diagnosed’, the less unique being dyslexic becomes. Furthermore, if ‘lazy’ people begin to be diagnosed with dyslexia, this will taint the reputation of dyslexic people being harder-workers than others.

D completes this extract with a wobble of self-doubt: ‘kind of makes me feel guilty because sometimes I feel like I’m faking it’, and this construction of guilt is undertaken by other participants at other times in the focus groups too. The ‘I feel like’ ensures others don’t imagine he is actually faking it (compare with the phrase ‘sometimes I am faking it’ which would be completely unacceptable), and he completes his sentence with an ‘and then’ headed clause which repositions him as undoubtedly genuine, not at all like the characters in S’s narrative, and he reiterates the ‘value’ of ‘having it’. The extract I have discussed above is another in the category of those which construct a moral glow around ‘being dyslexic’ that is juxtaposed to the ideologically and historically constructed meanings of laziness and stupidity, and the fear of being generally ‘mentally inferior’.

There were a number of times in the focus groups where participants talked about disability, and how they considered dyslexia in terms of disability. This topic was initiated by me, but swiftly taken up by both groups. A recurring position seemed to be ‘other people might think of themselves as disabled, but I certainly don’t’. This is an interesting position: dyslexia is a disability by law, and it is its status as a disability which allows those labelled to apply for and receive reasonable adjustments like extra time, and other resources. I want to start by looking at one such extract in focus group one.

FG1, extract 135

*H: what about you B?*

*B: yeah, I don’t think it’s a, like, especially from working with severely disabled*

 *people, like um, I’m definitely not disabled. I mean like, I have life easy compared*

 *to*

*H: compared to them, yeah*

*B: peo[ple ] with those [disabilities]*

*D: [mm]*

*H: [disabilities] yeh*

My initial question ‘what about you B?’ is asking about whether B considers dyslexia a disability. Her response ‘I don’t think it’s a like’ omits the word ‘disability’, and this may be because B wishes to qualify her point before she uses the word ‘disabled’ or ‘disability’. In this context ‘severely disabled’ brought to my mind an image of people completely dependent on twenty-four hour assistance, who may well live in institutions, and who have great difficulty in doing many everyday tasks by themselves. I don’t know any ‘severely disabled’ people (who fit my cultural image), and I expect my generalisations are not very accurate. ‘Severely disabled people’ exist for me as an unknown group – as reflected in my use of ‘them’ in the extract above. If I interrogate my own prejudice here, I admit that my idea of ‘severely disabled’ people sits fairly firmly along the lines of the personal tragedy model of disability which is a mix of pity and benevolence. I am clearly ignorant of the experiences people who have been labelled as severely disabled have in their daily lives, and I expect my ignorance is shared by most of the other participants in the group. But here, B is speaking from a position of experience. She uses ‘working with’ rather than ‘looking after’ which suggests she experienced her role as supportive rather than (the more patronising) ‘caring’. However, she distances herself from the ‘disabled people’ when she emphatically says ‘I’m definitely not disabled’. In saying that she has ‘life easy compared to…people with those disabilities’ she is equating disability with having life ‘hard’. One has to deserve the label, so to speak. Under this definition, one could not label oneself disabled in the absence of extreme hardship, struggle, and perhaps tragedy. This implies that disabled people are people to pity. This may be somewhat of an over-reading by me – as arguably what B intended to do here was to distance herself from a ‘poor me’ image; to make it clear that she didn’t really have anything to complain about compared to people with *real* troubles. Nevertheless, for me the discourse in this extract relies upon an ideologically driven assumption about the tragedy of disability which constructs this ideal of a disabled person as someone to feel sorry for, someone who has little self-determination, and someone who we feel very glad not to be.

Here is M giving quite a similar construction of disability:

FG2, extract 26

*M: I think the thing with ‘disabled’ that many people have, is that there doesn’t seem*

 *to be much grey area in the disabled. It’s always [‘are you disabled] or*

*H: [you are disabled ] or*

*J: [mmmmmmmmm ]*

*M: [are you not?’ It’s ] probably the same, Like if I go round saying*

*H: [you’re not , yeah I]*

*M: ‘yeah I’m disabled’ then I’m gonna feel [bad ] if there’s someone in a*

*J: [mmm]*

*M: wheelchair by me, because they’re disabled, I’m just not very good at*

 *deconstructing words, and I’m quite a slow reader, [but]*

*G: [but]*

‘I’m gonna feel bad’ says M ‘if there’s someone in a wheelchair by me’. In the context of this discussion this sentence achieves a number of things. . M uses the idea of ‘someone in a wheelchair’ as someone who is, without doubt, disabled; in fact, these someones are the epitome of disability having become the universal symbol for disabled people on toilet doors and in car parks, etc. In many ways this is an odd choice. Again, only having my own experience to draw on, the two or three people who I have known who use wheelchairs have not struck me as very ‘disabled’ at all; indeed, they have appeared far less ‘disabled’ than others who have been experiencing depression, or who have debilitating anxiety in social situations (for example). I understood M’s ‘gonna feel bad’ to mean he would feel guilt. Why? M’s discourse assumes the person in the wheelchair has difficulties that are much more worthy of sympathy than his own. The person in the wheelchair might just as well respond ‘I’m just not very good at walking, but *you’re* disabled’. The discourse being used in the two extracts discussed above helps to remove the voice of people who are labelled ‘disabled’ and culturally recognised as ‘disabled’. It assumes how they will ‘feel’ without allowing an opportunity for response. It also helps to create an ‘us and them’, and makes it very clear that we as dyslexic are in no way similar to you as really disabled.

There is a Victorian ring to this conception of disabled people (‘them’) as silent figures to be pitied and cared for. The Victorians arguably constructed a moral and fatherly responsibility for those on the margins of society like ‘idiots’ who through this discourse were infantilised (McDonagh, 2006) and denied a voice. There is also an argument that this very same paternalism played a part in removing people with physical disabilities from public view and strengthened the assumed association between physical/mental ‘abnormality’ and deviance/ illness (Whittington-Walsh, 2002, and also see Branson, for the treatment of deaf people in the 19th century). Obviously the terms for categorising people have changed, and it would be oversimplifying things to say that ‘idiocy’ and ‘feeble-mindedness’ as labels have been directly replaced by ‘learning disability’ and ‘mental retardation’. Nevertheless, there is still a patronising tone in the way we discussed ‘disabled’ people in our focus groups, and it is completely understandable that the participants (and anyone else) would prefer not to be on the receiving end of such an attitude; that is as objects of pity and placed under a charitable gaze. Thus, perhaps, most of the participants moved themselves away from the ‘disabled’ category. However, not all of them did. To some extent D in focus group one and, more so, G in focus group two opposed this discourse on disability. G comes in following the extract discussed above, and I will return to this shortly. But first I want to look at an extract in which dyslexia is constructed as most definitely nothing to do with other learning difficulties or ‘conditions’ commonly found in the classroom:

FG1, extract 42

*D: do you think, sorry, cos er, my mum’s a teacher as well, you kind of get sick of er,*

 *but she is quite good about it, but it is like, it’s always handled with asperger’s and*

 *ADHD, they’re just all put together, and two of those are really strongly*

 *associated with behaviour, and like, you know, quite difficult children, and then*

 *there’s dyslexia, like, added into the same [group] like, I think it’s*

*C: [yeah]*

*H: mmm*

*D: those associations that everyone gets it into their heads that everyone’s got those*

 *problems, they associate them with a difficult [child].*

*B: [espe]cially as my mum works,*

 *she doesn’t work in a mainstream school she works in a (school for…) learning*

 *difficulties [and]*

*D: [right] yeah*

*B: and those children tend to have [ADHD], beha[ioural][problems ] dyslexia*

*D: [yeah ] [yeah ]*

*C: [right, yeah]*

*B: and those kinds of [things] so I think, because of her job, it has had*

*H: [yeah ]*

*B: negative conno[tations ]*

*D: [yeah right] yeah*

*B so*

*H: yeah*

*D: yeah*

*H: yeah*

In the extract above the conversation is largely led by D and B who appear to concur on their discomfort with dyslexia being grouped together with other labels like ADHD. I want to look at the language closely here because it is informed by a similar ideological position as the two extracts I discussed before this one. I will focus upon D’s introductory utterance. All the way through the focus group, D adopted an apologetic and gentle style of discussion. He was very careful not to offend, and often softened his arguments with short phrases. His utterances were also quite hesitant, with the occasional stutter, which gave an impression of humility. The ‘sorry’ in the first line matches with D’s discursive style throughout, and possibly set us up for hearing something a bit sensitive, though it could likewise have been used because D saw someone else was about to speak, and he was apologising for getting in first. ‘My mum’s a teacher as well’ (without a subsequent ‘but’ to indicate a contrary position) constructs a solidarity of understanding with B, who has already discussed her mum’s role as a special needs teacher. This solidarity also gives the ‘you’ a particular extra meaning: while D is using the general ‘you’ to mean ‘one’, the ‘you’ has a ‘we’ (as in D and B) veneer to it, which in turn suggests ‘me and you understand this sort of thing’. ‘[Y]ou get kind of sick of er’ is an interesting mix of softening language with strong statement. To ‘get sick of’ something suggests you have really had enough or something negative that just keeps on happening. The ‘kind of’ takes the edge off this a little. D heads his following two clauses with ‘but’, the first of which softens the ‘sick of’ utterance further and takes the blame off his mother, and the second of which returns D to his former strong ‘sick of’ position. There is a lot of toing and froing before D gets to his point. And here it is: ‘it’s always handled with Asperger’s and ADHD, they’re just all put together…’. D’s use of the passive (*is*  plus past participle) and his choice of ‘handled’ as his passive verb is quite telling of the educational system and D’s experience as a labelled person.

The passive takes attention (and blame) away from the educational institution or legislation which does the ‘handling’. Meanwhile the word ‘handled’ reiterates the passive nature of the labelled children, and constructs dyslexia, ADHD and Asperger’s as reified objects, somehow floating around separately from people; if they are ‘handled’ they assume a status as ‘goods’ or packages to be shipped about. Problems are ‘handled’, stolen goods are ‘handled’, illness is ‘handled’. Positive, or neutral things generally don’t need to be ‘handled’. The ‘just’ in ‘they’re just all put together’ suggests flippancy and lack of care in the grouping of dyslexia with ADHD and Asperger’s which doesn’t take account of the fact that dyslexia is completely different and *not like them at all.* The meaning appears to be – there are *those* conditions that one sensibly should group together, and then there is dyslexia. D goes on to construct ‘difficult children’ and then more firmly a ‘difficult child’. The second of these, the singular form instead of the plural is important. We are all probably familiar with science documentaries which talk about ‘the polar bear’ as representing all polar bears, or news articles which talk about ‘the immigrant’ or ‘the unemployed’ which serve to homogenise an entire group as a single thing. The ‘difficult child’ achieves a similar thing. It is close to ‘the problem child’ in its negativity and is definitely something to be ‘handled’. The definite article (the) is part of this construction, and D uses the indefinite article (a), but in the particular flow of words in this extract, the impression is similar. Children with labels of Asperger’s and ADHD are not all the same in their behaviour patterns, in their strengths or in their difficulties. I would expect it is as insulting for someone with one of these two labels to be called ‘difficult’ as it is for a child labelled with dyslexia.

This is not D’s fault. Our educational system is designed to categorise and lump people together and ‘deal ‘with them (see discussion in chapter one). And again, it is very understandable not to want to be put in a group of people who are considered to be badly behaved. But ‘bad behaviour’ is utterly socially constructed. It assumes there is ‘good behaviour’ that is an unchanging thing, and recognisable without the people or society who get to say how it is constituted. People with ‘learning disabilities’ have historically been associated with ‘bad behaviour’, and as in some way ‘diminished’, ‘disruptive’ or ‘dangerous’ and so morally inferior (Mcdonagh, 2000). Our present understandings of ADHD, Asperger’s and dyslexia are still connected to these apparent characteristics.

As I mentioned earlier, the conceptions around disability discussed so far were not the only ones constructed in the conversations. Below is the extract in which G is responding to M’s ideas about disability which I have already discussed. Although I have already talked about the first part of this extract, I am including it again here so that it is clear what G was responding to. However, my focus here begins from G’s first interjection.

FG2, extract 26

*M: I think the thing with ‘disabled’ that many people have, is that there doesn’t seem*

 *to be much grey area in the disabled. It’s always [‘are you disabled]or*

*H: [you are disabled ]or*

*J: [mmmmmmmmm ]*

*M: [are you not?’ It’s ] probably the same, Like if I go round saying*

*H: [you’re not , yeah I]*

*M: ‘yeah I’m disabled’ then I’m gonna feel [bad ] if there’s someone in a*

*J: [mmm]*

*M: wheelchair by me, because they’re disabled, I’m just not very good at*

 *deconstructing words, and I’m quite a slow reader,[but]*

*G: [but]*

*G: they might think they [have just as much] a wide and full [experience]*

*M: [WELL, yeah ] [well yeah, ]*

*G: [as you do, er I ] I actually think that might be quite offensive, they might*

*M: [absolutely, ]*

*H: [yeah ]*

*G: really, they might read and [write really well] and [have] this wonderful*

*M: [YEAH yeah ] [mm ]*

*J: [yeah]*

*G: [mental] life where. People say well ‘dyslexia’s [not disabled], but, like I am’*

*J: [yeah! ]*

*M: [yeah hhh ]*

*H: yeah, so nobody really likes it, then?*

G is swift and confident in her reaction to M’s construction. She has access to a discourse of disability that the other participants have not been drawing on. This enables G to offer a response which is fairly condemnatory of M’s position, and one which places pressure upon M to acknowledge the alternative (‘absolutely’ M is obliged to agree). G does this by referring immediately to the voice of the people labelled disabled ‘they might think’ which she maintains by considering M’s position from the perspective of a ‘disabled’ person and ending her utterance with the direct speech of the imaginary ‘disabled’ person ‘people say well “dyslexia’s not disabled, but, like I am”’ which to me was clearly intended to be the sarcastic voice of the annoyed person being labelled as ‘disabled’ in comparison to someone with ‘dyslexia’: the direct speech was intoned with a singy-songy sarcastic tone that indicated incredulity that others might actually believe this. By allowing the person labelled ‘disabled’ in this narrative to have ‘just as much a wide and full experience’ and to ‘read and write really well’ G dismisses the image of the tragic, helpless disabled person, and replaces it with someone just as alive and human and unique as the non-disabled person. It also shifts dyslexia back into the category of disability, as if someone in a wheelchair gets given the label, then why should not the person with dyslexia? In this situation, ‘disabled’ has room to take on a new meaning – one more closely linked to ideas of social justice than medical tragedy. For G this discourse is useful; it means she can proclaim her own disability without taking on an inferior status, and it means she is in a stronger position when making a case for using reasonable adjustments. G does not *need* help; she has a *right*  to equal treatment. M and J cannot make use of reasonable adjustments with such ease because they have to try and match up two opposing discourses which give different messages about the legitimacy and meaning of taking such support. The ideological threads within discourses of disability rights and social justice is a topic to which I will return in a subsequent section.

The final group of extracts I would like to discuss in this subsection consider the idea of a ‘cure’ for dyslexia. This run of extracts followed my question: ‘I mean, I just wondered how you would react to the idea that, I mean if someone said well, ‘I can cure you of your dyslexia’?’. This was an intentionally provocative question, which it occurred to me to ask after the discussion of disability. The question elicited a range of diverse responses. Before we look at these, it is worth pointing out that ‘cure’ is normally a medical term, used in relation to diseases and illnesses, and implies complete removal of ‘symptoms’, as opposed to ‘treatment’, which may be independent of ‘cure’. The words ‘treatment’ and ‘symptoms’ are frequently used in literature and reports on dyslexia, though ‘cure’ is less common. There have been claims for ‘cures’, however (see the now discredited Dore Programme, Goldacre, B, 2006).

FG1, extract 161

*H: I mean, I just wondered how you would react to the idea that, I mean if someone*

 *said well, ‘I can cure you of your dyslexia’?*

*S: I would say ‘cure, cure somebody else [first’ ]*

*General: [hahahahahaha]*

*S: I mean, I like to think I’d say ‘no’, on the basis that I’ve I’ve organised my, I’m not*

 *a great believer in change. And I’ve organised my life around everything, and I*

 *like, and I’ve organised things in a certain way, and if I was cured, that would*

 *[change everything]*

*H: [yeah, so sort of ] happy with [the way]*

*General: [hhhh ]*

*S: [I’m quite] comfortable, like*

*j*

*H: yeah yeah yeah.*

S replies to my question with humour, but his reaction overall is typical of most of the participants. ‘[C]ure somebody else first’ implies that S would not want to risk being the first one to be ‘cured’, perhaps because it is unclear what ‘curing’ would actually mean. If one has an illness, like pneumonia, for example, it is fairly easy to separate the idea of the illness from the idea of the person. If the pneumonia is removed, what we have left is the same person without the pneumonia. S’s response suggests that it is not as easy to separate dyslexia from the person, perhaps because it is not such a distinct ‘thing’. ‘Being’ dyslexic for a number of the participants is mixed in with broader identities: for C, dyslexia means she is an overly organised person, for D dyslexia means he sees the world and other people in unique ways. If the dyslexia were to be removed, there seems to be a fear about what would be taken with it – where do the edges of dyslexia blur with the other ‘characteristics’ of a person? Here is S again a little later in the conversation:

FG 1, extract 166

*S: I’m also like, a little afraid, what if it’s that, you cure the dyslexia, and I find I’m still*

 *I’m [‘Ive still] hhh got all these problems hhhhh*

*H: [still hh ]*

*B: [hhahah]*

*S: hh. It’ quite frightening. But yes, it’s a possibility that, yes, actually, these*

 *problems, these problems are possibly just a character defect that I don’t sort of,*

 *do that.*

*H: oh hhhhhh.*

S says he is ‘a little afraid’ and ‘it’s quite frightening’ of the idea that if his dyslexia was removed and he still has ‘these problems’ which ‘are possibly just character defect’. For me this again confirms the label of dyslexia as connected to moral worth. Without the label, the same problems become morally unacceptable ‘character defect[s]’. It is interesting how socially powerful a label can be in transforming something from a moral bad to a moral good with no other change beyond the name. S is not the only participant who wouldn’t want to be ‘cured’:

FG2, part of extract 87

*J I actually think that my dyslexia makes me better, hhh, at certain things than other*

 *things, so I think if you got [rid of ] it, I maybe wouldn’t be as logical.*

*M: [mmm]*

FG1, extract 164

*B: I like the idea that dyslexia is part of your personality, and [like] well*

*D: [mm]*

*B: It’s you. And if someone cured you of that, like, it would be, like which bits of you*

 *would be [lost?]*

*H: [yeah] yeah.*

‘[I]t’s you’ says B. If dyslexia is ‘you’ then it’s not separable; therefore taking away the dyslexia would mean taking away yourself. In some ways this could be interpreted as pride not dissimilar to the pride of the deaf community in celebrating their difference; however, the ‘fear’ expressed by participants here seems to be more about loss of individual identity and personality, not loss of community membership. So far then there appears to be concern about being left the same way once the dyslexia is removed, and also concern about being changed once the dyslexia is removed. Either of these have potential undesirable impacts for the identities of the participants.

D questions the idea of ‘curing’ dyslexia altogether by constructing dyslexia not as a deficit, but as a different way of thinking.

FG1, part of extract 162

*D: I mean like, you can’t really cure a way of thinking different to someone else. I*

 *Mean [that’s essentially] It’s like trying to change your sexuality, [you] can’t*

*H: [ yeah, no ] [yeh]*

*D: cure the way you think [you] know, cos it’s the way you think.*

*H: [no ] yeah.*

*D: I mean yah, you can alter it, you can improve bits, but you can’t like, cure it*

*N: no*

*D: because, like, what is curing? What do you cure? [I mean if it’s like]*

*H: [yeah, yeah ]*

*D: [a normal brain]*

‘[I]t’s like trying to change your sexuality’ says D, and so compares dyslexia to something in-built and fixed that we do not have a choice over, and cannot be changed. ‘What do you cure, I mean if it’s like a normal brain?’ asks D. D avoids deficit conceptions and constructs a brain with ‘dyslexia’ as a ‘normal brain’. However, he maintains the emphasis upon his own responsibility for improvement rather than finding any fault with an environment which expects him to prove his ability with skills that aren’t his strengths: ‘so you don’t cure something, you just learn to be better. That’s what learning is. So that’s what you have to do.’

G is the only participant who says she would ‘love’ to be cured. She constructs the dyslexia for her as a single, separable set of difficulties, which if she could get rid of, she would be better off. She accepts the idea of ‘cure’ in this extract in a way that D does not. Throughout the focus group, G’s familiarity with neuroscientific and psychological discourses of dyslexia is apparent, and she often constructs dyslexia as an innate brain problem. In some ways this validates the ‘reality’ of dyslexia, and combined with her constructions of disability, again leaves her in a strong position to be able to resist some of the other discourses the participants draw upon.

FG2, part of extract 84

*H: Why wouldn’t you?*

*J: hmmm*

*H: If I could click my fingers and make it disappear? [would you?]*

*G: [I’d love that],*

*H: would you?*

*G: [oh yeah! ] cos it’s does so much*

*J: [mm mmm] (negative)*

Industrialisation, argue Carr and Hartnett (1996) is partly responsible for the continued construction of disabled people as a social problem. Declaring the ‘disability’ as a thing they want to be rid of in these conversations arguably requires an hidden acknowledgement that as individuals they are a social problem: ‘for a disabled person to seek or desire a cure, worthlessness is often implied…conflict between a desire to be ‘cured’ and how this desire is interpreted by others is inevitable’ (Carr and Hartnett, 1996: 9).

In this section I have argued that the participants’ discourse draws upon ideas which connect academic success and failure with moral status; ‘stupid people’, ‘intelligent people’ and ‘lazy people’ I have considered to be socially driven categories given to individuals and groups by other people in powerful positions. Being ‘dyslexic’, on the other hand, I have argued to some degree permits avoidance of the ‘stupid’ and ‘lazy’ categories in certain circumstances. I have suggested that the ideological connections made in these focus groups between concepts of disability and deviance, and their historical grounding in a paternalistic culture confuses the route to a positive ‘disabled’ identity, and for some of the participants here, this helps to create an uneasy balance between a positive, proud academic identity which reclaims traditional meanings of ‘disability’, and equally proud academic identity which distances itself from ‘disability’, and another which constructs an identity of an imposter, who is probably intellectually and morally inferior.

Theme 4: Positivism, cognitivism, and biological determinism

In this section I discuss the ways the participants drew upon scientific ideologies in our conversations about ‘the way things are’ in the world, and in our heads. The discussion will cover two broad areas. In the first of these I will choose some conversational snippets in which we constructed dyslexia as a brain deficiency; something innate, eternal, and quantifiable, and talk about how this was achieved using the language of positivism, cognitive psychology, and biological determinism. I will make connections between the kind of language drawn upon and the historical development of some of these ideas that help to show how and why these ideas became so dominant, and how this may impact upon educational identity. This will involve some reference back to chapters one and two in which the history of science, education and psychology in the West were examined more thoroughly. Assumptions about processes as simple strings of cause and effect, and the seemingly automatic construction of the brain or the mind as a computer are a couple of the ideas in the selected extracts that I will be considering. I will also consider the ‘faith’ some of the participants apparently have in scientists, particularly psychologists. At times the scientific explanations were constructed as comforting and reaffirming of the genuine nature of dyslexia. Not all psychologists agree about the ‘causes’ of dyslexia, but this appeared to have little impact upon the solid ‘belief’ in their conclusions. I will finish by talking about some of the implications of these ideological threads for meaning making and the participants’ identities as learners at university.

The first extract I want to talk about is one in which D considers the role evolution might have played in the development of the differences related to dyslexia. Here it is:

FG1, part of extract 52

*D: urm, I I’m er quite quite pragmatic, I erm. Cos er many of the things we do, like*

 *writing, and like reading and all things like this and all this like processing*

 *numbers and things like that, like we haven’t actually evolved to do, we actually*

 *have to change our brain to do it. Like, I think like quite a lot of it, n’ I just think*

 *that my brain hasn’t got it perfectly designed to do it the way everyone else does*

 *it.*

*H: mmm*

*D: so, the way my brain works. it works quite well when I do the things that I do my*

 *way, but when it’s trying to do it in another person’s way, cos my brain doesn’t*

 *work the same [way ]*

*H: [mm yeah]*

*D: like it’s evolutionary, like the driving be[hind] it, like we didn’t e[volve] to*

*H: [yeah] [yuh ]*

*D: read books.*

D begins his evolutionary explanation for dyslexia with ‘I’m er quite quite pragmatic’, and his subsequent utterance begins ‘cos’ (because). So I understood here, that whatever discussion he was about to have about dyslexia, it would be a reflection of his pragmatism, as an aspect of his identity or personality in this moment. I took ‘pragmatic’ in this context to mean sensible, unemotional, and deductive. The ‘we’ in ‘many of the things we do’ I took to refer to humankind, we as a species, in evolutionary language. The ‘we’s continue for a few lines until D switches to ‘I’ and ‘my’ in drawing conclusions about evolutionary development for his own brain. The use of ‘we’ is similarly general to the use of generalised ‘you’ but appears to construct a unity of human kind over time. Evolution is constructed as the force ‘driving’ the development of our brains. Moreover, the reading, writing and processing of numbers ‘we haven’t actually evolved to do’. This is odd in some ways, as if we are products of evolution within this discourse, it perhaps implies that reading, writing and number processing are somehow against nature; they have arrived despite evolution. Yet a little later on, D considers that ‘everyone else’ has got a brain that is ‘perfectly designed to do it [reading and writing]’, by which reasoning, D is one of a minority whose brains have somehow not caught up with ‘everyone else’. It also implies a ‘designer’. There is a popular conception of evolution as having a particular end point or set of goals (as a designer would), but this isn’t the scientific view. Evolutionary biology does not argue that evolution is taking us to any particular place, and would certainly deny the assumption that evolutionary change is always progressive and about increasing complexity (see, for example Dawkins, 2006). However, D’s explanation is powerful: in this discourse he is a quirk of evolution and dyslexia is a consequence of human technological development which outstripped evolutionary pace. Interestingly, D does not use this position as a reason to defer responsibility for his difficulties with writing and reading to this external force but uses it as impetus to ‘change’ his own brain, and therefore challenge the evolutionary legacy which has produced his poorly designed brain, so to speak. While D appears to have a positive, can-do identity in relation to his university learning, he nevertheless places emphasis upon the individual to adapt, not upon the environment to adapt to him. This idea of adaptability in the workplace or education is interesting in its fit with the relatively newly circulating idea of our brains as plastic, the idea that we can and should change our neuronal circuitry to be good, adaptable members of society. Hartmann (2012) talks about ‘neurocapitalism’ (82) as something which helps to justify and neutralise changes made to institutional structures to include the need for individual flexibility as an aid to powerful interests.

Other participants appeared to favour different scientific theories. Below, G is justifying her ‘belief’ in the cerebellar deficit hypothesis which one group of psychologists hypothesise causes a deficit in automatic processing. This theory is discussed in chapter one of this thesis.

FG2, extract 67

*G: I’m a great believer in Rod Nicolson’s cerebellar deficit hypo[thesis]*

*H: [hhhh ] can you just*

 *explain what it is?*

*G: pardon?*

*H: do you want to just explain a bit [about]*

*G: [so it’s] the part of your brain that kind of sits*

 *down here, and um, and you do a lot of your learning in your cerebellar, and we*

 *it’s things like procedural memory, so it’s learning how to do things, and to do with*

 *automaticity, so doing things automatically, so er, one of the reasons it’s thought*

 *it might be dyslexia is a lot of problems with dyslexia are about doing things*

 *automatically, so you know, things like, tying your shoelace, telling left from right,*

 *learning to read, learning to write, are all things, reading more so than learning to*

 *write, but that to some extent are automatic. Things that in the general population,*

 *you don’t have to think about doing them, you just automatically do them, If you*

 *try to think about them, you can’t do them. And the thing about the cerebellar*

 *deficit is that there’s a problem with the cerebellum, so you’ve got a problem in*

 *learning how to do things automatically, and maybe it’s just one possible route of*

 *dyslexia and there are others, but per, especially in people like yourself, where*

 *you generally are a high achiever, and you’ve got a very high IQ, the idea is that*

 *your cerebellum, the front thinking bit of your head, learns how to do things, so*

 *instead of doing it automatically with your cerebellum, like people without*

 *dyslexia, you have to [kind of use, like thinking ]*

*J: [have to use a different part of our brain]*

*G: you have to like, think your way through it.*

G’s ‘I’m a great believer in…’ stands out as a powerful utterance for me, discursively speaking. G might have said ‘I quite like’ or ‘I think there’s a lot to be said for’, etc. Being a ‘believer’ is a statement about who ‘I’ am. The noun form here helps to construct the identity of G, not just as someone who believes, but as a believer. G therefore constructs a strength of commitment to the theory she describes, as though it were a faith in religion. G makes reference to a particular, well known (in dyslexia circles) psychologist who champions the described theory. The use of his full name adds to the impression that G knows her stuff, and finds the expert’s theories accessible (See Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014, for example, on the role of the expert).

In fact, the ‘expert’ voice in G’s description is apparent in the structure and tone of the extract as a whole. In some ways her utterances sound like a paragraph in a text book being read aloud. She begins with a summary of the science, offers a simplified version, gives examples and then summarises the main points. G is eloquent, and clear that she is imparting information. She is using an authoritative voice dotted with scientific ‘things’ like ‘automaticity’ (nominalised), and ‘procedural memory’; she used the passive phrase ‘it is thought’ (by the experts) which is familiar in science textbooks and popular science books; she uses the verbs ‘be’ and ‘do’ (‘it is’ ‘you do’) to create a certainty about what is true and how we act, and phrases like ‘the thing about’ to front a particular clause which emphasises the factual nature of the point she is making. Yet at the same time, she is arguably yielding her own experiential ‘knowledge’ to the ‘knowledge’ of neuroscience, and is allowing the voice of neuroscience to speak through her – for example, when she says ‘your cerebellum…learns how to do things’. However, I must not neglect the role of my utterance ‘do you want to just explain a bit about’ which arguably gives G explicit permission to speak in an expert voice, and also constructs the other participants as less knowledgeable than G. Therefore, I am complicit in the construction of the truth of the ‘facts’ I already predicted G would ‘impart’. I wanted G to talk about the science, partly because I expected this would not be quickly accepted by other participants.

‘[Y]ou do a lot of your learning in your cerebellum’ and ‘your cerebellum…learns how to do things’ are both interesting utterances to look at further. The first implies a separation between ‘you’ and your localised brain structures; that somehow ‘you’ are working inside these structures as a little homunculus or ‘ghost-in-the-machine’. The second utterance implies the cerebellum as working by itself, again, separately from you, but this time also completely independently from ‘you’. In cognitive psychology, ‘learning’ and ‘thinking’ would be described as processes of ‘mind’, and for G, these processes are separated from ‘you’, and placed in the physical space of the brain. The philosopher Gilbert Ryle, writing in the mid-20th century argued that the ‘in-my-head’ metaphor for thinking leads to conflation of ‘thinking’ with a physically located process, which is inaccurate. One could not, for example, slice open one’s head and locate the ‘thinking’ happening (Ryle, 1951: 35). He might also have argued that G was guilty of mind-body dualism, an accusation he also levelled at psychologists and other expert theorists. I want to quote a longer passage from his 1951 work as I think it does a lot to highlight the ideological threads within G’s utterances and her understanding of her ‘deficits’ as a dyslexic person. Ryle writes that it is common for a person to consider that…

*the things and events which belong to the physical world, including his own body, are external, while the workings of his own mind [sic] are internal. This antithesis of outer and inner is of course meant to be construed as a metaphor since minds, not being in space, could not be described as being spatially inside anything else, or as having things going on spatially inside themselves. But relapses from this good intention are common, and theorists are found speculating how stimuli, the physical sources of which are yards of miles outside a person’s skin, can generate mental processes inside his skull, or how decisions framed inside his cranium can set going movements of his extremities.’ (12).*

In the same chapter, Ryle makes the crucial point that this tendency to locate our thinking as happening in a physical brain space and to use ‘in-my-head’ or ‘in-my-mind’ metaphors is a hangover from Reformation theology, and various philosophical schools (not just Descartes) that heavily influenced lay understandings of mind and body. For the participants in the focus groups, my position is that these ideas at times encouraged dyslexia to be constructed as a thing in the head that is contained in a particular brain structure, and separate from the rest of the self. This is contrasted with other constructions of dyslexia as an inseparable part of the self, of personality, which participants drew on other discourses. The metaphors here are therefore potentially dangerous in their power to construct dyslexia within the self (see Billig, 2010 on metaphor use and self-deception) in such a way that it has become an ‘unthinking idiom’ rather than a useful ‘live’ metaphor (Billig & Macmillan, 2005: 460).

In other extracts there was frequent use of the language of neuroscience (e.g. ‘it could just be your neurons firing slightly differently’ FG2, extract 66), and psychology. In all of our utterances there were assumptions about cause and effect processes which were assumed to be fundamental to our understanding about how the world works. I include my own contributions here as I repeatedly asked about people’s opinions on the causes of dyslexia – it was difficult to get out of this way of viewing the world. Below is an extract in which I pose this question to R:

FG1, extracts 67, 68

*H: Any other ideas about the causes?*

*R: I think it’s kind of, it’s a bit like, your reaction time, it’s like a slow reaction*

 *response. Because it’s, it’s not necessarily that you can’t do these things, like,*

 *something like, like learning to read. We’ve most dyslexics learn to read the*

 *way other people learn to read, but we do it in a passive way.*

*D: mmm*

*R: just a lot slower*

*D: mmm*

*R: and so like I think, dyslexia could affect all your kind of reactions*

 *[like] like a bit like hand-eye-coordination. [I ] think that that probably is*

*D: [mm]*

*H: [yeh]*

*R: affected by dys[lexia um]*

*D: [yeah mm]*

*H: [mmm ]*

*R: and it’s just like a sl, the brain signals, like, other people’s are kind of*

 *sprint[ing ] while yours are [kind of slogging along]*

*C: [yeah] [hahahaha ]*

*D: [mm ] [hahahaha ]*

*H: [haha ]*

*R: [HAHAHAHAHA] so they’re going to get there in the end, it’s just*

*C: [hahahahahahah]*

*A: [huhu ]*

*B: [hahahaha ]*

*D: [hahaahaha ]*

*H: [hahaha ] yes, but takes a bit longer*

‘[Y]our reaction time’, and ‘a slow reaction response’ both echo the language of behaviourism which dealt in bodily responses and external stimuli. This is mixed together here with neuropsychology’s ‘brain signals’ to give an overall impression of sciency-validity, though the actual theoretical content remains vague. The technical language is mixed in with informal banter, humour and metaphor, which brings all of the participants in with laughter. The laughter implies the description of dyslexia given is acceptable and accurate, and helps to construct a seeming solidarity within the group. R starts off with a specific hypothesis about dyslexia to do with slow reaction times and reading, but this quickly escalates into a sweeping generalisation about dyslexic people’s reactions: ‘it could affect all your reactions’. It is a little unclear what the ‘it’ refers to in this utterance – if ‘it’ is dyslexia, and dyslexia is slow reaction times, there is left a circular kind of argument where dyslexia is nothing but itself. It seems to make sense as a construction because of the scientific voice, but in some ways this conception of dyslexic people as potentially being ‘slow’ in all domains is quite frightening; yet easy to accept as part of an identity to the degree where it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The construction led by R in this extract is interesting in its contrast with G’s discussed in the extract above this one. While G’s scientific construction allows her to separate off dyslexia into one compartment of her brain (so keeping the effects limited to one domain of learning), and argue that this means she needs to ‘think’ her way through things, in other words, be more active in her approach compared to other people; R’s scientific-like discourse is used to construct her learning (and the learning of other dyslexic people) as ‘passive’ and the effects of dyslexia as generalised and pervasive, meaning dyslexic people have a general deficit in the shape of being a bit ‘slow’. When these two conceptions are compared, the former seems to be connected to a more positive and self-determined identity (see Rose, 2012, for the tendency to think of the brain as synonymous with mind).

The following two extracts I included here as examples of instances in which participants drew upon mind-as-computer metaphors or similes in the conceptions of dyslexia. There were numerous examples of this in the focus groups, and they sound so ordinary, it is easy to forget that the mind is not, actually, a computer (see Billig & Macmillan, 2005 on the dangers of ‘dead’ metaphors).

FG1, part of extract 55

*H: what about you B?*

*B: erm, when I describe it to people, when you were saying about the processes, like*

 *a computer with this massive memory and a really small RAM Hhh [hahahahaha]*

*All: [HAHAHAHA]*

*B: you’ve gotta like it’s getting things into it and getting things out of it, so, like, erm*

FG2, part of extract 78

*H: [but] if someone had said to you, you know, who you didn’t know, well, or had any*

 *experience, well what would you say to what’s dyslexia? What’s [going on?]*

*T: [erm, it’s ] erm,*

 *a term given to a number of problems that people suffer from which will have*

 *numerous causes within the workings of the brain, so I I think it’s a circuitry*

 *problem in the brain, erm, that just happens to produce something which we call*

 *dyslexia.*

*H: ok.*

*G: or [various] circuitry problems, I suppose*

*T: [hmmm]*

Having a ‘really small RAM’ is how B explains dyslexia to other people. She implies this means there is a problem ‘getting things into it and getting things out of it’, which imitates the input-output process on a computer. This turns the head metaphorically into a machine which does ‘processing’. You feed in information, and other information comes out. In this story, B’s computer is limited by its RAM deficiency and is therefore deficient. The computer metaphor of mind situates the learning people do entirely in the head or in the mind. Its capacity is pre-determined, in this case by the size of the RAM. It cannot be upgraded. In the second extract above, T talks about the ‘problems that people suffer from’ in dyslexia being caused by ‘a circuitry problem in the brain’. Firstly, the suffering is given solely an internal cause, just as with other deficit-based scientific conceptions of dyslexia; and secondly, the idea of the brain as having a circuit or many circuits arguably constructs again the input-output idea which implies a signal works its way around circuit (I imagine an electronics circuit of the kind I was given in school) from post to post. At some point I visualised a break in the circuit which stopped the output from being realised. Toys on a production line that are discarded have circuitry problems. To think of the mind as a physical circuit board is extremely limited, and I refer back to Ryle’s (1951) criticism of the description of mind as something physical, and in the head.

If the ‘problem’ of dyslexia is scientifically constructed as in the mind, and understood as a break in a circuit or a slow brain signal problem, then it is necessarily a ‘natural’, organic problem. There is nothing that needs to be changed in the education system if the problem is in the heads of individuals. For Carr and Hartnett (1996) this attribution of differences in capacity to nature is reminiscent of Plato’s ‘natural’ division of people into three graded types, with very little room for movement up. According to Baro (1994), the positivism in the science of persons is dangerous for the same reason: it is ‘blind to the most important meanings of human existence’ because it cannot recognise anything ‘beyond the given’ and results in worrying assumptions about particular groups of people and their innate capacities (21). This gives us ‘an idealisation of reality that winds up consecrating the existing order as natural’ (Baro, 1994: 21), while at the same time, positivism is ‘silent about its own ideology’ (Giroux, 1997: 12). Giroux argues that positivism has a political and social agenda which it fulfils by treating problems as if they were utterly separate from the social environment in which they were constructed (1997: 18). As such, positivism is strongly ideological and, says Giroux, a barrier to critical thinking (1997:18).

The ideologies underlying the study of individual differences, argues Giroux (1997), is linked to the neoliberal agenda, and means money is put into research which aims to get rid of problems at low cost so that individual productivity is enhanced. And for Billington, this ideological net which draws in the practice of educational psychology has meant that the power to resist pathologising discourses is reduced (Billington, 1996). Arguably, children and students with labels such as dyslexia are therefore left with only two dominant conceptions of their ‘deficiency’ to choose from: one based around neurological deficiency, or one which constructs the difficulties as fictional (Feldmeier-White, 2002). I heard both of these constructions in the focus group conversations, and have already talked about the precarious balance between the two, and the uncertainty about learning identity this has helped to create. As G’s utterances illustrate in the second focus group, the allegiance to neurological definitions of dyslexia is the backbone of conceptions of social justice and ideas of disability; and this is apparent in the social justice movement in learning disability more generally (Feldmeier-White, 2002). However, what I have also concluded is that scientific conceptions of dyslexia are not all the same, and subtle differences in which aspects of scientific discourses are drawn upon can make a difference to the identity taken up. I noted this in the difference between G’s and R’s conceptions above. Also, however, D brought in the idea of brain plasticity, and used the language of neuroscience to construct a learning identity that was not limited by nature, but rather freed by it. His apparent understanding of neuronal paths as ever-growing and changing structures meant that D could, so to speak, create a different brain; by ‘making different sorts of connections’ (FG1, extract 32). Therefore, it is overly simple to conclude that science equals ‘bad’ for individuals’ constructions of identities around dyslexia.

I am going to stay with the influence of science in my discussion of the next few extracts, but will shift the attention to the role of the scientific experts, often referred to as ‘they’, in shaping our understandings of dyslexia and what it must mean to be dyslexic. Below is a part of an extract in which the question ‘what is dyslexia?’ is being discussed. G comes in:

FG2, extract 63

*G: I’ve been to some lectures on it and I [still don’t know what it is] I*

*General: [hahahahah hhhhhhhhh]*

*G: know people who’ve written [rod] there’s [ rod nicolson ]*

*H: [yeh] [yeah there’s Rod’s stuff]*

*G: an expert, one of THE experts on dyslexia. He doesn’t understand what it is,*

*G: [so, we] don’t know.*

*H: [no ]*

G’s position here contrasts with her discussion elsewhere of ‘Rod’s’ theory where she describes herself as a ‘great believer’ in his work. Nevertheless, she still bestows the ‘experts’ as people who have a greater access to the truth. G again uses the full name of the psychologist and emphasises his status with ‘an expert, one of THE experts’: ‘THE’ is capitalised here to show the vocal stress that G placed upon the word. This emphasis upon the direct article implies that there are only a few leading experts in this area of science and Rod Nicolson is right up there with them. ‘He doesn’t understand what it is, so we don’t know’: in other words, if the experts cannot tell us what dyslexia means, how are we as ordinary folk going to have any clue at all? In this discourse, the power to define and describe and explain lies with the experts. Other explanations might be given, but positive psychology and psychologists are far more reliable, because they know how to examine our minds in a proper empirical, objective manner. In another age, other discourses might have been given equal or superior status: God, for example, would have been given some of the credit for endowing people with different strengths and weaknesses. In our western society, science reigns, albeit in popularised, simplified form (Gould, 1981).

One of the ways in which the expert psychologist’s voice comes to be accessed by students with the label of dyslexia is via the psychological ‘diagnostic’ assessment report. Now these are not all the same. Some are written with great care to minimalise overly-scientific language, and to explain the limits of what insight an afternoon of testing can provide; but there are many reports which do not manage this and instead offer a mindbogglingly dense and ‘expert’ text, packed with impressive nomenclature, statistics, and percentiles which are left unexplained. Thus, they can be fairly intimidating documents, which are often left unread by the student (here I am speaking from my own experience). Below is D, who is responding to my question about how his ‘diagnosis’ influenced the way he felt about himself:

FG1, part of extract 14

*D: erm. I don’t know. Cos I think, cos I’ve read, I was able to read my own Ed psych*

 *report that time, and understand what it meant, and like. so, some things um,*

 *were quite enlightening, like I, one of the things that was the difference between*

 *like your articulation, and like, your ability [to ] pro[cess]?*

*H: [yuh] [yeah]*

*D: your working [memory]*

*H: [yeh ] hmm*

*D: Mine said it was like the same level as like five percent of people*

*H: yeh.*

*D: [that difference was so huge]*

*H: [yeh yeh yeh yeh ]*

*D: and that was like, was kind of like, kind of explains a lot, at at the same time as*

 *quite, like, [wow]*

*H: [yeah] huh ha, yeh. I think it is quite like like wow. People*

*H: look at their scores [and you] you see that some of them are um*

*D: [yeah ]*

*H: often average, and, or above average, or superior, and you realise that some of*

 *your abilities, according to these tests, are right in the right in the bottom five*

 *percent of the population. [um ] (inaudible)*

*D: [yeah]*

D said ‘I was able to read my own ed psych report that time, and understand what it meant’. This can be interpreted in a number of ways. We might intuit that because D was ‘able’ that ability to read such a report is not automatic; in other words, reading and understanding an ‘ed psych report’ is not easy. D adds ‘that time’, which suggests that he was unable to read an earlier ‘ed psych report’, that by the time of this subsequent report, he had acquired enough scientific understanding to decipher it. Being able to understand such a scientific document is perhaps, for D, something which reflects well upon him: he gets it. His abbreviation of ‘educational psychology’ (or ‘educational psychologist) to ‘ed psych’ also implies a familiarity with the field, and assumes a similar understanding from the group. The ‘ed psych report’ is something that we are all likely to know about in terms of content and significance.

‘[S]ome of the things were quite enlightening’ D goes on. ‘[E]nlightening; the situated meaning here appears to be paraphrased in D’s own words a little later ‘explains a lot, at at the same time as quite, like, wow.’ I understand, therefore, that the report told him things about himself (his mind? abilities?) that he did not know, but that made sense to him once told. Being enlightened does not sound trivial; it sounds like an important moment in D’s understanding of himself. D explains what was enlightening about the report: the difference between *‘* like your articulation, and like, your ability to process?...your working memory…Mine said it was like the same level as like five per cent of people’. Understanding what D means here means having an understanding of the kinds of things psychologist’s reports say, and how they go about measuring abilities. ‘[A]rticulation’ could refer to pronunciation of words in the tests, and ‘ability to process’ and ‘working memory’ are stock ‘abilities’ these reports construct and comment upon (see the theories outlined in Nicolson & Fawcett, 2008 which underpin some of the theory of psychometric testing for dyslexia identification).

Construction of things like ‘working memory’ can be extremely useful, and by no means is my position that such abilities are not ‘real’; they are part of the psychological discourse which offers one perspective upon how we live and interact with the world and with each other that is no less valid or ‘truthful’ than other circulating perspectives. My concern about the dominance of psychological diagnoses of dyslexia is in how such language comes to be simplified and used to construct a limiting understanding of individuals and their ‘abilities’ (Gould, 1981). For me this is reflected in D’s comment ‘[m]ine said it was like the same level as five per cent of people’. D is referring to the percentile scores which often accompany the standard scores for each of the tests completed. In saying D was in the fifth percentile for working memory, this meant that in comparison to the scores of the population of his age sampled (the size of which would be listed in the manual, but not on the report), D’s scores were the same as, or higher than, 5 per cent of people. There are a number of assumptions that D has made, and which are very easy to make. Firstly, the assumption is that a single test score is a quantitative measure of an apparent ‘thing’ (ability) which psychologists have called ‘working memory’. It not only assumes such an ability, if it ‘exists’, can be measured quantitatively, but also that ‘performance’ on a test in near-lab conditions, outside of the social situations in which someone might ordinarily be using their ‘working memory’ is representative of ‘performance’ in everyday life. It assumes ability in ‘working memory’ is stable; that it does not change over time or according to context. It assumes there is a natural hierarchy into which everyone falls. For D – his ability is apparently worse than 95 per cent of people his age. Once again, it is not that these assumptions are ‘incorrect’ but that without another set of discourses available to compete with the idea of the scientific expert and scientific monopoly on ‘truth’, it is very hard for D to question the constructions which he has taken from his report, or to consider other alternatives; and very easy to make assumptions about the meaning of the numbers which the psychologist did not intend. My own part in this part of the conversation confirms the perspective that the psychology report is something to be accepted without question. I used the terms ‘average’, ‘above average’, and ‘superior’ used in psychology to describe portions of the population depending on where they fall on the bell-curve of individual ability.

Psychology and psychologists have been ruled by empiricism and rationalism ‘a dual hegemony’ and they go ‘unnoticed and unquestioned’ (Packer and Addison (intro) 1989: 13).

According to Billington, psychology acts as a tool for a capitalist economy in gaining control over a population (Billington, 1996). Psychology not only produces normal and abnormal people, ability and disability (in line with economic need), but also produces ‘experts’; it is from these ‘experts’ that people receive written reports, summing up their identity within a diagnosis of abnormality (Billington, 1996). In these reports, the person becomes a collection of percentiles and standardised scores set out in a hierarchy. The psychologist tells you who you are or what you ‘have’, as is reflected in D’s words, ‘you don’t really know what it is. I mean you don’t find out until people tell you things.’ They also have the power to tell you what that means, as J recounts below:

FG2, extract 8

*J: I remember when I had my test, they said like, my logic and my ability was like*

 *way above average, but my reading and my writing speed, I shouldn’t be at uni*

 *[and] I remember thinking, ‘owh’ hhh [hhhhhhhh]*

*G: [yeh]*

*General: [hhhhhhhh]*

*H: and sometimes, I guess that is quite [shocking ]*

*J: [mmm yeah ]*

*G: luckily they did]n’t put it like that*

*G: [other]wise I probably would have [left, hhhhhhh]*

*J: [yeah] [hhhhhh ]*

*H: [hhhhhhh ]*

J’s reaction to being told she ‘shouldn’t be at uni’ was to apparently believe them, as implied by her ‘owh’. As G says, this kind of ‘information’ may have led her to leave university. The ‘knowledge’ is passively accepted, and arguably reflects the patriarchal power relationships apparent in traditional doctor-patient relationships in which one of the pair appeared to have all of the power (Carr & Hartnett, 1996). Lemke argues that this patriarchal system has helped to produce what is commonly understood as ‘common sense’ (Lemke, 1995: 3). He is highly critical of the technical language used to report ‘facts’, along with the use of the passive and nominalisation to hide agency and reify (1995); all of these discursive aspects are givens in most psychological assessment reports ‘diagnosing’ dyslexia.

It is useful here to refer back to chapter one, in which the history of science and psychology was the focus of critical discussion, to recall the ways in which the various familiar classifications for people came into being, particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries (and also the period dedicated to the development of human measurement, Ewald, 1990). In this period, says Hacking, ‘[c]onstantly new ways of counting people were devised. New slots were created into which people could fall….They [the countings] were part of an elaborate, well-meaning, indeed innocent creating of new kinds of ways for people to be, and people innocently “chose” to fall into these new categories’ (Hacking, 2002: 49). I am not convinced of the innocence, but at the same time I do not consider the development of categories and techniques of measurement as done with the intent to dominate, nor with a conscious will for power; and I do not think of the psychological scientists as the masterminds here. Scientists are not ‘super-beings’ (Schaffer, 2009) either in their ability to step outside culture or to shape society according to their will.

What I have discussed in this fourth section in many ways ties back to the other three ideological threads considered in this chapter; reinforced are the ideas of dyslexia as a deficiency situated in the head, and as an entity measureable using psychometric tests (but only those administered by properly qualified psychologists). The history of psychology as a discipline is very prominent in the story of how dyslexia came to be a pathologised, and dealt with by cognitive scientists and by the education system. So much so that the language of Individual Psychology is reproduced in the participants’ stories, particularly in their use of mind-as-computer metaphors, understandings of cause and effect, and easy reference to percentiles and test scores as representative of their real-world abilities.

I turn now to the conclusions I have drawn from this ideological analysis and from the analysis of subject positions in chapter four. The conclusion will draw together the threads of the discussion sections and will consider implications for practice and further research.

Chapter 6 – Conclusions

At this point in the current thesis I have completed two largely separate chapters (four and five) which analyse the focus group conversations from different angles, and from slightly different, but complementary, methodological approaches: in chapter four my intention was to address the first four of my research questions. Here they are:

1. Which conceptions or discourses of dyslexia are constructed during the focus groups?

2. What positions are taken up/ offered by participants in relation to these

Constructions or discourses?

 3. What connections are there between constructions of dyslexia, related

positionings, and explicit or implicit ways of being and ways of doing? That is,

how do constructions of dyslexia help to open up or close down certain

possibilities for feeling and behaviour?

4. How are certain constructions drawn upon and positions taken up within the

conversations?

After familiarising myself with the transcribed conversations and making notes of points of interest I systematically recorded my interpretations of the conceptions of dyslexia constructed in the texts (see figs i and ii). This part of analysis was not a central focus, but part of the process of my more pressing question about subject positions (question two above). My main interest was to consider how the participants positioned themselves in relation to some of the conceptions we had constructed. I followed the ideas of Davies and Harrè (2001) on subject positioning and progressed through a process of coding the conversational exchanges in both focus groups, eventually constructing a list of ten or so key subject positions offered or taken up in the texts (which subsumed many others). The final part of the process (though this was not always a linear process as there was much going back and forth between analytical stages) was to consider the interactions between the subject positions and apparent ‘feelings’ (see personal reflection section for discussion of ‘feelings’ as constructs) and actions constructed by the participants in our stories. This stage helped me to form part of an answer to the third research question listed above. Both the conceptions of dyslexia, categories of subject position and ways of ‘feeling’ and ‘doing’ are presented in the diagram following this introduction.

In chapter five, my attention turned to the wider discourses and ideologies that I considered to be voiced within the conversations. I switched to an approach I described as a form of critical discourse analysis (informed by Willig and Gee) in order to attend to the fourth and fifth research questions. Here they are:

5. Which relevant wider discourses and ideologies are drawn upon (implicitly or explicitly) in the conversation and how do these interact and co-construct

participants’ identities as learners in higher education?

6. What are the implications of drawing upon the named discourses and

ideologies for the participants (and others) within higher education?

I used a simplified set of guiding questions to help me in this second stage of analysis, but what I found was not simple at all. It was extremely difficult to name distinct ideologies as there was such a degree of overlap and tangling between the different threads I named. I chose to present my discussion in chapter five according to four key themes, with the recognition that these had fuzzy boundaries and could often not be fully separated from each other. These themes I named as follows: education and literacy; neoliberalism, meritocracy and individualism; health, morality and medicine; and positivism, cognitivism and biological determinism. The second of these included a sub-theme of egalitarianism, democracy and social justice, which was at times contradictory to the wider theme, but was so intertwined I found it sensible to discuss the two together. Under each theme I explained how I interpreted the texts and ‘recognised’ the various ideological threads within the participants’ stories. I also discussed the implications of the ideological ‘voices’ for the local identities taken up.

In this final chapter, I talk more about why the ideologies I have discussed interact with and help to construct the participants’ stories of themselves around dyslexia. My position is that the discourses of dyslexia, weighted by ideology, offer, persuade, or predispose (dyslexic) people to take up particular subject positions; and these subject positions are apparently linked to particular ‘feelings’ and actions. I am not suggesting that there is a smooth linear pathway between a named ideology and what a person does or ‘feels’ but that there are interactive and dynamic relationships between actions, conversations, subject positions, discourses and ideologies. My aim in this chapter is to draw together the different sections of my analysis to reach a position where I can talk about the implications of my analysis for dyslexic students, and for our socially produced maintenance of dominating ideologies and discourses. What positionings are most useful for students will depend upon experience, perspective and context, but I hope to be able to suggest more and less helpful positionings with reference to the stories the participants in this study shared.

In order to do this, I will select a number of different interactive threads from the two analytical sections to illustrate how and why ideology comes to influence apparently free choices about the actions participants (said they) took and how they came to ‘feel’ in the ways their stories suggested. For example, I will look at ‘feeling proud’ as a commonly constructed ‘feeling’ in a number of the participants’ stories, and I will consider which subject positions, constructions of dyslexia and ideologies this ‘feeling’ appears to be connected to; and in conjunction with this, I will ask similar questions about the contrasting ‘feeling’ of ‘shame’ which appeared to be less useful to participants in constructing a positive learning identity. I will talk about the multiple interactions which played a constructive role in producing the participants in these focus group contexts; how much choice did they appear to have, and how helpful did their self-constructions seem to be? I will ask the same questions about how and why participants constructed themselves as happy to make use of help and support in their learning, or as reluctant to do so; how and why some participants appeared to reassess themselves in a positive way (or not) following ‘diagnosis’ of dyslexia; and how and why there were differences in where participants located blame for academic ‘failure’ and reasons for ‘success’. In considering these particular examples of interactive relationships at work in the conversations I hope to be able to suggest more and less helpful discursive positionings for dyslexic students, educators and others to be aware of; and to be in a position to discuss the implications of the discussions I have presented for dyslexic students, and for more generally for people in higher education contexts, though there are limitations to what my work here can contribute, and these will be detailed.

*Looking at the whole picture: choice and limitation in ‘being’, ‘feeling’ and ‘doing’*

The diagram below offers a simplified overview of the key interactions I ‘identified’ between the different layers of my analyses. The diagram is arranged so that the ideological weight lies at the bottom, and the ‘feelings’ and ‘actions’ sit at the top; unfortunately, putting such an overview in diagrammatic form meant that I couldn’t avoid this kind of hierarchising of the categories. In my discussion, the different levels are not arranged neatly in levels. If I had the freedom to describe the ideological and discursive interactions spatially then themes and categories would appear as a fluid mass, changing shape and being absorbed into and then separated from one another.

As it is, the diagrammatic representation shows (statically) the ideological threads that I considered were at work in the different constructions of dyslexia (in blue) and in the subject positions taken up or offered (in green). When participants took up or offered some subject positions they did so via particular constructions or discourses of dyslexia, and sometimes the construction of dyslexia was not given attention; in these cases, subject positions were constructed directly using ideologically weighted discourses described within the four (circled) themes. The arrow directions reach only upward as this fits with my analytical approach and discussion which I imbued with a metaphorically upward motion with subject positions drawing upon discourses of dyslexia and discourses of dyslexia being informed by wider ideologies. However, the direction is not one-way. Each time someone positions themselves as a ‘survivor’, for example, they reinforce and perpetuate the individualist and neoliberalist discourses and give life to the power of that clump of ideological threads. In this way, ideologies are not big, bad, and separated entities lurking in the dark ready to pounce; they are fully present and we actively renew and build upon them. We cannot escape them, but we may be able to better manage them if we are more aware of the work they do, and the work we do which can modify them.



*Fig. 1: a simplified diagram of interactions between positioning, discourses and ideologies.*

At the top of the diagram, in boxes, are lists of ‘feelings’ and ‘doings’ which the participants constructed out of the subject positions which they took up, or offered (in green). From the position of ‘being intelligent’ or ‘able’, for example, we have a list which begins ‘celebrating the label’. I hold that when participants positioned themselves as intelligent, this opened up the chance for them to celebrate ‘being’ dyslexic, whereas when presented with the position of ‘being stupid’ or ‘being a fraud’ they could not very easily celebrate the dyslexia label without first switching position or drawing upon a different ideological network. In this way, then, the diagram shows some of the dynamic paths between what we say about how we feel and what we say about what we do (and probably what we actually do too), and the (historically shaped) discourses that are made available to us in a given context, and those we carry with us from past experiences (when I say ‘we’ I mean all of us as participants).

To illustrate what I am describing here more clearly, I am going to choose a few of the more commonly constructed ‘feelings’ and ‘doings’ and follow some of the pathways of interactions that allowed them to ‘exist’ in the conversations we had. As I do this, I will ask questions about agency, and consider how a better understanding of the interactions I talk about might be useful for dyslexic students in examining their own self-constructions and reflecting upon why they ‘feel’ or ‘act’ in particular ways. I am going to talk about the following ‘feelings’ and ‘doings’ and the related interactions: ‘feeling proud’ and ‘feeling ashamed’; ‘not asking for help/ taking help reluctantly’ and ‘asking for and gladly accepting help’; ‘blaming self for failure’, ‘blaming environment for failure’, and finally ‘attributing success to internal factors’ and ‘attributing success to external factors’.

‘Feeling proud’ was perhaps the most frequently constructed ‘feeling’. The proud ‘feeling’ was not always directly about being dyslexic (though this was part of it), but sometimes about what the participants felt they had achieved educationally, *despite* dyslexia. ‘Feeling proud’ was constructed from the following positions: ‘being intelligent/ able’, ‘being superior’, ‘being a hard-worker’, ‘being a survivor’, ‘being just who I am’, and ‘being disabled’. Each construction of ‘feeling proud’ had a different flavour, so to speak, and a different set of implications for participants’ identities and potentially for the identities of other people produced in binary relation to these ‘selves’. ‘Feeling proud’ from the position of ‘being intelligent/able’ was constructed with reference to the educational level they (participants) had reached; that is, studying at a red-brick university, achieving high grades (eventually), or studying for a PhD, and also with reference to the dyslexia assessment which granted them a ‘high’ IQ. The discourses of dyslexia which interacted with ‘feeling proud’ (via ‘being intelligent’) I named ‘dyslexia as desirable’ and ‘dyslexia as difference’. The construction of dyslexia as ‘desirable’ was fed by all four of my ideological themes, and this plurality of ideological input was perhaps responsible for those different ‘flavours’ of ‘feeling proud’. Ideologies of neoliberalism, meritocracy and individualism appeared to direct participants towards the ‘feeling proud for achieving despite dyslexia’ perspective; these ideologies enabled participants to acknowledge the dyslexia label, but only in so far as it was used to say ‘look what I achieved even when I was dyslexic’. Because the participants had ‘succeeded’ in education, they were able to subscribe to the meritocratic ideal, and so understand that dyslexia had not held them back, and that their high ability and hard work got them through. The discourses of cognitive psychology and biological determinism reinforced this enablement of ‘feeling proud’ because it cemented the ‘reality’ of dyslexia as a specific ‘deficit’ that was not related to intelligence, and indeed appeared to confirm intelligence.

Here then, there was a move from ‘feeling proud’ of succeeding ‘despite’ dyslexia, to ‘feeling proud’ of the dyslexia itself as a signifier of intelligence. This is interesting because it allowed ‘being dyslexic’ to become a desirable label in itself – something which indicated *ability* rather than *disability*  and something that was given enough respect and attention in the educational experiences of these participants to have become a positive good. Ideologies connecting health and medicine with morality, which might be expected to offer only morally inferior status to people with a dyslexia label, in fact helped to bolster the conception of dyslexia as desirable because these ideologies separated dyslexia from morally inferior categories like ‘stupid’ and ‘lazy’, at least some of the time. The dyslexia label became necessary to participants to avoid historical associations between ‘abnormality’ and moral inferiority; that is, the alternatives to taking on the label were far less advantageous in terms of the identities they offered, so while participants weren’t necessarily proud of ‘being dyslexic’ as such, they were proud of not-being-stupid and not-being-lazy. Proclamation of one’s dyslexia status became important, therefore, even if one would prefer not to ‘be’ dyslexic, and not to have difficulties with literacy.

These same ideological threads fed into positions I described as ‘being superior’, ‘being a hard worker’, and ‘being a survivor’. Neoliberalism and individualism were most prominent in these positions. Dyslexia became a symbol to the participants and the world of how hard the participants had worked to overcome the challenges they had faced, and so allowed them to ‘feel proud’ of not letting dyslexia defeat them. It also led some participants to talk scornfully about other people who ‘allowed’ ‘their’ dyslexia to hold them back.

However, the same ideological threads (other than positivism, cognitivism and biological determinism) also appeared to inform the conceptions and subject positions from which participants constructed the ‘feeling’ of ‘shame’. Importantly, it was the interaction between the different ideological threads, the discourses different participants appeared to have available to them, and the educational experiences they had had that seemed to push participants towards ‘feeling proud’ or ‘feeling ashamed’; and participants sometimes slipped uneasily between the two. Within the stories of educational ‘success’, which all of the participants offered, there were sub-stories of difficulty and frustration and ‘failure’ in their educational histories. Participants also shared experiences of continuing difficulties with some aspects of everyday university life like being on time, producing written work quickly and accurately, and coping with a heavy reading load. In these stories, participants seemed to move away from the ‘being intelligent’ position to ‘being stupid’ or ‘being a fraud’ type positions. The same ideologies of health, morality and medicine which from other positions had been so useful to participants in avoiding accusations of moral inferiority started to kick in when participants were presented with the possibility that dyslexia really just meant you were stupid and lazy. Some participants began to wonder whether their difficulties were actually about their inferior abilities in general, and to worry that other people might judge them as frauds who proclaimed a special status to cover up their inability and low moral worth; thus, keeping quiet about dyslexia and feeling quietly ashamed became more likely. This was the only group of positions from which ‘feeling ashamed’ was constructed.

There are two further positions, however, from which ‘feeling proud’ was constructed: ‘being just who I am’ and ‘being disabled’. ‘Feeling proud’ from these positions seemed a bit different to ‘feeling proud’ from the positions ‘being a survivor’ and ‘being a hard-worker’, partly because different ideologically driven discourses fed into these positions. ‘Being disabled’ when it was a position actively taken up (rather than rejected, and pushed towards faceless, helpless ‘others’) was informed largely by ideologies of egalitarianism, democracy and social justice which were also active in constructions of dyslexia as a social construction and as a ‘disability’ (from a social justice perspective). Discourses of positive, psychological science and biological (genetic) determinism were drawn upon to verify the ‘disability’ positions, which seemed to produce some conflict. Understanding dyslexia to be a defined, specific brain based deficit was central to arguments for the disability label, and for funding and adjustments. This was not useful from a social constructionist perspective which placed the cause of the disability in the environment. To some degree, though, ‘being disabled’ and ‘being just who I am’ positions allowed some participants to ‘feel proud’ of being part of a minority group that was in no way inferior – just different, and to declare their disability and dyslexic status confidently and loudly.

I have talked about a number of different ways of ‘feeling proud’ and ‘feeling ashamed’ in the focus group conversations. What might be useful about this for the participants, for other dyslexic students, or for people in the education system in general? Does it matter if participants construct ‘feeling proud’ or ‘feeling ashamed’? My position is that it does matter, both for the participants and for other people. Firstly, it matters what one ‘feels proud’ of. If one feels proud that one is dyslexic and therefore ‘not stupid’ this is apparently beneficial to the individual with the label. However, in my study, the associations made between dyslexia and intelligence were sometimes quite flimsy. In situations where there was little obvious ‘success’, or in contexts where participants questioned their competence, doubt about what dyslexia meant crept in. In this sense, then, understanding ‘intelligence’ as a fixed quality we have inside us in the first place makes us (as humans) vulnerable to constructions of ourselves as intellectually inferior if our achievement level begins to slip. It also makes us vulnerable to accusations of low moral worth and laziness if we construct academic achievement as something one just works hard for. In other words, ‘feeling proud’ about being dyslexic because it signifies intelligence, or hard work, or that you are a survivor, is useful so long as the individual can achieve and maintain academic status. ‘Feeling proud’ in this way also implies that other people who do not ‘succeed’ academically should not ‘feel proud’: one cannot be ‘stupid’ or ‘lazy’ and proud, from this perspective.

‘Feeling proud’ from the ‘being disabled’ position also comes with its own problems, but perhaps is more helpful and stable than ‘feeling proud’ from the other positions discussed above. ‘Being disabled’ from a social justice and social constructionist perspective allows people with a label to be proud of being ‘human’ and ‘equal’, just as someone without a label can feel. The ‘feeling proud’ is not just about the dyslexia or being disabled, it is about a right to feel an equal part of humanity, and proud about all the bits that go into producing you as a particular person. This position offers the tools from which to reject discourses which construct shame and inferiority. It also constructs pride in group identity (as part of a disabled minority and as part of humanity), and therefore moves away from individualising ideologies which place all of the emphasis upon the self to strive and succeed. ‘Feeling proud’ from a ‘being disabled’ position may be maintained even in the face of apparent ‘failure’ in certain areas. It is also not particularly linked to ‘being superior’, and so avoids the construction of others as inferior, for whatever reason.

I do not think there is one best way of constructing one’s identity to the degree that one has a choice in it. However, by asking questions about how and why one feels a particular way in certain situations, or by doing particular things, it might be possible for dyslexic people (and relevant others) to have some control over the identities they take on, and have a greater awareness of the implications of these identities for the social world of which we are a part.

In the next few paragraphs I am going to talk about the constructed behaviours I labelled ‘asking for help/ gladly accepting help’ and ‘not asking for help/ taking help reluctantly’. All of the dyslexic participants did take ‘help’ to some degree, though in some cases they only made use of extra time in exams and did not make use of the full range of adjustments they could have done. I have chosen to talk about the participants discussion of ‘adjustments’ and ‘help’ and fairness because these has clear practical implications for how these students experienced their courses, their ‘progress’ and their ‘success’. ‘Not asking for help’ or ‘taking help reluctantly’ were ‘doings’ constructed from the following groups of subject positions: ‘being a hard-worker’, ‘being a survivor’, and ‘being stupid/ being an fraud’; ‘asking for help’ and ‘gladly accepting help’ were constructed from the subject positions ‘being worthy and deserving’ and ‘being disabled’. I will start by talking about the ideological and discursive interactions that helped to make ‘not asking for help/ taking help reluctantly’ possible.

‘Being a hard worker’ and ‘being a survivor’ were very closely related subject positions, and were both most powerfully informed by the group of ideologies I called neoliberalism, meritocracy and individualism. From these ideological positions, one may acknowledge a ‘disability’ but one may not use it as an ‘excuse’ to get ‘special attention’. ‘Being a hard worker’ was very central in many of the stories the participants told: in their early educational experiences ‘being a hard worker’ was used as evidence that they weren’t lazy and that certain teachers were wrong about them, and in their more recent educational experience, ‘being a hard worker’ continued to be a key part of most of the identities participants were constructing for themselves – having the dyslexia label testified to the reality of their ‘hard-work’; that is, the fact that a dyslexic person had got this far was evidence enough that participants must have worked hard (harder than others) to get there. One of the problems with ‘asking for help’ or ‘taking help’ was that acknowledging these actions appeared to diminish the hard-worker identity. The idea here can be summed up along these lines: ‘in order to be a hard-worker I must be seen to jump through exactly the same hoops as everyone else; if I take a short cut, then I risk being accused of taking the easy option. As a result, my degree will not be as valuable as someone else’s degree’. Moreover, some of the participants not only wanted to be understood as having worked just as hard as other people, but as having worked much harder. Using American Dream discourses the ‘disability’ becomes a badge of honour, but only *after* you have proved that you can compete in the same field as everyone else, without any ‘charity’. In some ways, then, this means rejecting the label, until you can say you have stood on your own two feet.

Neoliberalism and meritocratic ideologies say that individuals are not equal; one can (seemingly) offer equality of opportunity, but after that, the best will rise to the top through their own merit and hard work. The others will become ‘average’ or sink to the bottom, and that’s just how life is. Under such discursive regimes, schemes which attempt to even up the representation of women, ethnic minorities, or disabled people in certain fields of education, politics and employment, such as affirmative action, are reviled; and anyone who makes use of such schemes labelled as not really worthy, and not equal to others who got there on their ‘own merit’. Many of the participants were therefore understandably reluctant to say that they were comfortable taking ‘help’ when they were drawing on these discourses to construct themselves as hard-workers.

In many places during our conversations, participants did manage to construct the ‘help’ they got (in the form of technology or tutor support) as invaluable, and themselves as deserving of this support. In these narratives, neoliberalism became a victim of its own close pairing with ideologies of egalitarianism and democracy. Neoliberalism claims a kind of ‘fairness’ to its principles, which nicely cloaks the utter unfairness of its preferred societal mechanisms; in order to claim ‘fairness’ it relies upon democratic ideals which say everyone should have equal opportunity to take part. Even by drawing very selectively upon discourses of egalitarianism and democracy, the neoliberalist argument puts its legitimacy at risk by opening up the route for a deeper discussion of ‘fairness’. Participants were therefore able to question whether it was really fair that someone ‘intelligent’ who simply could not read or write very fast compared to equally intelligent peers, should be virtually excluded from the kinds of ‘success’ these peers could achieve. Surely it is reasonable, and ‘fair’ to give assistance to people who have a specific difficulty so that when they do compete on the education and employment market, they do so on a more equal footing. Such it was in the conversations, that when drawing on the discourses egalitarianism and positivist cognitive science, participants were able to use the evidence of their specific neurological deficit, and intelligence, to argue that adjustments in education were reasonable.

In consideration of the interactions discussed above, ‘being worthy and deserving’ and ‘being a survivor’ may be understood as opposing positions in both of the focus group conversations. The first heavily informed by egalitarianism, social justice and psychological science, and the second by neoliberalism, meritocracy and individualism. They allowed very different ways of ‘feeling’ and ‘doing’ to be constructed. Which is more ‘helpful’ to dyslexic individuals depends upon a number of things. If one considers one’s own progression and identity as most important, then once a degree of educational ‘success’ has been achieved, meritocratic and neoliberalist discourses may appear to serve that individual best. This is because the identities made available in this situation permit a sense of superiority and place the individual somewhere high in the human hierarchy. These discourses also allow such individuals to dismiss the plight of others further down the scale as their own fault, which effectively means the successful individual can opt out of any moral responsibility for others. For some people, this is the most desirable position to be in. However, if one considers that society comes before the individual, and that our ‘successes’ and ‘failures’ are partly given to us through our communities, then working towards a fairer and more inclusive environment becomes vital. From this perspective, participants could acknowledge their right to reasonable adjustments because these made society fairer, and therefore better. This meant that they could be seen as hard-workers *and* as having a right to additional support, as the two no longer conflicted.

I have yet to discuss the question of help-taking from positions of ‘being disabled’ and ‘being stupid/ being a fraud’. They are both informed by the same ideologically driven discourses discussed above, but represent more extreme ends of the spectrum of accepting help or not accepting help. While ‘being worthy and deserving’ permitted participants to ask for and accept help, the help was constructed as something taken quietly and gratefully. From the ‘being disabled’ position, help was taken loudly, and often combined with demands for more. Because social constructionist discourses were used to support the conception of dyslexia as a disablement rooted in the environment, ‘being disabled’ allowed some participants to question assessment practices at the university, to approach academic staff to say what they wanted, and to confidently explain to doubters why they needed reasonable adjustments. With a strong conception of socially constructed disability and some reference to brain-based ‘differences’ (which become deficits only in certain contexts), it is possible to construct a positive identity which does not separate the individual from society and responsibility for others. It allowed participants to be ‘successful’ and to avoid guilt; it allowed them to feel indignant in the face of ‘failure’, rather than responsible for it; it allowed them to resist the more dominant individualist ideologies that would have them defined as cheats or tragedies. In this context, the position of ‘being disabled’ as I have described it appeared the most beneficial to the group and to the individual.

I have interpreted ‘being disabled’ as the most beneficial position in the discussion of help-taking, and here I talk about why I consider ‘being stupid/ being a fraud’ to be the least beneficial. It is the dark side, so to speak, of the neoliberalist and meritocratic ideologies. I said above that as long as you are ‘succeeding’, meritocracy and neoliberalism allow you the identities of ‘survivor’ and ‘hard-worker’. The participants did not construct themselves as ‘successful’ all of the time. They experienced situations in which their ‘abilities’ were constructed as letting them down and putting into question their competence or intelligence: for example, not being able to remember a speech one had to do, feeling that one was a bit stupid compared to quick thinking colleagues, not being able to spot one’s own errors, or doing ‘stupid’ things when buying train tickets or writing down information. From the meritocratic perspective, these little ‘failures’ are one’s own fault. To ask for help would be to acknowledge that one’s weaknesses had beaten you, so the only real choice is to keep your difficulties quiet, take responsibility for them, and struggle on. Yet from this position, one does not get to be a ‘survivor’, but more a secret failure; a fraud who feels at any moment they will be found out for the morally and intellectually inferior person they ‘really’ are. The ‘dyslexia’ becomes a cover for ‘stupidity’ and discourses linking intellectual ‘health’ and not being a very worthy person come into play. This is not at all helpful either for the individual or for others. By conceptualising dyslexia as a cover for stupid from the perspective of one’s own label, one is extending this conception to others with the dyslexia label, and offering an inferior identity to anyone who experiences ‘failing’ at something. It compounds the discourses which abound in the media and proclaim dyslexia as a middle class excuse, and argue for the removal of reasonable adjustments. It also perpetuates the idea that ‘stupidity’ and ‘intelligence’ are things which we possess independently of social context.

Asking for help or not is linked to the next group of ‘doings’ I am going to discuss, namely, the ways participants situated blame for success and failure. Blaming external factors for apparent failure was constructed from subject positions ‘being intelligent/ able’ and ‘being worthy/ deserving’. Blaming internal factors (self) for apparent failure was constructed from the positions ‘being a survivor’ and ‘being stupid/ being a fraud’. Attributing ‘success’ to internal factors was constructed from the position of ‘being a survivor’; and attributing ‘success’ to external factors was constructed from the position of ‘being stupid/ being a fraud’. Again it is possible to argue that the subject positions ‘being a survivor’ and ‘being stupid/ being a fraud’ are more closely connected in terms of the ideologies which inform them and the ways of ‘feeling’ and ‘doing’ they permit. It was possible to flip between these positions in different stories, which in turn constructed a conflicted educational identity often demanding defensive justification to others in the group. Both of these positions are dominated by individualising ideologies which proclaim the individual as a separate and responsible unit which determines his or her own course. ‘Failure’ may be attributable to only two factors: lack of inherent ability, or lack of effort. There is no space for entry of socially constructed limitations to people’s likelihood of ‘success’ as defined by the neoliberalist, late capitalist society. For some participants in particular narratives, the power of the ‘being stupid/ being a fraud’ position did not even allow attribution of ‘success’ to the self. For example, one participant felt that an A grade in maths was somehow gained by luck, and that her ‘true’ mathematical ability was likely to be very poor. The construction of dyslexia as a myth and an excuse was fundamental in reaching this conclusion. Again, then, ‘being stupid’ and ‘being a fraud’ appear as the least useful and most identity-damaging of all of the positions taken up, second only to ‘being a survivor’ to which it is closely linked. The ideological and discursive interactions which help to construct these subject positions and inform our constructions of ‘feeling’ and ‘action’ are, in my view, destructive in this context. They destroy one’s ability to recognise the role institutions play in labelling individuals according to the economic and political agenda of the time, and coax people to actively participate in the construction of their low social status. For the participants in the focus groups, the conception of dyslexia as an excuse for stupidity was not prevalent. It lurked, but was normally superseded by other constructions. My concern is that the reason it did not dominate is because these particular participants were at a stage in their educational career where they had achieved a great deal of conventional academic standing and confidence. All participants were on course to do well on their degree or higher degrees. It would be interesting to see whether the conception of dyslexia as stupidity would have further reach in a group of less conventionally successful young people discussing similar topics.

I have picked out some of the commonly constructed ‘feelings’ and ‘doings’ from the focus group conversations and attempted to make the wider ideologically driven discourses that influence them more transparent. There are many other parts of the participants’ narratives I could have given close attention; I chose the categories I have discussed because, as a specialist teacher for dyslexic students, constructions of shame and pride, self-blame and anger at the environment, and the ‘choice’ about whether or not to make full use of additional support in education, appear in my experience to shape students’ identities at university and colour their stories in the most pervasive ways.

*Participant feedback*

I sent draft analyses of the transcripts along to the participants after my first attempt at identifying subject positions, and later, during the initial ideological analysis. I also sent a near complete thesis draft to the participants for any final thoughts, and to invite them in to chat about the work. Most of the participants were interested in the way their words had been analysed and said that the focus group experience had been a useful one. One participant said ‘it was a very interesting and not always comfortable experience!’ and another said ‘it's always very strange when I see it’s me talking!’  . None of the participants contested the analysis, though one participant expressed her surprise at the way she came across in the transcripts. This participant felt, on reflection, that her talk was more extreme than she remembered. She felt that at times she was reacting to what she perceived as attack. She explained ‘I think I found myself in a position where I had to defend my views from attack and I was maybe a little frustrated at points that it felt like people were being unreasonable’. It is an important point to remember that the ways participants construct themselves and their views are not static, but context bound and produced in interaction with others and with the environment.

On sending out the near final draft and inviting participants to come in for a chat about the work if they so wished, one participant commented ‘[f]rom my own naive perspective I thought your [sic] raised some very revealing attitudes and ideas I'd had both myself but not realized’. This participant also said  ‘[i]t's also an insightful experience to read an analysis of one's own language use. Its not often you get to reflect on the layers of meaning you have in your own speech.... or notice how often I use the word 'like'.’. In all, the feedback from participants was characterised by interest, and not by suggestions for different interpretation or alternative analysis. Not all of the participants responded, and there were too few interested in a reflective focus group for this to go ahead, though the invitation for individual meetings is still open at the time of writing. In future research I would be keen to set up a reflective focus group sooner in the research process so that participants had a more structured opportunity to offer their interpretations and comment upon the implications of the ways their words had been analysed. From the feedback I did receive at the different stages of the project, I feel that the process was, overall, one that benefitted the students taking part and helped them to consider the ways they were producing different dyslexia-related identities together.

*Use of this research*

A key driver of this research from the outset was to enhance the educational lives of students with the dyslexia label. I therefore turn now to a discussion of how some of the conclusions I have discussed above might inform practice: by practice, I mean my own practice and that of other specialist teachers in specific learning difficulties working in post-16 education, but also the practice of other specialists and educators who work with students with SpLD labels in whatever capacity. I will also talk here about how students might use this work directly as a means of increasing awareness and possibly their own control of their ways-of-being as learners within a western education system. I will begin with implications for specialist teachers like me.

All over the UK, universities and colleges have specialised staff who offer services to students with labels of specific learning difficulties. Usually within this group will be a small number of specialist tutors whose responsibility it is to work with registered students to help them work around academic-related challenges they face on their courses, to build self-confidence and self-determination, to teach different aspects of academic literacy using multi-sensory methods, and to help them use their strengths to get the best the most out of their educational experience. This requires the building of a close and trusted working relationship with the student who may arrive at college or university with an educational history that has not been very enjoyable, and that has more often than not included at least a few experiences of feeling stupid or incompetent which continue to haunt them. Even when such damaging instances are not reported, the story of continual frustration with academic work and confusion about why they seem to struggle so much compared with peers and why their marks do not reflect their effort and understanding is almost universal, in my experience. When specialist teachers meet a student for the first time, they explore the student’s educational histories with them; they ask questions about how they perceive their own strengths and difficulties, how they enjoyed school, about their relationships with teachers and peers, and what kinds of things worried them, or still worry them about learning in this context. Quite often the student and I will get onto the topic of what dyslexia ‘is’, and what it has meant getting the label in their particular experience. Quite often, the getting of the label is a huge source of relief; just as the stories of many of the students in the current study attested, being given a formal report ‘diagnosing’ dyslexia is a certificate of social legitimacy; a solid, often socially respectable explanation for all those years of being told they could do better, of being placed in lower school sets than their ability should have suggested, of being considered ‘a bit slow’ by teachers and peers. For many students, particularly those who receive the label towards the end of compulsory schooling or in early adulthood, the dyslexia label is immensely valuable. There are, of course, many exceptions to this. In my experience, those students who come from (I am oversimplifying) ‘working class’ backgrounds, or from minority cultural groups, appear less likely to experience the label as a good thing. In many of these examples, this is informed by the reaction or opinions of the student’s family and home community to formal labels they consider identify intellectual deficiency (or even ‘disease’ as one of my students has said). However, I argue that all of these students could benefit from a better understanding of how and why they draw upon the discourses they do and what implications this might have for their ongoing identities and ways-of-being (and those of other people).

Each initial meeting with a student is different. Sometimes students arrive in crisis, and so the expected initial interview changes form to adapt to the student’s situation at the time. My suggestion is that the specialist teacher uses her expertise to judge whether a discussion about positioning may be initiated in that first session. If the specialist teacher notices any links in the story made between conceptualisations of dyslexia and choices made about disclosure, taking up of adjustments or not; and also any connections between discourses of dyslexia and how they say they feel about learning, their stories of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ and how they now characterise their ability and worth as a student, then a discussion about why they feel or act in the ways they have would be enriched by an understanding of the discourses and ideologies at play. I argue that these kinds of in-depth discussions from the outset would in many cases help enable students to resist the discourses and ideologies they had not before recognised in their self-constructions and to act in a way which means they are more likely to take up support which would allow them to help level the playing field for their educational participation. For example, if a student says something like ‘well, yes I’m glad I was finally diagnosed because now I know why I couldn’t get through all the reading my friends could, but it’s ok: I don’t really need any extra help now. I wouldn’t want my tutor to think I couldn’t do it by myself. It’s fine. I just have to work a bit harder.’ I can use this as a springboard to begin a discussion about ideas of ‘hard work’, ‘equality’, ‘fairness’, and ‘social justice’. While avoiding complicated language about ideology and discourse I would ask the student why they would not want the tutor to think he ‘couldn’t do it by myself’. If the student replies, for example ‘I wouldn’t want her to think I wasn’t able, or bright’ or ‘I wouldn’t want her to think I expected handouts’ the route would then be open to a discussion of ‘ability’and how we judge it, of what it means to be ‘bright’ and how this is measured, of what ‘handout’ means, why this appears insulting, and why asking for help seems to qualify for this term. Now many tutors may already take up lines of discussion like these, but where they may stop is with a helpful but limited statement that the student should take up adjustments because they are legally entitled to it, and it will help them participate more equally. The student may agree with this in principle, but in another situation when faced with someone who is drawing on neoliberalist and semi-meritocratic ideologies to position them as a cheat, they may well crumble, and forget why it is ‘fair’ they get ‘extra’. What I argue my work can add here is a depth and clarity which a student can take away with them and use in ongoing reflection upon what dyslexia ‘means’ and which they can draw upon to resist unhelpful positionings they are given by others. That is, if I as a tutor can help make explicit the historical origins of some of the conceptions of dyslexia they have, to make visible the political and social origins of some of the common-sense ideas about learning and fairness they have, and how these translate into ‘choices’ and assumptions they have made, they may be empowered (for want of a better word) to resist the ideas that have been dominating their constructions of self. This discussion could be scaffolded with use of a diagram such as the one presented above (though perhaps simplified). This would not take the form of a lecture, but would be a discussion driven by questions with a focus upon the student’s stories and experiences. I recognise this may not work very well with students of school age, nor with adults who have not made their way through the education system recently, as discussions about the power of ideas might be assuming a good deal of brought ‘knowledge’. This would have to be judged by those working with other student groups.

The onus should not rest entirely upon the student to reflect upon their use of discourse, and to adjust. Perhaps more important is that specialist teachers, subject teachers, lecturers, and psychologists use this understanding to reflect upon and adjust the ways in which they position, albeit inadvertently, the students with SpLDs whom they come across. In my current position as academic director for SpLD tutorial support at The University of Sheffield, and as responsible for organising and often delivering university-wide staff development around teaching and specific learning difficulties, I am well-placed to transfer some of the messages of this research to teaching and support staff. Staff development sessions which used case studies containing student narratives around education and dyslexia would be an example starting point for a string of sessions which helped educators to reflect upon their role in the ideological positioning of students (incidentally, this discussion might also encourage reflection upon the ways educators position other students too, particularly when ‘failing’). Sessions around the topic of teaching and dyslexia are consistently popular at the moment at The University of Sheffield, although one challenge is to attract members of staff who are either resistant to the idea that dyslexia is ‘real’, and sceptical of the usefulness of the label at all, or who are not terribly interest in teaching and learning. This is a practical challenge that is not resolvable here. Nevertheless, I am in a position to make a start, and I very much intend to. I also hope to use this work to directly inform a specialist teacher training course I am in the process of designing and which is due to open in 2014. The practical implications of the current research are woven into the fabric of the course, and much opportunity will be given for trainees to talk about their ideas together and to explore ways of working with their students in the ways I have suggested above.

From my perspective, the particular discourse analytic approach employed in this study is particularly suited to the overall aim of improving practice and student experience. As the methodological approach was formed from a critical realist perspective, there is room both for an understanding of dyslexia as in part socially constructed, and for acknowledgement of the social, material and historical realities students are subject to in their educational lives. The research findings do not enable prediction or generalisation across HE contexts (that was never the aim, nor possible with this kind of science), but they do, I argue, scaffold a process of theoretically informed and in-depth reflection during which practitioners, students and educators can extrapolate from the findings and make adjustments to their ways of talking about learning and dyslexia accordingly. Moreover, I consider this an example of how practitioner-led, practically orientated and purposeful research can be directly impact-ful in higher education beyond conventional measures of ‘impact’ academics have arguably been governed by (Saunders, 2013; Watermeyer, 2014).

The idea of interpretation has been very important within this work. Burman suggests we have a duty to interpret, rather than simply explain, if we wish to resist the domination of ‘legitimised knowledge’ about humankind (Burman, 2003: 107). Each of us taking part in those conversations was doing interpretation; gathering and building the meaning of utterances according to our histories, the histories of those words we used, and according to the unspoken understandings of being and contexts we had experienced. This self-interpretation ‘lays out possibilities for being’ (Packer and Addison, 1989: 2). With awareness of these possibilities, I consider we begin to have choice: ‘[g]rasping these possibilities, we take a stand on our existence.’ (ibid: 2). However, my idealism here is tempered by the discursive and extra-discursive limits on our choices in who and how to be. The argument that classifications will always come to collect a proportion of a population is a strong one. Hacking says that ‘[c]ategories of people come into existence at the same time as kinds of people come into being to fit those categories, and there is a two-way interaction between these processes.’ (2002: 48). From this position neither the person, nor the category arrives first: both come together, and evolve together, and so Hacking asks ‘[h]ow do classifications of people affect the people classified, how do we change in virtue of being classified, and how do the ways in which we change have a sort of feedback effect on our systems of classification themselves?’ (Hacking, 2002: 99). To answer these questions using the example of dyslexia as a classificatory kind, I say that being labelled dyslexic absolutely interacts with possibilities for being (our possibilities and those of others); and being a person with the dyslexia label feeds into the way that label is understood and how it is used in the future. These possibilities cannot be sorted into bad and good, but they each have different implications for our own and others’ identities, and for the institutions and power structures we are a part of.

Further research might include similar analysis of discussions of learning, ability and specific learning disability between other student groups, lecturers and other educators, between psychologists who ‘diagnose’ dyslexia, and between specialist SpLD teachers to explore some of the common ways in which these groups draw upon wider discourses and ideologies in characterising themselves and the students they teach. Furthermore, it would be useful to analyse other types of text which help to circulate ideas about intelligence and learning difficulty, such as psychological reports, and institutional policy guidance documents. It would be interesting and useful to see how they balance the often contradictory ideas about hard work, ability, equal opportunity, and fairness, and to explore the ways such texts are used and understood by students and educators. The outcomes of such research are profoundly important to me in my role, and I look forward with excitement to wherever this journey may take me.

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Appendix i

*Extracts from focus group one referred to, but not included in full, in the body of the thesis*

**Extract 2**

H: Right…so…now I know a little bit about your subjects and I know that you, you (indicates R) were identified quite late, I was just wondering if you could all tell me a bit about..when you were first identified. Was it when you were a kid, and if if so can you remember what that experience was like?

H: Anyone want to go first hhh [hhh]?

General: [hhh]

C: Erm,hgm, I was identified in my second year, erm, and it sort of felt like, I sort of new I was dyslexic but it was nice to be told like you are dyslexic. and here’s the help and [support] sort of thing.

H: [yeah ye]

H: Why was it, why was it nice to be told?

C: because er I struggled with my grammar and that and and spelling and that, and I just thought I wasn’t that good at it, but it’s nice, like, I ’have like a reason why I’m not very good at it, if that makes [sense].

H: [Yes ].

H: [yes ]

C: [so it’s] not like my fault as such, like. [ugh, huh]

**Extract 3**

H: [yes, yeh.] .hhhhh. anyone else?

B: yeh, well I was I was diagnosed when I was in first year. So [yeah, it was]

H: [oh, ok, so ]

H: you three [were ]

B: [quite similar] but erm, it was it was nice, it was nice to be told like’ because, especially at school, like we did the CATS test? so they predict your grades for you. [so like] intelligence tests. And urm, I was

D: [mmm ]

B: predicted like A-stars in English, and and I got like Bs. And like, urgh, I’m well aware that a B is still good, but, but [the fact] that, er, they’d told me my

H: [yeah ]

B: potential was’n A-star, it it was the frustration of (.) not understanding

 [why]

C:[why]

B: it wasn’t getting that far. Like I was doing everything that I was supposed to be doing, but, [but not ] yeah.

H: [yeah, yeah]

C: [yeah ]

H: but not that often is the experience of, that people who have who have got identified at university, because th they’ve, been they’ve got on so well at school, but not fulfilled their potential because they’ve been getting sort of Bs and sometimes A’s, no one thinks that there’s a problem, especially in girls that seems to [be ]

**Extract 5**

H: mmm, interesting. ok. How about you?

R: Erm, well mine was just after getting some really awful essay results? erm, an it was so frustrating because I knew that I’d tried really really hard [ hh ]

H: [yeah]

R: urm, and, yet the marks just didn’t reflect that? And other people hadn’t tried at all and had done loads better. so in a way it was nice to get it because it was like I had tried, and it wasn’t as if I hadn’t put enough [work in].

H: [yeah ]

H: completely, yeah. So I suppose they were all quite similar feelings

**Extract 6**

H How about you?

S: erm, I was diagnosed when I was like in year four, or or something like that, when I was really young.

H: How, how old was year [four?]

D: [erm ]

C: like, eleven?

H, S: No.

D: it’s [eight] yeah

R: [eight]

H: [ahh ] and can you remember anything about it at all?

D: er, I remember I don’t remember being diagnosed. My mum was an English teacher [so she ]

H: [yeah ]

D: knows, like, [she picks ] up on it.

H: [yeah, yeah] yeah

D: um er er an I remember, I remember doing like some small word classes or something else . for dyslexia some else, something else like that, I don’t remember much [at all ]

H: [much at all]. Mmm. ( )

**Extract 9**

A: well, I found the tests quite embarrassing, like, parts of it that were really***9*** really bad at. urgh, just felt like, you think I’m really really stupid, don’t

 [you ]?

General: [yeah, yuh, yuh] (strong agreement)

**Extract 32**

H: why does she, why does she refuse the help? I mean, does she talk to you about why?

R: um, a little bit, um, she just said that she doesn’t want it to stop her from doing anything, and she just wants to do it all on her own merit. I think she had a lot of help when she was younger,

but she just [doesn’t take any of it now]

H: [doesn’t take any, university, yeah] yeah.

**Extract 36**

D: I sometimes feel like I’m outside the net, outside the nest of the university health, er the university disabled thing, like, in a real job, like, how would you cope with it in the same way, like, where there wouldn’t be the same kind of supports

H: Yeah

S: or extra time, like, [like that]

H: [well, there are] laws protecting you, protecting, for things like [that]

D: [mmm]. They are supposed to, to

D: well my feeling is that you just need to compensate [by] being good at

H: [yeah]

D: something [else]

H: [yeah] exactly. And everyone has got strengths.

D: yeah yeah.

**Extract 134**

H: what about you R, what do you think?

R: er, I don’t think, I don’t see it as a disability at all. I just see it as something that I need to know about, to compensate for when I need [to ]

H: [yeah] yeah. Ok.

R: so it’s more for my understanding than for anyone else’s [understanding]

H: [understanding] yeah, yeah. Ok.

**Extract 146**

S: yeah, so they might realise they do have dyslexia, but if they don’t have dyslexia, then they are giving it a really bad [name]

H: [yeah]

D: [it ] kind of makes me feel guilty because sometimes I feel like I’m faking it, and then I’ll mess something up [you’ll, then ] you kind of do value whether you do have it or not.

S: [yeh but you don’t]

**Extract 150**

D: well the reality is you just have to work harder [like ]

S: [yeah]

D: cos people can help you, give you Dictaphones and stuff, give you all the help in the world, but in the end you’ve just got to sit [down and work ]

H: [work more, yeah].

D: like [like]

**Extract 152**

R: erm, I can understand why it’s seen as a middle class thing, but again, if the parent, it’s the parent who says to go and get tested for it all, but erm, anyone who says something like that should have a look at the assessments we had to do and see if someone can get ninety nine percent on one thing and one percent on [another] It’s obviously they’re [not working]

H: [yeah ] [yeah ]

D: [yeah ]

R: [the same as everyone else] you know?

D: [yeah yeah yeah ]

H: [mmmmmm ]

R: and the fact is

**Extract 168**

H: hhh. You?

D: get rid of my dyslexia?

H: mm

D: Well, it’s like a trade-off. Bits would go that are helpful and that would trade off other bits.

H: mmm

D: you can’t take away one thing without taking [away the others]

H: [away the others] yeah.

D: so like, yeah. I dunno.

Appendix ii

*Extracts from focus group two referred to, but not included in full, in the body of the thesis*

**Extract 1**

H: OK, so, I think that’s recording. I should probably just check. No, it’ll be fine. No, it definitely is. Right. So the first the first, the way to start off really is, I was wondering when, if you could all say when you were first identified with dyslexia. Can you remember it, and how long ago was it, and how did it kind of feel when you did it, when you got.

N: when you say ‘identified’ you mean clinical[ly ] identified?

H: [yes]

N: or when your first [er, or]

H: [well I ] don’t know. Maybe both. Yeah.

N: I I think I was middle school age. [ahhh yeah er]

H: [ what’s, how ] old is

N: ahh yeah I, ha hh. Probably half of these didn’t go to middle school. Hh, er, nine to thirteen?

H: okay.

**Extract 16**

J: see, I kind of feel more able than some people [to do] certain day-to-day

H: [mm ]

J: things. So I think

H: who haven’t got labels of any [kind] and so I think that’s.

J: [yeah]

J : And also from knowing from very young, that’s, like you just live with it, you compensate, you just kind of find little ways around doing things

**Extract 29**

H: How about you?

T: well, what I would say is that, in the education system, I would label myself as having some sort of disability, because it affects my performance in that area. But in the the big wide world, and in the work environment, I can’t imagine it having

such a [det ]rimental effect on [me ] that it would cause me

J: [mm] [mm ]

T: to label myself as dyslexic.

J: mmm yeah.

**Extract 56**

N: mm I found a great contrast [there] cos, my partner’s parents

J: [mm ]

N: they think it’s brilliant that I’m doing a PhD and I’ve got dys[lexia]

J: [mm ]

N: and I’m just like, well, you know, ‘don’t’, they’re like ‘ohh! It’s GREAT’, and you’re thinking well ‘no. please don’t’, [don’t tell me that]

J: [that you’re, yeah]

H: [you mean like ] ‘even though you’ve

H: got [this terrible thing, you can still] [survive it’ yeah]

N: [yeah, IT IS, hhhh ] hhhh [yeah hhhhhhh ] [hhhhhhh]

J: [yeeaah! ] [you’re just you] [aren’t you]

**Extract 57**

G: Like, it’s interesting as well, like, we’re having this group talk about what it means to be dyslexic, labelled dys[lexic]

H: [mm ]

N: [mm ]

G: we’re all people who have come to university. We’ve all come to the university of X which is one of the harder universities [to get] into

H: [mm ]

G: if you just get a random group of people with dyslexia who [HAD] known

J: [mmm]

G: forever, but hadn’t, but had it to the extent that they couldn’t [come to uni]

J: [mm yeh ]

G: versity, [they’d] probably have really dif[ferent ]

H: [mmm ] [yeah ]

J: [differ ]ent, yeah.

H: I’ll have to do another PhD on that [hahahaha ]

General: [hahahaha ]

**Extract 59**

H: ok. Ok so that was, not really wanting to tell people

J: mmm

H: that was, you didn’t get any negative reaction, you just didn’t want

J: no, no I don’t, not to my face anyway hahaha, I don’t think so.

H: did anyone else have any, or weirdly positive, or?

M: I had people telling me they probably had dyslexia as well. That seemed to be universal, cos, I didn’t tell many people. I told my close group of friends who are all doing the same kind of thing as me. And I think they looked at me, and thought, they were just as capable as he is [and we] are all doing the

H: [mmm ]

M: same kind of stuff, and obviously, I turn up and say ‘yeah well I’ve got dyslexia today’ and they’re like ‘yeah, probably if I got tested, I’d

have [it as well] and that’s [the end of it]

J: [yeah ] [mmm yeah]

G: [mmmm]

M: [and that’s] all I really got. And I haven’t told many people because,

J: [mmmmm ]

M: apart from people assessing your work [and] stuff like that. I haven’t

J: [mm]

M: told my PhD assessors, but, like, I don’t tell people, because the only thing you can do with that information is use it as an excuse for

H: yeah

M: I mean you (indicates N) say you use it as an excuse [but but ]

**Extract 60**

N: the thing is when I had my viva, which is actually [really] really [wor]rying me

M: [mmm] [mm]

N: already, is, they are gonna ask me questions about my work.

M: mmm

N: now if I’m gonna write a paper and not remember it,

M: mmm

N: then writing out a full thesis, and being asked questions on it is

actu[ally] quite concerning, and I want them to know that I have

M: [mm]

N: this [specific]

M: [no, I tot]ally agree with you] [that that hhhh ]

G: [yeah, the thing, if it’s ] [if you have meaning] put to that.

G: you’ve been doing the work, you remember doing the PhD, you remember what

 [you were thinking and what you feel]

N: [yeah but I, I’ve written ]

G: [then that’s going to have meaning, isn’t it?]

N: [well, that’s what I’m saying ] my paper’s my paper’s going

N: into my thesis, I’m [putting it in ]

**Extract 61**

M: [but I think that’s] exactly the place where the label IS useful, because you can you can say to someone ‘you are assessing me somehow, I’m gonna have this issue, please bear it in [mind’. That’s] that’s

N: [yeah, yeah ]

M: perfect, but when you’re, in a day to day situation, I tell the lecturer who’s like, two doors down, ‘oh, it turns out I’ve got dyslexia, wahay!’ [and ]

General: [hahaha]

M: and I don’t know what reaction I’ll get off him, [but he] doesn’t need to

J: [mmm ]

M: know that. The the only way that information will evr come up again is if I late with an assignment, and he’ll be well ‘that’s cos you’re dyslexic’ but it shouldn’t be

an [excuse]. If something’s due in at a certain time or if I’m

J: [yeah ]

M: supposed to be at a meeting, and I’m not, it’s my fault. It’s

Not [the dyslexia’s] fault, you know?

J: [mmmm, yeh ]

M: So that’s why I generally don’t tell too many people, well, [it’s not] a

H: [mmm ]

M: [sec]ret. You know, I don’t mind telling people

H: [mm]

**Extract 66**

H: Is there something different about er, your brain, or?

N: It could be, it could be, I mean, the brain’s incredibly complex, so

H: mmm

N: It could be just your neurons firing slightly [different]

M: [it could ] be, could be

G: [yeah it ]

**Extract 68**

H: M, what are you thinking?

M: I’m not even a little bit convinced. But [you know ]

J: [hhhhhhhh]

H: [hhhhhhhh]

G: there’s probably different types [of ] so like whereas you’re saying

M: [yeah.]

G: you just have a very mild [problem with] reading and writing an things

M: [mmmm ]

G: whereas we were both very shocked to see we’d got quite extreme

J: yeah, I’m [I am diagnosed with very mild]

G: [dyslexia, mmm ]

J: er, mildly dyslexic, even though, whatever, maybe that’s because my logic, or

 something brought it up, [or ]

G: [hahaha]

M: [mmm ]

**Extract 76**

H: so what’s dyslexia to you then?

J: oh I don’t know.

H: where does it come from.

J: I don’t know. I just am it. Ha [ha ha]

General: [hhhh ] hahahahaha

J: I don’t really know [what it is]

M: [or is ] it you?

General: hahahahahaha

J: sometimes I’ve thought it when I’ve got my other test, most recently, I wondered if I wouldn’t be it anymore, I [didn’t feel]

M: [cured? ]

J: [yeaaah I] I’ve worked my ways [around it]

G: [hahaha ]

H: [how ] would you have felt if you hadn’t been? Would you have minded?

J: I think I would have been , it’s a shame, no sup[port hhhhhhhh, ] erm.

G: [hahahahahaha ]

M: [hhhhhhhhhhhhhh ]

H: [hhhhhhh ]

J: um I don’t know. Yeah, I I think for me it, I’m just a bot slow at reading

M: mm

J: that’s my only thing. And if um, handwriting stuff, I would maybe choose simpler words to avoid [spel]ling harder ones?

H: [yeh]

J: but,

H: so, [similar ]

J: [not even] that, like, I don’t think about it. I’ve never thought.

H: yeah

**Extract 82**

M: Now obviously if you are a researcher of dyslexia, it’s very interesting. To find out what cause [it but for the] average dyslexic person.

H: [so what is ]

M: but it can be useful for the average dyslexic person because it makes it much easier to not combat it, cos that sounds really aggressive, but if you know how to combat [something, to] makes it [easier to ]

J: [to build ]

M: [but if someone] could say to me

G: deal with it, deal with it.

**Extract 87**

G: that’s, yeah, if you define dyslexia as not being able to, as reading slower than other people,

M: mmm

G: [then maybe, read faster like] did that, then [that’s]

M: [or maybe read ]

J: [I act ]ually think that my dyslexia makes me better, hhh, at certain things than other things, so I think if you got [rid of] it, I maybe wouldn’t be as logical.

M: mmm

J: wouldn’t be as

H: organised

J: yeah, and as people [skills]

H: [yeah]

M: mmm

**Extract 108**

H: and do you think that’s, like, that’s about fair? Do you think it’s fair that um students with dyslexia, they go through all the paperwork process, get um a printer, a computer and like er do you think that’s right, is it enough is it um er people?

N: it’s er, I, I actually felt like a scrounger [er ] you know, the amount of kit

T: [yeah]

N: that you get through er yeah, um like laptop, you’d need a lap top anyway.

J: mmm

N: so.

H: I guess their argument is you could um use the university computers

N: hmmm [does that ]

J: [most students] have laptops [so ]

**Extract 111**

G: I find. I find the yellow sticker thing a little frustrating in that I know for a fact that some lecturers ignore them [because they] think everyone should be

H: [how do ]

G: graded [the same ] cos I’ve been told by lecturers [ ]

J: [I I debated this]

H: [mm?]

G: not that they do, but that they know lecturers [who ignore] it, and one of

J: [mmm? ]

H: [mmmm. ]

G: our lecturers made a big big song and dance about the fact that names and dates are [really ]important which is why [I ] came and saw you [ ]

H: [mmm ] [yeh] [yeh]

G: I got, feedback for one of my exams which said ‘If all your names and dates had been right, you’d have got a first, but you’re getting 68 instead because they weren’t’ and I spoke to X about it, and he said well, that’s dyslexia, and you know, that shouldn’t be happening, that’s what the yellow stickers are for, when I then spoke to the disability services, they said

G: [that’s not] what they’re for. They’re just there to advise [that you]

H: [no ]

J: [yeah ]

G: have [dyslexia ]

**Extract 117**

J: so how do you measure [what you should get, much stuff or ]

M: [yeah, who should get what thing and who, can] be

M: rubbish, er you know, [and they say, ‘I’m rubbish at this and I’m rubbish at

J: [yeah, I’m rubbish at

M: that’ it’s not my, yeah, it’s not my yeah]

J: commas hhhhhh hhhh ]

M: I, I am useless at the semi colon [so you] know, [you can’t ]

H: [yeah ]

J: [mmm ] [can’t ] yeah

G: [I guess [that’s]

G: it’s like you saying about extra time for coursework with revision, if there was soe way that they could magically give you a few extra days, cos Harriet taught me great techniques for the names and dates, but I don’t have

 time [to do] that, especially with the chronic fatigue. I can either write a good

J: [mmm]

G: essay that’s got really good ideas in it, that’s got new ideas which is what they say they want, and it’ll have at lease 50 % , if not 70% of the names and

dates [right] but, it’ll then not get a first because it’s not more right, [or I can ]

H: [mmm]

J: [even in ]

coursework?

G: no, in [exams ]

J: [in exams] right..

G: or I can spend that much time learning the names and the dates and write an essay that’s not as good, and I have the ideas [and that] and I think

J: [yeah ]

G: the ideas [are more important]. mmm

J: [mmmm yeah ]

G: so in the last couple of years, in the last year, I went for the names and dates instead, and I got a first overall, but I was aware that in the ones where I got there were some where it was a seen question so that was fine

G: [cos I could] learn everything, so that [was fine]

J: [yeah ] [yeah ]

H: [mmmm ] [yeah ]

N: [mmm ]

G: what I was learning, but there was somewhere I had 30 or 40 names and dates that I was trying to learn for one for one exam and I didn’t manage to put enough work into the actual answer, and I didn’t get a first in that.

General: mmmm

G: because the answer wasn’t high enough qual[ity]

J: [do] you then try and then try

to choose modules that are more coursework based, or do you not

G: there isn’t [many so]

J: [oh isn’t ] there oh]

N: [I try and do that ]

J: do you? I I have this year, [yeah]

**Extract 150**

G: I guess it also depends whether dyslexia is the thing that Rod Nicolson thinks it is, automatic learning, then that’s something whereby if you’re not, if you’ve not got the intelligence enough to get round it, or if at least if a chunk of dyslexia is that, if you’ve not got the intelligence to learn things the long way round instead of automatically, no different learning styles are gonna really get around that.

J: mmm, then that’s maybe more than just dyslexia, isn’t it?

**Extract 151**

N: [can I just ask if anyone, compared to your peers] if you feel a little bit

J: [you know, it’s just intelligence as well ]

N: stupid? I do. When I look at the people I work with, I actually think they’re slightly more intelligent than me.

H: is that, could that be because you’re modest?

G: yeah, I was gonna say, cos there’s imposter syndrome as well, whereby you’re somebody whose very very successful, you keep wondering ‘shit when are they gonna find out?’, sorry, [hhhhh] when are they gonna find out that I’m

H: [s’ok hh]

G: really crap?

H: but does, does anyone else feel [that?]

J: [no ]

G: no

M: no

R: no

G: I used to [think I was stupid ]

M: [I sometimes have doubts] in my own work

H: [hhhh mmm ]

J: [hhhhh ]

M: [probably] more like what you were say[ing]

G: [yeah ]

Appendix iii: Table showing subject positions, constructions of dyslexia and related ways of being for focus group 1

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Conver-sation****chunk** | **Relevant subject positions offered, taken or rejected** | **Related way of being or doing** | **Related construction of dyslexia** |
| **1** |  |  |  |
| **2** | C: self as thankful for dyslexia labelC: self as not just incapable | C: Relief, vindication, taking up support, removal of self-blame | As a desirable explanation. As something innate.  |
| **3** | B: self as intelligentB: self with unrecognised potentialH: dyslexic people as victims of the system. H: self as expert | B: Relief, vindication, re-allowing identity as intelligent, end to frustration | As desirable explanation.  |
| **4** | A: self as not very affected by dyslexiaA: teachers as experts of dyslexia | A: teachers ‘spotting’ dyslexia and pushing for test.  | As desirable explanation.  |
| **5** | R: self as hardworking R: self with unrecognised potentialR: self as victim of the systemR: others as less hardworking | R: Relief, vindication, allowing identity as hardworking | As desirable explanation |
| **6** | S: self as having a medical/psychological conditionD: self as having a medical/psychological conditionD: teacher (mum) as expert | D: going to word classes | As medical/ psychological diagnosisA desirable label |
| **7** | C: as deserving of the dyslexia labelC: as part of a special groupC: dyslexic people as part of a special groupC: as having a medical/psychological condition | C: feeling fine about struggling with the ‘diagnostic’ test. C: feeling that being dyslexic meant she wasn’t wasting anyone’s time.  | C: As a cognitive deficiency, measurableC: as desirable explanation |
| **8** | R: self as not just incapable  | R: relief, vindication, allowing identity as intelligent | As desirable explanation |
| **9** | A: self as (seen as) stupid | A: embarrassment | As stupidity |
| **10** | C: Self as incompetent (on specific task)B: self as incapable (on specific task)D: self as not understanding what he’s done wrong | C: frustration, perplexity, self-berationB: feeling limitedD: frustration, annoyance,  | As poor literacy |
| **11** |  |  |  |
| **12** |  |  |  |
| **13** | H: dyslexic people as having the right to choose the labelD: Self as perplexed by conflicting diagnostic outcome.  | D: change in sense of identity, feeling weird, questioning of reasons for behaviour | As owned by those with the label.D: as a medical/ psychological condition |
| **14** | D: self as abnormal, deficientD: self as enlightenedH: dyslexic people as abnormal, self as empathetic | D: feeling unusual, very different from others, feeling relieved to have explanation.  | Dyslexia as a medical/ psychological deficiency (particularly in working memory and processing speed) |
| **15** |  |  | Dyslexia as identifiable condition |
| **16** | C: self as mis-assigned by teachers as unintelligent or sloppy and lazyC: self as hard workingC: self as victimC: self as intelligent | C: feeling retrospectively annoyed with a teacher for not recognising her potential, feeling vindicated by dyslexia label | As desirable explanation |
| **17** | R: self as unfairly assessed by the school systemR: self as intelligent | R: feeling that it all makes sense looking back, vindication | As desirable explanation |
| **18** | D: self as not ashamed by dyslexia | D: not afraid to be the only one with a computer in class, open to others about dyslexia.  | As desirable explanationAs things you can’t do |
| **19** | S: self as ignored by school system, unfairly treatedS: teachers as ambivalent |  | As a literacy problem |
| **20** | H: people with dyslexia as having to struggleB: self as struggling in English at schoolR: victim of assessment systemR: intelligent, deserving of higher gradesR: others as having it easy compared to herC: self as having unrecognised intelligence and potential | B: frustrated, feeling of not fulfilling potentialR: feeling that effort was not recognised and that marking was unfair, vindicationC: frustrated, dyslexia as vindication | As things you can’t doAs desirable explanation |
| **21** | A: self as struggling in school | A: getting extra help | As limitation |
| **22** | D: self as a struggler against adversity, as unique, creative in problem solvingD: dyslexic people as part of a special group | D: comes up with ever new ways to be organisedD: pride, taking joy in different approach | As endearing, as limitation |
| **23** | H: dyslexic people as having a difficultyH: dyslexic people as creative strategistsD: self as capable and organisedC: self as capable and organisedD&C: selves as survivors, struggling and winning, coming out on top, as more organised that the average | D,C: pride, attribution of positive skills to dyslexia, positive sense of self-identity | H: As individual difficulty/ deficiencyD&C: As struggle against adversity |
| **24** |  |  |  |
| **25** | H: participants as hard-working organised, other dyslexic students as doing things last minute |  |  |
| **26** |  |  |  |
| **27** | C: self as intelligent and deserving of labelC: doubting friend as misinformedC: positioned by friend as a fraudC: others position dyslexic people as stupidD: dyslexic people as working really hardH: Dyslexic people as struggling against adversity | C: C: went for dyslexia testC: rebuttal to the doubting friendFeels that many people don’t understand dyslexiaC: likes telling people she is dyslexicC&D: pride | Dyslexia as an affliction of the intelligentDyslexia as a psychological, innate conditionAs desirable explanationDyslexia as a badge of honour |
| **28** | D: Self as unashamed of dyslexiaB: Self as unashamed of dyslexia | D: pride, resisting other conceptions of dyslexia as shameful. B: legitimately getting help | Dyslexia as desirable explanation (resistance to idea of stigma). Dyslexia as an innate condition |
| **29** | B: dyslexic people as unfairy discriminated againstB: employers as potentially unsympathetic and misunderstanding of dyslexia | B: indignation, shock. Subsequent reluctance to declare her own dyslexia | Dyslexia as stigma, as excuse for incapability |
| **30** |  |  |  |
| **31, 32** | R: friend as unaccepting of label; friend positioning dyslexic people as cheats if they use label | R: friend doesn’t take up adjustments and refuses help, does not accept label | Dyslexia as an excuse for stupidity or incapability or laziness.  |
| **33** | R: mother positioning R as not dyslexic because she could spellR: positioned by others as intelligent and therefore not dyslexicR: Mother and friends: dyslexic people as unintelligentD&H: dyslexic people as deficient in processing information | R: rejection of these positioning, defining herself as having an unusual profile, not an overall lack of intelligence.  | (rejection of) Dyslexia as stupidity or intellectual deficiency as cognitive deficiency (processing) |
| **34** | S: peers positioned S as a fraud, unfairly advantaged because of adjustmentsS: self as superior and successful despite dyslexiaH positions S as having sense of entitlement. | Rejection of peers’ perspective – adjustments justified – feeling they put him on an ‘even playing-field’ with other students, strong rebuttal of idea he’s unfairly advantaged. Sense of entitlement | (rejection of) Dyslexia as an excuse/ middle class cheat,  |
| **35** | H: dyslexic students as potential abusers of the support systemC: self and dyslexic students as jammy, cheatsC: self and dyslexic students as entitled and justifiedC: positioned by 'people' as unentitled, a cheat.  | Feeling guilty but taking up the equipment anyway. Conflicted feelings.  | Dyslexia as disabling and an acceptable label.Partial rejection of dyslexia as an excuse/ myth.  |
| **36** | D: self as living in a protected bubbleD: self as reliant upon support to succeed. D: Self as struggler, survivorH and D: Dyslexic people as having the problem.  | Feeling over-reliant on support, nervous about the 'real world', emphasis on himself (and other dyslexic people) to compensate, adapt – feeling that he shouldn't (and one shouldn't) rely on the law or the unrealistic protection within educational insts to get by.  | Dyslexia as an individual's problem, dyslexia as a struggle against the odds |
| **37** | S: self as having survived dyslexia alone | Doesn't 'hide' or 'broadcast' that he is dyslexic – something he deals with alone, wouldn't tell friends unless it came up.  | Individual's problem. Dyslexia as carrying stigma, (not a positive) |
| **38** | D: self as confident, able to brush off japesD: others as judgemental about language difficultiesD: self as not stupid, people with dyslexia as not stupidD: people with dyslexia struggling against negative assumptions | Uses his dyslexia label to indicate that he is NOT stupid; feels that dysexia is a legitimate reason for word-finding difficulties. Is vocal when others laugh and correct him. Says he doesn't mind the japes.  |  |
| **39** | A: self as not very dyslexic, someone who is fine (and different to others in the group who have 'negative' experiences)A: others as unlucky | Doesn't tell others about dyslexia because she doesn't feel it's relevant.  | Dyslexia as nothing much – a few small limitations.  |
| **40** | B: dyslexic people positioned by friends as 'stupid'B: positioned by friends as intelligent, and not dyslexicB: self as intelligentB: dyslexic people as stupid by mumB: Dyslexic people as intelligent | Feeling she has to justify her label and fight against negative assumptions, but she does this anyway.  | Dyslexia as a desirable explanation, dyslexia as positive, dyslexia as intelligence, dyslexia as a medical/ psychological thing that one has got or is.  |
| **41** | H: dyslexic people as intelligentA: dyslexic people as intelligentH: dyslexic people as no more intelligent than the 'average'  | A feeling the label does not imply she may be less intelligent. Associating herself with someone who is 'really really clever'.  | Dyslexia as a spectrum of severity. Dyslexia as an affliction of the intelligent. Dyslexia as a special group of people/ a club. Dyslexia as an individual problem (something you've 'got').  |
| **42** | D and B: self and dyslexic people positioned as having a behavioural medical condition and 'being difficult' by the school system. D: self as misunderstood. D and B: implicitly positioning themselves and dyslexic people as very distinct from medical/ behavioural conditions like ADHD and Asperger's syndrome.  | Rejection of medical/ behavioural assumptions about dyslexia, feeling they want to be distinct and not as 'difficult' and not like those people who have something wrong with them.  | (rejection of) Dyslexia as a medical condition in the same group as ADHD and Asperger's. Dyslexia as negative, as a learning difficulty.  |
| **43** | D: self as comfortable with being dysexic | Doesn't feel stigma related to dyslexia. Has a positive sense of self.  | Dyslexia as a positive and acceptable explanation.  |
| **44** | B: self as victim of negative judgement.  | Doesn't feel comfortable telling people she doesn't know that she's 'got' dyslexia.  | Dyslexia as an individual problem. Negative.  |
| **45** | CR: selves as comfortable with dyslexia. S: as wary?D: as vulnerable to accusations of stupidity.  | CR: put it on applicationsS: doesn't put it on applications unless requiredD: hasn't always put it on applications, but reflects that he should have done | Dyslexia as a desirable explanation, and ensuring you are not seen as stupid.  |
| **46** | C: self as legitimately disabled and as having rights. C: self as working the system | Likes employers knowing, actively seeks adjustments and sees the dyslexia as an advantage – something to push.  | Dyslexia as a desirable characteristic. Dyslexia as disability.  |
| **47** | D: self as blameless for spelling errors. D: self as comfortable with dyslexiaD: people with dyslexia as blameless for literacy difficulties (and implicitly, therefore, people who aren't dyslexic as blame-worthy for their lit errors).  |  Did tell boss in the end and felt happy explaining his errors were due to dyslexia.  | Dyslexia as a desirable and acceptable explanation.  |
| **48** | A: as someone without a problem (unlike the others in the group).  | Probably would state it on applications |  |
| **49** | A: as honestA: those who don't state their dyslexia as dishonestD: self as highly educatedD: dyslexic people without many qualifications as being worse judged.  | D doesn't worry about others knowing as his qualifications show he's intelligent. D: qualifications as important proof to counteract negative assumptions about abilities. A: would tell people. Thinks you should tell people.  | Dyslexia as something to own up to (A). Dyslexia as suggestive of unintelligence.  |
| **50** | H: scientists and educationalists as experts of dyslexia. S: self as victim of the system, neglected.S: self as a survivor and someone who struggled alone. Neglected.  | Felt as though he was left to cope alone, perhaps a bit resentful. Dealt with issues by himself.  | Dyslexia as learning difficulties.Dyslexia as a mystery.  |
| **51** | R: own intelligence not recognised by the education system.  | Places part of the problem with the means of assessment and part of the problem in herself.  | Dyslexia as discrepancy between spoken and written intelligence.  |
| **52** | D: self as a product of evolution. D: Self as disadvantaged | Places the problem in his own brain, caused by evolutionary processes that are beyond him. Not his fault. Emphasis on individual adaptation.  | Dyslexia as a problem in the brain (genetic).  |
| **53** | C: someone who's not very good at stuff. C: self as having differently functioning brainC: self as approaching things differently | Sees dyslexia as the reason (excuse) for why she isn't very good at 'stuff'. Yet – doesn't feel she is limited – just feels she does things differently.  | Dyslexia as an acceptable explanation, dyslexia as a problem in the brain, dysleixia as difference |
| **54** | R: self as victim of the educational system. R: self as having unrecognised intelligence | Frustration at the way her knowledge is assessed. There should be a better assessment method.  | Dyslexia as partly caused by the environment, partly as individual deficiency.  |
| **55** | B: self as victim of a brain with a small RAM | Frustration at the mismatch between understanding and memory capabilities. Use of computer metaphor. Problem placed in herself, the individual.  | Dyslexia as working memory deficiency. |
| **56** | A: self as a bit dippy, making silly mistakes. A: people who make such silly mistakes who are not dyslexic as just stupidA: dyslexic people as allowed to make these mistakes. D: self as overcoming difficulties. C: self as a butt of jokesC: self as obsessive checkerA & C: as comical characters.  | A: unsure whether to attribute silly mistakes to dyslexia or just to the way she is. Frustration.D: comfortable with his obsessive checking. A: not confident in her abilities. A,D,C all showing solidarity with one another.  | Dyslexia as limitation. Dyslexia as an acceptable explanationDyslexia as a special club |
| **57** | C: self as hyper-organised, beating her difficulty.D: as C aboveD and C: as unusual in a positive way | Gives the impression that she's on top of it, in control. Pride in being organised. D&C: seem to be saying 'this is what we're like' – what dyslexic people are like, and they are more organised – a posiive identity.  | Dyslexia as deficiency, but overcomable. Dyslexia as struggle. Dyslexia as a special club.  |
| **58** | DCA: all supporting their positionings of each other (and dyslexic people) as struggling with what others may view as simple everyday tasks, as being overly fastidious, as a bit ridiculous, but proud of their strategies.  | Feelings – comfortable with their strategies, in control of difficulties, part of a special club whose members are the only ones who understand. Allowed to feel like they have succeeded and overcome a problem. Pride. Ability to laugh at self.  | Dyslexia as cognitive limitation, as a special club,  |
| **59** | C: positioned by boyfriend as 'going mad', self as an object of humour | Comfortable with laughing at self. Positive identity as someone who is being organised.  | Dyslexia as cognitive limitation, dyslexia as a special club |
| **60** | H: dyslexic people as subject to mishapsR: self as threatened by disorganisation  | R: heavy use of organising tools – diary, post-it notes |  |
| **61** | C: self as abnormal, having a different brain | 'normal' spoken very quietly – indication that C felt there was something not quite right about comparing herself to 'normal' people | Dyslexia as abnormality, as individual brain based problem.  |
| **62** | D: self as different to other peopleD: self as part of an 'us'; others in the group as part of an 'us'D: self as learning differently | Feels he has to find ways around things in order to get to the same level as other people. Seeks to make different 'connections' in his brain.  | Dyslexia as different brain function.  |
| **63** | R: self as having an atypical dyslexic profile.  | Bemused about its cause | Dyslexia as specific writing difficulty, as distinct from rest of self.  |
| **64** | R: self with purely a writing problem  | Using someone else to help unpick her work | As above |
| **65** | D: positioning R as valid and offering solidarity | Able to gently mock himself – comfortable with his own difficulties.  | Dyslexia as a literacy deficiency |
| **66** | D: self as successful strategist, as struggling and winningH: as expert | Open about difficulties, able to think his way around a problem and take joy and pride in that.  | Dyslexia as overcomable |
| **67** | R: self as able but different.  | Expects some things to take longer to learn and to be more challenging.  | As innate deficiency |
| **68** | R: Self and others in group and dyslexic people as deficient  | Patience in getting to an end – feeling she can achieve, but it takes longer than with other people.  | As innate, neurological deficiency. |
| **69** | D: self as somewhere on a continuum | Notes the bits of dyslexia and dyspraxia that seem to fit him – uses these to make sense of his identity.  | Dyslexia and dyspraxia as continuums – innate conditions |
| **70** | R: self as object of humour | Not feeling ashamed about difficulty |  |
| **71** | C: self as hyper-prepared, organised and as object of humour | Pride in over-organisation, seems to form part of identity. Difficulties do not hold shame as they're down to the dyslexia. Make her unique and quirky.  | Dyslexia as identity |
| **72** |  |  |  |
| **73** | H: dyslexic people as potentially having different sense of identityC: self as dyslexic and proud;  | Feels dyslexia is part of who she is. Doesn't mind if people laugh at word problems – that's just who she is. In a sense then, it's their problem. Happy with who she is and dyslexia is part of that.  | Dyslexia as identity(dyslexia as kind of cool) |
| **74** | C: self as a capable, organised, confident person.  | Dyslexia as a positive part of her personality. Attributes strengths to dyslexia.  | Dyslexia as strength, as identity.  |
| **75** | D: Self as having a dyslexic identity (positive) | Some characteristics of dyslexia can be amusing – these inform his sense of self and personality.  | Dyslexia as an identity – unique, special. Cool.  |
| **76** | S: Self as done down, ignoredS: Self as a strong individual who stands alone, who just gets on with it. S: self as struggling against adversity | Blame upon teachers, resentment, dyslexia as distinct, not something he considers is part of his identity. Feels a bit hard done by.  | Dyslexia as difficulties, negative. Dyslexia as partly environmentally caused.  |
| **77** | B: self as ready to embrace positive dyslexic identity | Interested in learning dyslexia-friendly strategies, and to reflect upon own learning through a dyslexia-perspective. Sees identification as a positive driver of change for the better.  | Dyslexia as identity |
| **78** | B: self as hard-working; dyslexic people as hard-working, able, valued, self as sb who has struggled and succeeded. B: people without dyslexia as less hard-working, less valuable | Dyslexia as something to be proud of as it signifies someone who has succeeded despite adversity, would bring it up in interview | Dyslexia as strength, as identity |
| **79** | D: self as having a positive dyspraxic/ dyslexic identity; as having a unique and quirky personalityC: Self as having a positive dyslexic identity | D: Relieved to have an explanation for idiosyncrasies. Means he is not just 'being weird'C: positive self-reflection, a ne way of seeing herself that made sense – dyslexia as a part of the way she 'is'.  | Dyspraxia/ dyslexia as identity; as desirable explanation |
| **80** | C: self as hyper-organised, uniqueC: positioned by assessor as hyper-organised | Proud of what she sees as the result of dyslexia. Happy with herself. Able to laugh at self.  | Dyslexia as strength, as identity.  |
| **81** | C: as having positive dyslexic identity, as sb who did unusual things | Relief at having an explanation.  | dyslexia as identity; as desirable explanation  |
| **82** | R: as having a positive dyslexic identity, someone who understands herself well. Capable.  | Feels the label helps, feels she can better understand herself with the label. Uses it to reflect. Feels like part of identity.  | dyslexia as identity; as desirable explanation |
| **83** | H: people with dyslexia as strong, creative problem solvers.  |  | Dyslexia as strength, difference.  |
| **84** | S: self as a no nonsense, say it how it is sort of guy | Doesn't have any time for vague interpretations |  |
| **85** | B: self as not seeing the obviousD: self as positively different, creative, a good strategist | D Works out new ways to get round difficulties, able to see difference as a strength, doesn't feel helpless or limited.  | Dyslexia as strength, difference, |
| **86** | C: self as creative, as having a strength compared to people without dyslexia.  | Has a positive self-view and identity | Dyslexia as a strength |
| **87** | D: self as creative, as gifted, having an advantage. C: as D | A feeling that dyslexia brings benefits – solidarity with each other as specially gifted. Lucky. Part of identity | Dyslexia as a strength, part of identity.  |
| **88** | S: self as sb who sees through all the crap to what things really are. Positions C and D and people who like modern art as silly.  |  |  |
| **89** | S: self as seeing the obvious in a way that non-dyslexic people can't. Self as smart. Self as better than other people.  | Got into discussion with 'mathematically minded friends' and challenged them on some of the basics of maths. Cocky. Belittling others opinions | Dyslexia as strength |
| **90** | H: dyslexic people as gifted, hidden geniuses. D: self as having previously unrecognised strengths. S: self as really good at maths, self as better than other people | Expression of how good he is compared to other very clever people. (overdoing how able he is – this didn't feel very convincing. S appeared to me to have a chip on his shoulder and to be hiding a significant insecurity about his ability). Putting other people down.  | Dyslexia as (potential) strength.  |
| **91** | C,B: self as no good at mathsS: self as good at maths, better than C and B | C does not place value upon her success in maths at school, but takes her inability to respond to arithmetic problems quickly as representing her true inability. (imposter syndrome).  |  |
| **92** | C: self as a fraudS: self as knowing better than the teachers | C: concern about putting her 'A' for maths on her CV, as they will find out how bad she is when they ask her arithmetic questions. S: blames teachers and the GCSE syllabus for any difficulties. Talks back to teacher.  | Dyslexia as limitation.  |
| **93** | S: self as knowing better than the teachersH: positioning C's experience as valid, self as similarly bad at maths.  | S: challenging teachers.  |  |
| **94** | D: self as seeing the beauty of maths, others as not to blame for poor teaching | D places some of the blame for his difficulty with the lack of explanation of why maths is beautiful and relevant in schools.  |  |
| **95** | C: self as fraud, timed tests position her as stupidR: self as limited | Hate doing such timed tests for jobs, feel they reflect their incapabilities, feel stupid.  | Dyslexia as deficiency |
| **96** | R: self as deficient | Views her difficulty with timed tests as a barrier to employment (rather than seeing the test as the barrier).  | Dyslexia as deficiency.  |
| **97** | R: self as fraud | R places the problem in herself and feels she didn't deserve her A, though also feels the tests are to blame in part.  |  |
| **98** | C and D: position R as valid, justified in blaming the tests |  | Dyslexia as environmentally caused.  |
| **99** | S: R and C as victims of the system | S blames it all on the government | Dyslexia as environmentally caused |
| **100** | H: R as put upon, and self as supportive |  |  |
| **101** | R: frustrated, victim of system |  |  |
| **102** | S – self as knowledgeable | IQ as invalid |  |
| **103** | H: self as knowledgeable  | IQ as invalid |  |
| **104** | S: self as knowledgeable |  |  |
| **105** | S: positioned by tutor as not worthy of attention, as the one with the problem; S self as genuine, reasonable, suffering. S positions tutor as unreasonable, mean.  | S: asked tutor for help - indignant after being refused help.  | Dyslexia as an individual problem. Dyslexia as an acceptable justification for help (S).  |
| **106** | S: as righteous, doesn’t stand for any shit. S: self as genuine, worthy, entitled | Places the blame for the above with the tutor, not himself.Approaches departments/ tutors to discuss dyslexia and support. Reflects upon differences in levels of support between departments. Places any problems in his environment (e.g. ‘the secretaries are awful’).  | Dyslexia as acceptable justification for help.Dyslexia as a disability |
| **107** | B: self as neglected by her department, misunderstood | Dissatisfied with lack of reaction by tutors whom she expected to raise the subject. Expected tutors to discuss dyslexia with her. Didn’t bring it up herself or explain further to the tutor. Passive.  |  |
| **108** | B: self as mistreated by department/tutor.  | Quietly upset and indignant. Negative interpretation of written feedback. Doubt about efficacy of yellow stickers. Discussed with another tutor who was on her side and who helped her to remove self-blame.  | Dyslexia as a specific learning disability, dyslexia as negative.  |
| **109** | B: as victim of system. H and S: B as justified, entitled | Passively indignant, feels tutor(s) don’t understand. Seeking reassurance from group. (yet appears not to have discussed this further with tutor).  | Dyslexia as a genuine disability deserving of support.  |
| **110** | C: as sympathetic to tutors; tutors as doing their best; self as not being great at writing.  | C: places some of the blame with herself, recognises tutor’s need for clear writing.  | Dyslexia as individual problem.  |
| **111** | H: people with dyslexia as deserving of extra help; self as someone who is on participants’ side.  | Reassurance and solidarity for C and B | Dyslexia as entitlement, as everyone’s problem.  |
| **112** | D: positioned by tutor as not worthy of special treatment.S,C: selves as at the mercy of different tutor and department attitudes.  | C: placing the blame upon lack of experience with dyslexia of some tutors. C: expressing solidarity with participants and dyslexic others – feeling righteous.  | Dyslexia as an excuse for shoddy work (tutor).Dyslexia as a special club.Dyslexia as a desirable explanation |
| **113** | B,H: self and others in the group as having special knowledge.  | Having a group identity, feeling others should understand, placing the responsibility for understanding dyslexia with others.  | Dyslexia as a special group, as difference, as acceptable label as interesting and complex. |
| **114** | H: dyslexic students as deserving (or as sponging, depending on interpretation). C: self and dyslexic others as deserving | Questioning appropriate amount of support at uni.C: feeling sure that the support and adjustments are fair | Dyslexia as a disability |
| **115** | H: participants as potentially disadvantagedC: self and dyslexic others as disadvantagedD: self as reliant on supports | C: implies further adjustments are needed. D: strong sense of what he needs, feels incapable without certain supports – uses computers for exams, etc.  | Dyslexia as a disability, dyslexia as an acceptable explanation and justification.  |
| **116** | S: self as unfairly disadvantaged | S – feels exams should be abolished as they don’t measure his ability properly. Blame with the system.  | Dyslexia as an environmental construction.  |
| **117** | B,R: self as unfairly disadvantaged | B- feels written coursework is unrepresentative of ability.  | Dyslexia as an environmental construction. |
| **118** | H: dyslexic people as disadvantaged and deservingR: victim of system | R: feels ability isn’t fairly measured at uni. Feels others who are not as able get better marks.  | Dyslexia as a environmental construction.  |
| **119** | D: self as potentially disadvantaged by system | D: views move away from exams as a positive change.  | Dyslexia as things you can’t do well, and as an environmental construction |
| **120** | H: dyslexic people as historically constructed; self as expert. Self as on dyslexic people’s side.  | H: removes blame from individuals.  | Dyslexia as a historical construction |
| **121** | H: Dyslexic people as victims of current educational system; self as sympathetic. D: self as sympathetic to traditional academiaS: Self as disadvantaged by current system.  | H: implies further adjustments could be made. S: supports idea of alternative assessment (oral)D: partially supports idea of alternative assessment but respects the need for writing.  | S: dyslexia as an environmental construction; D: dyslexia as partly externally and partly internally constituted.  |
| **122** | S: self as long-suffering, patient, surrounded by incompetents (in group work). R: self as capable, but unfairly measured by system.  | S: places blame for difficulties outside himselfR: positive sense of self | Dyslexia as environmental construction |
| **123** | H: participants and dyslexic people as having particular strengths. C: self as having oral strengths | C: feels it would be fairer if she were assessed orally. Resistance of academic traditions | Dyslexia as difference, as social construction |
| **124** | C: as capable | C: feels it would be fairer if you were allowed to write how you speak. Resistance to academic traditions.  | Dyslexia as social construction, as difference |
| **125** | D: as academic, as sympathetic to academic norms.H,C: people with dyslexia as disadvantaged by overly academic-style expectations fo written work. R: Self as excluded by academic writing | D: feels that academic writing using a clear structure, and accurately is necessary. C,H,R: feel that academic writing is not necessary. Indignance. Situating the problem in the environment. | Dyslexia as a social and historical construction, (D: dyslexia as individual difficulty).  |
| **126** | S: lecturers as experts, self as academic, self as knowing best | S: thinks he should write in a straightforward manner.  | Dyslexia as a social, historical construction.  |
| **127** | S: self as comfortably within the academic worldD: self as comfortably within the academic world, someone who gets it and fits in. C: science students as needing to write academically (not her) | S: criticises those academics who expect ‘academic’ writing, blames this on their age.D: tries to produce what the lecturers want, agrees with their position.  | Dyslexia as a social construction.Dyslexia as an individual problem (D).  |
| **128** | H: students as under pressure to follow conventionD: self as someone who can do ‘science’ writing | H,D: place status in being able to write scientifically, D: effort to learn how to write as expected.  | Dyslexia as an individual problem |
| **129** | A: self as competent, intelligentA: self as a victim of the assessment system | Frustrated that she doesn’t get to do more ‘real’ research which allows her to show her ability well. Situates responsibility for any problems with the department who focus too much on assessing writing.  | Dyslexia as an environmental constrution |
| **130** | H: participants and people with dyslexia as disabled.S: self as survivor, struggler against the odds, hero, not disabled | S: deals with it by himself, struggles on, other people may feel the need to call themselves ‘disabled’, but not him.  | Dyslexia as a struggle against adversity |
| **131** | C: self as disabled, self as having a learning difficulty, self as not disabled, self as not like those other people who are really disabled. C: positions other people as ‘disabled’ who have really severe physical problems.  | C: appears to feel she is not sufficiently disabled to use the label ‘disabled’. A bit conflicted – still ticks the ‘are you disabled’ box for jobs but feels a bit unsure about this.  | Dyslexia as a disability, resistance to dyslexia as a disability, dyslexia as learning difficulty.  |
| **132** | A: self as far from disabled, disabled people as people with physical disabilities. A: others as misunderstanding dyslexia | A: finding it very funny that someone assumed she was ‘disabled’ and checked she could get out of a building during a fire drill.  | Resistance to dyslexia as a disability |
| **133** | R: self as not disabled, dyslexic people as not disabled. Self as independent, not needy, capable, no different to anyone else.  | R: feels others don’t need to know about her label, that she will compensate for it by herself as needed.  | Dyslexia as an individual problem, stigma.  |
| **134** | B: self as not disabled, disabled people as having severe problems (I’m not one of them type thing).  | Feels she has an easy life in comparison to disabled people. She should have nothing to complain about.  | Resistance to dyslexia as disability,  |
| **135** | D: disabled people as different, not disabled | Resists idea that there is a poor old disabled group of people who are other to everyone else.  | Dyslexia as disability |
| **136** | D: disabled people as constructed by society, as victims of convention, self as disabled, everyone as disabled,  | Takes up idea that disability is difference and is only disabling because of societal conventions – and appears to apply this thinking to himself. Removes blame for difficulties from himself.  | Dyslexia as disability, dyslexia as a social construction, disability as a social construction.  |
| **137** | H: positioning S as disabled, deserving, disadvantagedS: as survivor, superior | S: ‘got used to dealing with it on my own’, suggest he could struggle on and succeed even where others might fail. Doesn’t need help.  | Dyslexia as struggle, survival, dyslexia as an individual problem.  |
| **138** | H: dyslexic people as disabled. A: Self as disabled, self as not disabled | A: disability label leads her to self-reflect and consider whether or not the label applies to her – leads her to believe she won’t get the grade she deserves.  | Dyslexia as disability, dyslexia as a social construction, dyslexia as an individual difficulty |
| **139** | D: self as disadvantaged |  |  |
| **140** | H: participants as having strengthsR: self as a survivor, as capable, intelligent | R: pride in achievements despite dyslexia, feels that dyslexia indicates how intelligent you must be to have succeeded. Show you are innovative and hardworking. Positive.  | Dyslexia as struggle, survival, dyslexia as an individual problem, dyslexia as a strength, positive.  |
| **141** | S: self as victim of a costly education | Certainly won’t say no to the free stuff | Dyslexia as route to free stuff |
| **142** | D: self as a valuable asset, self as different, self as advantaged | Feels that despite difficulty, he has a lot to offer and his contribution should be valued. Dyslexia as an advantage because by having to put more effort in, you get more out.  | Dyslexia as strength, dyslexia as difference.  |
| **143** | S: self as fortunate compared to people with other disabilitiesS: self as survivor, independentS: dyslexic others as over reliant, weak.  | Feels he can cope alone, places responsibility with himself to get on with things, doesn’t feel affinity with other ‘disabled’ groups – feels lucky not to be them.  | Dyslexia as an individual’s problem, dyslexia as an excuse,  |
| **144** | H: dyslexic people as cheats, fakes, lazy or stupid (via news articles); dyslexic people as not cheats, fakes, lazy or stupidS: as not stupid, as a survivorS: self as genuineS: positioned by others as a joke | H: inciting reactionS: resentful about people who go for the dyslexia test just to get extra time in exams, implies that some people with the label do use it as an excuse. Feels the label should be protected from others sullying it who do not deserve it. S: insulted at the suggestion he may not be genuine.  | Dyslexia as a desirable label, dyslexia as an excuse for laziness or lack of ability.  |
| **145** | S: self as genuine, others as potentially cheatsD: self as imposterD: self as genuine | S: anger at those who give dyslexia bad name. D: guilt, doubt about label, removal of guilt, pride in label | Dyslexia as a desirable explanation and label,Dyslexia as an excuse |
| **146** | S: self as genuine, self as survivor, hard-workerS: positioned by father as a fakeS: self as victim of misunderstandingS: self as not an imposter | S: conflicted when dad suggested he may not be dyslexic anymore; doubt, concern about whether or not his dyslexia is real, justifying his label, maintaining the idea of himself as an independent loner, struggling on.  | Dyslexia as a myth, dyslexia as an excuse, dyslexia as survival, struggle |
| **147** | D: self as middle-classD: dyslexic people as middle-class and advantagedH,D: dyslexic people as potentially cheating | D: feeling a bit guilty, feeling that he may have an unfair advantage over people who are not labelled because they are not middle class.  | Dyslexia as a middle-class excuse.  |
| **148** | S: positioned himself to friends as a cheat (‘jokingly’)S: self as not a cheatS: self as independent, a survivor despite disadvantageS: others who use the label as an excuse as inferior | Says he copes alone, pride in coping alone, not needing any help, joking to friends that he is cheating the system, being defensive, justifying his being.  | Dyslexia as an excuse, dyslexia as survival, dyslexia as an individual problem |
| **149** | D: self as working harder that others without dyslexiaD: dyslexic people as harder workers | D: emphasis upon himself to overcome difficulties | Dyslexia as an individual’s problem.  |
| **150** | H: dyslexic people positioned as cheats, a bit slow B: dyslexic people positioned by radio programme as victims of poor teachingB: self as capable, as survivor, as no victimB: self as genuinely having a difficulty | B: angry at suggestion her dyslexia is because of poor teaching, resisting idea that dyslexia is anything but real.  | Resistance of idea that dyslexia is poor teaching or a myth, Dyslexia as an internal condition.  |
| **151** | R: self as genuinely having a psychological difficultyR: self as intelligent, unusualR: self as deserving | R: anger at those who suggest dyslexia isn’t genuine, feeling that she is part of a special group who have unique cognitive profiles, pride in her diagnosis, very distinct from people who are just stupid.  | Dyslexia as a psychological, individual deficiency (spiky profile), as intelligence, resistance to idea of dyslexia as a middle-class excuse. Dyslexia as a special group |
| **152** | D: self as privileged, middle class | D: recognition of advantage in being able to pay for test – guilt.  | Dyslexia as a middle-class condition, dyslexia as genuine |
| **153** | R: brother as disadvantaged | R: feels it’s unfair if the test isn’t paid for by the system |  |
| **154** |  |  |  |
| **155** | H: dyslexic people positioned as cheats, victims of myth (by press)S: dyslexic people as genuineS: Dyslexic people as victims of bad teachingS: self as victim of bad teaching S: self as capable, deserving | S: feels he had to (resentfully) struggle alone until good teachers helped him, feels some of the fault lies with bad teaching, discounts idea that dyslexia is a myth with humour.  | Dyslexia as a product of the environment, (resistance to) dyslexia as a myth, dyslexia as genuine. |
| **156** | S: self as lucky, self as unlucky – victim of neglect. | S: feels he has had good teachers, feels he had teachers who neglected him, feels dyslexia was partly as a consequence of neglect by teachers. Appears to have learnt that asking for help doesn’t often work and one must get on alone.  | Dyslexia as an environmental construction, dyslexia as an individual problem.  |
| **157** | S: positioned as stupid by teacherS: self as victim of poor teaching | S: places balme for difficulties with the system | Dyslexia as excuse, dyslexia as an environmental construction |
| **158** |  |  |  |
| **159** | H: dyslexic people as potential victims of scam |  |  |
| **160** | H: dyslexic people as curable (by DORE)S: self as comfortable with how he is, as having a dyslexic identity | S: ‘cure somebody else first’ – doesn’t want to be cured, feel that that would change who he was. Feeling happy with self.  | Dyslexia as identity, as positive |
| **161** | D: self as different, not diseasedD: self as normalD: self as a good problem solver | D: rejection of idea he could be cured, or would want to be. finds his own ways of getting round problems. Sees dyslexia as a way of thinking that can’t be cured. Proud.  | Dyslexia as difference, as normal variation, as individual problem |
| **162** | D, S: selves as being neurologically different | S: feels dyslexia is incurable because it’s beyond medical scienceD: feels dyslexia is part of who someone is and therefore would never be curable no matter what medical science can do – feels one can only learn to build new brain connections and improve this way.  | D: rejection of dyslexia as pathological. Dyslexia as identity, as struggle, as difference. S: dyslexia as pathological.  |
| **163** | B: self as being dyslexic, happy with dyslexic identity | B: feels dyslexia is part of who she is, personality, and wouldn’t want to be cured even if it were possible as worries what else would be lost | Dyslexia as identity |
| **164** | R: self as hard-working, motivated, happy with dyslexia | Proud of achievements, attributes her motivation and conscientiousness to dyslexia, feels it has made her who she is. | Dyslexia as identity, as a strength |
| **165** | S: self as potentially deficient in characterS: people with dyslexia as superior to people who are just deficient | Feels dyslexia protects him from seeing defects in himself. Feels frightened of finding this out. Dyslexia is better than just being deficient.  | Dyslexia as an acceptable explanation  |
| **166** | A: self as struggling | Suggests she would like to cure herself of dyslexia | Dyslexia as a medical condition |
| **167** | D: self as comfortable with dyslexic identity, self as having strengths | Feels dyslexia is part of who he is, that good things are tied up with the bad. Wouldn’t want to cure.  | Dyslexia as a mix of strengths and weaknesses, as part of identity. |
| **168** | S: self as comfortable with dyslexic | Comparing dyslexia to asthma, and finding it not as bad as that | Dyslexia as a medical condition |
| **169** | D: positions S as incorrect, self as not suffering from a discrete condition | Feels dyslexia is not separable from who he is, everything connected | Dyslexia as neurological difference, as part of identity |
| **170** | H: dyslexic people as victims of environmentD: self and dyslexic people as different, not deficientD: self as intelligentS: self as victim of poor support, self as fortunate to have later good support, self and dyslexic people as deserving. S: dyslexic people as deficient | D: would like to change society’s understanding of intelligence to encompass greater variety, for there to be different ways of teaching, places responsibility on environment and society and education to changeS: would like all kids to be assessed for dyslexia so they can have support put in place – (but the focus is still on the individuals who have the problems).  | Dyslexia as social construction, as difference, as strength (D)Dyslexia as deficiency, individual problem, dyslexia as psychological condition.  |
| **171** | R: as victim of educational systemR: self as intelligent, capable | Places blame in her environment and thinks she should have had more support. Thinks everyone should be assessed in school. D agrees.  | Dyslexia as entitlement, Dyslexia as a psychological condition |
| **172** | H: dyslexic people as very able and far less disabled than others who don’t have a labelH: everyone as disabled |  |  |
| **173** | S: self and people with dyslexia as not disabledAnd as intelligent | Entitlement to support | Dyslexia as acceptable label,  |
| **174** | B: self as able, proudly differentB: self and dyslexic people as part of a special groupB: self as not limitedD: self as strong, capable, proud, not ashamed | B Feels it should be ‘different abilitied’ and that if you call it disabled or a problem then there is prejudice, pride, standing up for herself, refusing to be a victim. D: feels it should not be classified as s problem – resistance to such descriptions | Dyslexia as difference, dyslexia as a special group, dyslexia as political struggle, dyslexia as desirable |
| **175** | S: self as similar to D and B, as different, as proudH: dyslexic people as created by society, self as sypathetic | Saying ‘I do things differently’, moving away from deficiency model. Showing solidarity, rejection of special label, rejection of societal compartments.  | Dyslexia as difference, dyslexia as social construction, dyslexia as a right |
| **176** | D: self as capable, different | D: having a right to communicate in ways that suits him, not which society says.  | Dyslexia as a right, difference, political group |
| **177** | R: self as interested, proud of group membershipS: self as happy to be part of group | R: found this conversation useful, interest in dialogue and solidarity, prideR: joking about dyslexia, humour as connection, affirmation of positive identityS: felt it was good to talk about dyslexia like this | Dyslexia as identity, positical group |
| **178** | D: self as survivor despite problems, as academicS: self as D | Sense that he is motivated informs sense of self. Suggestion that sense of self is a little fragile and only reinforced by traditional academic achievement. S – exaggeration of reading pleasure.  | Dyslexia as deficiency (and possible impacting on intelligence).  |
| **179** | D: self as unfairly labelled as having a problem | D: sense that he different, and that being labelled as having a problem is not helpful.  | Dyslexia as difference |
| **180** |  H – speaker. End.  |  |  |
| **181** |  |  |  |

Appendix iv: table showing subject positions, constructions of dyslexia and ways of being in focus group 2

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Conver-sation****chunk** | **Relevant subject positions offered, taken or rejected** | **Related way of being or doing** | **Related construction of dyslexia** |
| **1** | H: self as interviewer, as politically aware (choice of ‘identified’)N: self as clinically identified, as older than group | N: humour | As psychological phenomenon that may be clinically identified |
| **2** | N: self as poor reader, disinterested in school, as a sort of failure at school.N: self as misunderstood by school and parents | N: resentment towards parents (for getting him ‘Boggle’) and towards teachers for not getting him tested. N: going for the test himself. | As medical/ psychological diagnosis. |
| **3** | H: self as politically aware (identification)N: self then as someone who struggled with writingN: self now as capable, intelligent, a good writer | N: glad to have an explanation for things he couldn’t do/ reason why he wasn’t interested in school. N: went to a support tutor for help with writing. N: reconstructs own identity as a good writer. Uses humour.  | As a desirable explanation |
| **4** | J: self as neglected/ misjudged/ in school.J: self as capableJ: self as victim of ignorance | J: angry with teachers, vindicatedJ: parents sent J for testJ: take up of additional supportJ: glad to have an explanationJ: self-acceptance and reduction in frustration | As desirable explanation, as medical/ psychological diagnosis.  |
| **5** | G: self as having a fast brain, as neglected/ misjudged in school | G: ‘mine’ – sense of ownership over her label | As a brain-based thing |
| **6** | G: self as very intelligentG: self as not that bothered during earlier education | G: faith in IQ and use of her understanding of her own High IQ to bolster positive sense of self | As an excuse, a crutch,  |
| **7** | G: Self as having specific deficiency, self as genuine | G: seems to feel reassured by the official diagnosis, faith in psychological testing: ‘a real diagnosis…the full report and everything…I actually saw written down wht my dyslexia actually is’  |  As a cognitive deficiency, measurable, as desirable explanation |
| **8** | J: positioned by ed psych as sb who shouldn’t be at uni (slow writing and reading) | Disappointment, not fair,  | As specific literacy deficiency |
| **9** | G: Self as self-reliantG: Self as avid reader G: Self as  | Not concerned with label, not using it as a crutch, just got on with it. Statement that she devours books despite others’ expectations. (Feeling seems that she doesn’t need the label that she is just fine and doesn’t want to be characterised as someone who doesn’t read well).  |  |
| **10** | M:as hard-working, as careful | Exasperation with education/ teachers who kept giving the same advice, challenging teacher’s instruction, going for dyslexia test.  |  As a psychological quantifiable condition |
| **11** | M: self as separate from label, as critical reflector (what I mean here is sb who sees the system for what it is, wise, self-assured). Compensated. Capable. | Disregards the label, questions why the difficulties he had only received attention once he had his label. Situates the problem outside of himself. Takes the support. Finds ways around difficulties. Frustration with the way the system of help is set up that you have to have a label.  | As a bit silly, a mystery, unnecessary, useful in a sense  |
| **12** | T:Self as confident, comfortable, normal | Difficulties not a problem, everyone is good at some things and not at others and this is just normal variation. Took the test at uni. | As psychological, quantifiable condition.  |
| **13** | T: self as self-sufficient, confident,  | ‘I just live with it. It doesn’t really affect me’ but still uses support at uni. Interested to know if he was definitely dyslexic so went for test.  | As psychological measurable condition. As a learning difficulty.  |
| **14** | H: dyslexic people as belonging to a group, as needing a label, as having the right to choose label, self as politically aware and sensitive. J: able. Not disabled | J: doesn’t like term ‘specific learning difficulties’, doesn’t like ticking the ‘disabled’ box on job applications, feels indignant, but concerned that she should have put it and that employers would expect her to.  | Dyslexia as disability |
| **15** | M: self as not disabledG: self as disabled, people with dyslexia as legitimately able to call themselves disabledJ: self as not disabled | M: annoyance with job applications and the suggestion he should be ticking the disabled box.G: feels that ‘disability’ is appropriate if there are some things that you can’t easily do day to day. Disability label as not negative, but important.  | As disability (and resistance to).G: as ‘psychological protection’ |
| **16** | J: self as more able than others (in some areas), independent, self-reliant | J: you just live with it, compensate, find own ways round difficulties. Doesn’t feel disabled.  | (Resistant to) dyslexia as disability |
| **17** | J: self as dyslexicH: Self as politically aware, sensitive, sb who gets it.  |  |  |
| **18** | N: people as not wanting to be labelledG: self as fine with label, self-confident, J: self as negatively judged, misunderstood, positioned by friends: ‘you can’t be dyslexic’ – dyslexic people as not very clever.  | J: wary of assumptions people make of her when aware of her label, e.g. that it = stupidity, or just bad spelling. Doesn’t want to be associated with stereotypes. G: appears to be fine with facing others’ judgement, feels there are different truths. Reflects.  | Dyslexia as stupidity, stigma.  |
| **19** | M: self as cynic, self as above all this nonsense, self as stuck to a made-up label, self as normal, not disabled, not dyslexic.  | Feels the whole dyslexia thing is a bit ridiculous, doubts the existence of dyslexia, rejects the idea of ‘being’ dyslexic, it’s just sth he has been labelled with – not representative of anything in him. Self as like anyone else with a varied set of strengths and differences.  | Dyslexia as a myth. |
| **20** | H: J as disabledJ: self as disabledG: self as disabled | N: parallel with physical disabilityG: goes with the idea of spectrums of disability. | Dyslexia as disability |
| **21** | J: people with dyslexia and self as not disabled but different in way of learning. | J: tells other people that it’s learning difference, not disability | Dyslexia as difference |
| **22** | H: self as contextually disabled,  | H: happy to apply label to self in certain contexts: places disability as environmentally caused as much as internally caused | Dyslexia and disability as partially environmentally constructed.  |
| **23** | H: participants and people with dyslexia as disabled by environment,  | H: accepting of social model of disability, implication of need for social justice.  | Dyslexia and disability as socially constructed.  |
| **24** | N: self and others with dyslexia as disabled by environment | N: agreement with H | Dyslexia as environmentally constructed |
| **25** | N: self as disabled, disadvantaged by uni environment | N: would have liked extra time for coursework as well as exams.  | Dyslexia as environmentally and socially constructed |
| **26** | M: self as not disabledM: people in wheelchairs as disabled, self as not like them. G: people in wheelchairs as not necessarily disabled, M as ignorant | M: associated ‘disability’ with people who are physically disabled and wheelchair bound, G: challenges this idea and does not see those in wheelchairs as necessarily more disabled than she is.  | Dyslexia as disability,  |
| **27** | G: self as disabled by the environment | G: feels comfortable with the idea that she is disabled – allows her to shift the cause/blame of dyslexia into the environment. Disability becomes a political statement, one that may be used to direct attention towards what should change in the environment.  | Dyslexia as an environmental/ social construction. As disability. |
| **28** | G: self as able, self as disabled | Thinks about how much more able she’d be if she didn’t have dyslexia. | Dyslexia as disability |
| **29** | T: self as disabled in educational contexts but not in the ‘big wide world’ | Doesn’t feel he’ll be disabled in the world of employment. Wouldn’t call himself dyslexic outside the educational environment | Dyslexia as socially, environmentally constructed. As disability |
| **30** | N: self as disabled in work environments as well as educational.M: self and dyslexic people as not disabledG: people with dyslexia as disabled | N: Would tell boss his dyslexia meant he might need extra time to complete tasksM: does not feel it would be acceptable to ask for extra time – places emphasis on the individual to get better at time managementG: dyslexic people have rights at work – employers should understand they need to make adjustments.  | N,G: Dyslexia as a disability, as right to adjustmentsM: Dyslexia as an excuse, not legitimate.  |
| **31** | H: everyone is disabled | People should help each other out with things they find hard.  | Dyslexia as part of range of differences in people.  |
| **32** | G: self as disabled | Fights for rights as a disabled person in employment. Use of the disability legislation. Sense of social injustice and entitlement to equality. Situating problem with others/ in the environment. | Disability as social label, as a right |
| **33** | N: people with disabilities as having rights, discriminated against, self as disabledG: people with disabilities as having rights, discriminated against | N: Glad that bosses are now having to tow the line and will be punished for discrimination.G: awareness of the law and willingness to use it.  | Dyslexia as disability, as a right.  |
| **34** | N: Disabled people as having rights to fair treatment | N: sense that people should push for fairness and use the law to fight for their rights | Dyslexia as disability, as a right. |
| **35** | G: self and other dyslexic people as vulnerable to misjudgement | G: scared putting her dyslexia down on a form, doubting whether or not it’s the right thing to do. | Dyslexia as stigma, deficiency, sth wrong with you |
| **36** | N: self as wily, unashamedJ: Self as having a strengthJ: potentially positioned by employers as incapableJ: self as a survivorG: self and dyslexic people with degrees as survivors | N: always ticks the disabled boxJ: always ticks the disabled boxJ: torn about whether or not to tick the disabled box, J: pride in achieving degree despite dyslexiaG: pride in achieving a degree despite dyslexia | Dyslexia as incapability (J)Dyslexia as a disability, Dyslexia as strengthAs differenceAs a badge of honour |
| **37** | J: self as strong, confident, able, J: self as survivor J: dyslexic people as capable | J: reflects positively on work with school kids to inspire them to go to uni despite dyslexia, says this impacts upon her attitude to telling employers about dyslexia – feeling of pride, standing up for self and dyslexia. Not ashamed.  | Dyslexia as badge of honour, as not nec limiting.  |
| **38** | J: employers as judgemental, people with dyslexia as misjudged, self as capableM: employers as judgemental, people with dyslexia as misjudgedN: employers as fair | J: might not declare dyslexia on a form, would prefer to do it in person, feels that she would have to persuade employers she was in fact capable despite dyslexia. N: implies there is no concern in declaring dyslexia on a form. M: agrees with J in worry over how he will be perceived, so telling face-to-face would be preferable to a form.  | Dyslexia as deficiencyDyslexia as stigmaDyslexia as legal disability |
| **39** | G: self as deserving, right,  | G: declares dyslexia, prepared to challenge employers legally if she feels she has been disadvantaged when applying for jobs. Places the responsibility and the problem with the employers to get right. G: argues for and takes up reasonable adjustments.  | Dyslexia as social justice, as disability,  |
| **40** | T: self as not disabled | T: wouldn’t tick the disabled box on job applications. Feels ‘disabled’ is for people with far more serious problems than he has.  | Resistance to dyslexia as disability.  |
| **41** | G: T as wrong, as having a malfunctional view of disability; self as disabled.  | G: feels cross about the way disability is perceived as happening to other people with extreme needs. Feels this is where the stigma comes from. Implies she doesn’t feel ashamed and is happy to associate herself with the label ‘disabled’. Blames people with attitudes like T’s for stigma.  | Dyslexia as positive, positive social declaration, disability |
| **42** | J: self as not like those people who are really disabledM: J as misunderstandingG: as disabled | J: distinguishes herself form the ‘disabled’ group. G: takes adjustments, feels annoyed with the inefficient disability adjustment system.  | Dyslexia as disability, resistance to idea of dyslexia as disability.  |
| **43** | H: people with dyslexia as differentG: self as high achiever, someone who coped.  |  |  |
| **44** | T: not really affected by dyslexia, fortunate (imp others as less fortunate) | T: feels fine, that difficulties aren’t significant.  | Dyslexia as poor literacy skills |
| **45** | M: T as lucky, self as unlucky, dyslexic people as having unfair helpN: self as neglected in school | M: disgruntled that one only gets support by having the label. Feels he missed out on support. Whay not get the support for the difficulty, not the label?N: annoyed he wasn’t helped more | Dyslexia as a route to support, as a mythDyslexia as a genuine difficulty |
| **46** | N: self as treated unfairly by school conventionsN: self as having rights.  | N: refused to read out loud in English exam. Uses humour when reflecting on his subsequent D and E grades. (sth to stand up against) | Dyslexia as genuine difficulty, |
| **47** | N: self as able, survivor, struggler | N: retook GCSE English and got a B. doggedly persued education up to PhD level.  | Dyslexia as disadvantage, badge of honour.  |
| **48** | N: self as sneaky, bit of a cheat. J: people with dyslexia as a special group – an usG: people with dyslexia as disadvantaged | N: happy to use the label to get adjustments, plays on people’s fear of being politically incorrect and says he uses the label ‘terribly’ – (this implies that he is cheating a bit, that he gets more out of the label than he should?). Uses humour. J: statement about how others feel about dyslexia, that they want to be PC. G: counters the feeling expressed by J and N that somehow dyslexic people get more than they deserve.  | Dyslexia as an excuse, as a political statement. As a special groupDyslexia as rights |
| **49** | N: self as cheatN: self as hard-worker, dedicated, reliableN: self as struggler, survivor | N: uses humour, says he’s dyslexic, feels that means he gets to get away with things, scare people into giving him leeway. Doesn’t seem to think he deserves adjustments, implication of guilt.  | Dyslexia as excuseDyslexia as genuine |
| **50** | N: self as an object of humour, self as humourous, light-hearted. N: other people as judgmental of him as dyslexic | N: goes with the idea of the fool (my words): sings IOIOE. Tries to break the concern of others by being funny. ‘use it when it suits me’ (even though it sounds like he is playing the system this actually implies he feels a bit guilty, suggests he feels he is being a bit of a cheat ‘using’ the label, when he could feel that it was straightforwardly his right). Concern about how others view him.  | Dyslexia as excuse, dyslexia as political statement |
| **51** | G: positioned as deficient by tutorG,N: as deficient in a particular area | G: quit that subject, but blamed the ‘evil hag’ rather than herself.  | Dyslexia as difficulty with things |
| **52** | J: people with dyslexia as incorrectly blaming some difficulties on the label, N: self as genuinely disabled in formal oral presentations | N: told the audience he was dyslexic and took his paper with him while presenting. Read up on dyslexia and identified with descriptions of poor working memory which helped him to justify his action.  | Dyslexia as an excuseDyslexia as genuine disability.  |
| **53** | J: self as not like N, being good with memory, just fine.H: J as like N, J as mistakenG: J as mistaken, people with dyslexia as working memory deficientN: self as working-memory deficient | H,G,N: disallowed J’s experience to some degree, social pressure put upon J to conform to group opinion. (Possible discomfort with someone who does not fit the profile of dyslexia others are constructing).  | Dyslexia as a psychological, brain based condition affecting working memory.  |
| **54** | G: as memory deficient, as capable, as an expert in memory types | G: Confident in what she is good at and dyslexia to blame for what she is less good at, but this also implies she is not to blame.  | Dyslexia as a psychological, brain based condition affecting working memory – automatisation deficit.  |
| **55** | H: dyslexic people as carrying round a dirty secretJ: secretly deficient/ ill (‘diagnosis’), others as judgemental | J: ashamed of the label when she was younger, didn’t like telling people, angry at teacher for telling others about her dyslexia. Thought they might think she was stupidNow J feels happy to tell people.  | Dyslexia as stupidity, deficiency.Dyslexia not stupidity.  |
| **56** | N: self as separate from dyslexia, successful in his own right | N: frustrated with attitude that he is so amazing that he can do a PhD even though he’s dyslexic. Rejection of the badge of honour thing. Feels patronised.  | Rejection of the idea of dyslexia as personal tradgedy.  |
| **57** | G: self and other participants as intelligent, part of elite group | G: feels she and other participants don’t experience dyslexia in the same way as those who haven’t come so far educationally.  | Dyslexia as limitation, survival |
| **58** | N: positioned by others as inspirationalJ: self as survivor, successful | J: enjoyed talking to the kids, encouraging them to go to uni, pride in achievements and how she’s tuned out.  | Dyslexia as badge of honour, not stupidity |
| **59** | M: as no different from anyone else, a fraud | M: expects and understands the bemused reaction from friends and peers, feels dyslexia is pretty meaningless, doesn’t take label very seriously. M: hasn’t told PhD assessors and doesn’t like telling people in general because he thinks this would be using dyslexia as an excuse.  | Dyslexia as a myth, as an excuse.  |
| **60** | N: deserving, genuinely disadvantaged | Doesn’t feel he’s using dyslexia as an excuse, but feels he really has difficulties which disadvantage him – N would tell his VIVA examiners about dyslexia and that he needs certain supports.  | Dyslexia as genuine, deficiency |
| **61** | M: N as deserving and correctM: self as independent, not disabled; dyslexic people as potentially over-reliant on label | M: backtracking a bit on his earlier point., but still wary of using it as an excuse – wouldn’t want to claim dyslexia if he was behind with a deadline. ‘it’s my fault, it’s not the dyslexia, you know?’ M doesn’t tell many people because of this.  | Dyslexia as an excuse, myth |
| **62** | G: self as independent, not reliant on label | G: feels like M – doesn’t feel the need to tell people without reason.  | Dyslexia as excuse |
| **63** | N: self and participants as in the dark over what dyslexia is.G: self as having access to expert knowledgeG: a named psychologist as THE expert on dyslexia | G: has been to lectures ‘on it’, but if the expert doesn’t know, how can ‘we’ all know?(‘experts’ are the ones who get to sat what it is).  | Dyslexia as a psychological condition.  |
| **64** | H: self as having access to the expert knowledgeH: a named psychologist as less important than one might think (‘special theories’)N: self as not stupid, positioned by others as stupid; self as hard-working, as misjudged | H: use of subtle sarcasm.N: having to explain to peers that he had to work harder than they did to get to the same end – standing up to others’ perceptions that the label didn’t mean anything.  | Resistance to idea of dyslexia as myth/excuseDyslexia as specific difficulties, individual problem.  |
| **65** | J: Self as someone who struggles with things | J: considering genetic transmission of dyslexia, suggesting umbilical chord wrapped round neck may be to blame | Dyslexia as an individual, internal, medical/psychological, genetic problem |
| **66** | H: participants as being brain-different.N: self and dyslexic people as possibly different brained | N: talks about different neuronal firing as explanation | Dyslexia as a brain based condition.  |
| **67** | G: self as poor at automatisation, cerebellum-deficient, self as very intelligent (high IQ)G: J as very intelligent, and like GG: people with dyslexia as unique, having to ‘think’ their way through things | G: implication that being dyslexic and having a high IQ shows a talent in defeating problems through thinking through them using a different part of the brain. G describes complex theory of brain deficit to explain dyslexia.  | Dyslexia as brain deficiency, dyslexia as a special group, dyslexia associated with high IQ.  |
| **68** | M: self in opposition to G, G’s argument as unconvincing. G: as open to different theoriesG: as intelligent, as extremely dyslexic; G: J as the same as herJ: As mildly dyslexic,  | J: inadvertently breaks solidarity and does a hasty repair with GG: deals with M’s challenge by using her theory to fit only certain kinds of dyslexia | Dyslexia as automaticity deficitResistance to idea of dyslexia as automaticity deficit.  |
| **69** | H,N,M: self as cynical about degrees of dyslexiaG: self as scientifically minded | G: uses scientific theories of brain deficiency to explain the different kinds of dyslexia | Dyslexia as brain based deficiencyDyslexia as a social construction |
| **70** | T: self and dyslexic people as abnormalJ: self and dyslexic people as highly above average in some areasG,J,M: selves as intelligent, not like those other people who are generally deficient/ stupid.  | Dyslexia becomes acceptable, sth to be proud of – better than just being stupid.  | Dyslexia as a brain-based problem (whole brain).Dyslexia linked to being intelligent. Acceptable label, explanation.  |
| **71** | J: self and people with dyslexia label as genuine; others who pretend and go for test as not genuine | J: Feeling dyslexia is not sth you can fake.  | Dyslexia as real, as psychologically measurable.  |
| **72** |  |  |  |
| **73** | H: G as conflicting with MM: as cynical about dyslexiaG: as accepting of differences in opinion | M: feels that getting the label is pretty meaningless in terms of his ability, didn’t really want to go for test but went as suggested, felt he scraped into being dyslexic, suggests it’s all a bit ridiculous. Mocks the scientific theories. Rejects pathologisation of dyslexia and thinks it’s just variation/ difference. G: philosophises on the idea of self and identity and so accepts that people can have different ideas about what dyslexia is or means.  | Dyslexia as ‘a particular set of answers to a particular set of questions’, a myth, a construction.  |
| **74** | G: self as having automaticity problemsR: self as being a poor driver | G: Provides a way of explaining why she has difficulty with other everyday tasks like chopping vegetables. G incorporates the automaticity idea into her ways of doing things in general and things where she loses concentration. Realisation – comfortable with this.R: ‘it’s just innately me’ to be not very good at things like driving (that involve automaticity) | Dyslexia as automatic learning deficit, individual brain problem, an acceptable explanation for things you can’t do well.  |
| **75** | J: self as not being automaticity deficient | . J: rejection of G’s hypothesis.  | Rejection of automaticity theory.  |
| **76** | J: self as being dyslexic: ‘I just am it’ | J: doesn’t really think about it, wondered if she wouldn’t ‘be it’ any more when she went for an update test. Would have felt it was a shame to have not been dyslexic as she would have lost the support.  | Dyslexia as identity, dyslexia as literacy difficulties.  |
| **77** | J: self as not really that dyslexicG: J as a compensated dyslexic | Doesn’t really feel that she has been much affected | Dyslexia s specific literacy difficulties |
| **78** | T: self as suffering from circuitry problems in the brain | T: Rejects automaticity theory, considers brain circuitry probems as the cause of dyslexia.  | Dyslexia as a brain-based deficit.  |
| **79** | T: self and people with dyslexia as differently-brainedM,N,Y: selves as impressed, dubious, funny | M,N,J: use humour to gently mock T’s theory of circuitry. T retracts a little and emphasises difference between people.  | Dyslexia as a brain-based deficit. |
| **80** | T: self as unique, different, dyslexic | T: feels he get a unique perspective on people because of the dyslexia. The dyslexia ‘just er makes me me’ | Dyslexia as difference, as special, as positive, as identity |
| **81** | M: self as not interested in causes, self as simply a poor reader, not abnormal | M: getting frustrated with the idea that dyslexia is a specific pathology. Feels he just has to learn to deal with it himself.Rejects the science.  | Rejection of idea of dyslexia as pathology.Dyslexia as normal difference |
| **82** | M: self as self-sufficient, deals with own difficulties; others with dyslexia as potentially passive.  | M: suggests that having a scientific reason for difficulties can be used by dyslexic people as an excuse not to do anything to help themselves  | Dyslexia as an excuse |
| **83** | M: self as not interested in theories of dyslexiaG: self as having an illnessJ: self as fine with dyslexia, G as wrong | M: Questions whether knowing causes would help anyway. Feels knowing more about dyslexia is a bit pointless. G: feels that knowing causes brings us closer to cures | Dyslexia as a medical problemDyslexia as a mythDyslexia as a scientific construction |
| **84** | G: self as restricted by dyslexiaJ: self as being dyslexicH: positioning J and G as differently orientated.  | G: would make it disappear if she could, feels dyslexia is separate from who she is.J: feels dyslexia is part of who she is | Dyslexia as a specific difficulty, separate problemDyslexia as identity |
| **85** | J: self as successful, capable, not limited, inspirational | J: feels proud of being dyslexia, feels she can achieve anything, considers dyslexia as symbol of how much she has achieved | Dyslexia as identity, dyslexia as a badge of honour. |
| **86** | G: as restricted by dyslexia | G: would like to get rid of it. M: would be happy to lose the label if his reading speed doubled.  | Dyslexia as specific reading difficulty |
| **87** | J: as made better by dyslexia | J: rejects idea that dyslexia is just reading difficulty, wouldn’t want to get rid of it as she might lose some positive things too, like being logical and well organised.  | Dyslexia as identity, as strength |
| **88** | H: dyslexic people as socially competent, suggests that her enjoyment of social stuff is related to not wanting to spend time reading and writing.  | J: sees some aspects of dyslexia as positive. | Dyslexia as strength, as pattern of strengths and difficulties.  |
| **89** |  |  |  |
| **90** | R: self as restricted by dyslexiaR: as successful and happy with how he is | R: Would take a drug to be rid of it if he couldR: also feels he is very well suited as he is to his niche in biology so wouldn’t want to change anything; implies his strengths may go if dyslexia went. | Dyslexia as pattern of strengths and weaknesses.  |
| **91** | T: comfortable with dyslexia | T: wouldn’t get rid of it | Dyslexia not a particular problem |
| **92** | N: self as creative, unique, able | N: dyslexia has made him who he is. Has abilities that others don’t have as a result.  | Dyslexia as identity, ability |
| **93** | H: dyslexic people as creative |  |  |
| **94** | G: dyslexic people as having particular strengths |  |  |
| **95** | N: self as comfortable with dyslexia now he is older | N: Feels it was harder when younger. G: feels dyslexia could still be a problem depending on context | Dyslexia as a problem with reading and writing |
| **96** | M: self as separate from dyslexia | M: annoyed that his success is seen by some as belonging to the dyslexia – that the dyslexia is taking the glory. Feels patronised. Doesn’t need the dyslexia.  | Dyslexia as a myth.Rejection of idea of dyslexia as identity and as survival.  |
| **97** | M: self as separate from dyslexiaR: self not having dyslexic identity | M sees is separatelyR: doesn’t know how to tell what is connected and what not | Rejection of dyslexia as identity. |
| **98** | J: friend positioned by mother as deficient | J: found this idea of sympathy and negative reaction very odd. Doesn’t feel that being dyslexic is something to be worried about. Friend’s mother felt devastated.  | Dyslexia as acceptable explanation for difficulties (J)Dyslexia as personal tragedy. |
| **99** | G: self as differently abled, not disabled |  | Dyslexia as differently abled, difference |
| **100** | R: self as not very affected by dyslexia | Doesn’t really feel the need to tell people very much, except when he needs to explain different exam arrangements to people |  |
| **101** | J: self as a bit jammyN: positioned by peers as object of fun and a bit of a cheat | J: feels everyone would do better with extra time and a computerN: often didn’t use his extra time, if he did, peers would make fun, suggest he was not genuine and getting extra for his ‘genius answers’ – not sth N appears to have enjoyed.  | Dyslexia as a myth, excuse |
| **102** | N,G: selves as genuinely disadvantaged | N and G: emphasis how they really do find certain aspects of writing/ memory hard | Dyslexia as specific learning difficulties |
| **103** | J and T: selves as genuinely disadvantaged | J,T: use up their extra time and feel they rely on it to allow anywhere near true representation of their ability in exams.  | Dyslexia as specific learning difficulties.  |
| **104** | J: self as genuinely in need | J: uses her extra time and panics less – justifying her need for it.  | Dyslexia as genuine difficulty |
| **105** | N: as genuinely disadvantaged, victim of timed examsH: N as let down by system | N: frustration with himself for misunderstanding what the GCSE paper was asking | Dyslexia as genuine difficulty |
| **106** | H,N: G as deservingG: self as lazy | G: hasn’t gone for all the adjustments she could have for chronic fatigue |  |
| **107** | H,M,G,J,N: selves as deserving | All use adjustments offered | Dyslexia as disability |
| **108** | N: self as scrounger | N feels a bit guilty |  |
| **109** |  |  |  |
| **110** | J: self as deserving, not a scrounger | J feels that the stuff she gets is closely tied to her needs and they don’t throw everything at her.  | Dyslexia as disability |
| **111** | G: self as unfairly marked down, self as intelligent, capable | G: situates the problem for lowered marks with the examiner and the system which marked her down for not remembering names and dates. Feels frustrated with the sticker system – feels it should make a difference to how work is graded.  | Dyslexia as disability, as environmental construction |
| **112** | H,J: G as expecting too much, selves as happy with current system.  | J debates whether to use the stickers | Dyslexia as disability |
| **113** | J: positions examiners as potentially judgmental, or sensitiveJ: positions examiners as positioning her as a cheat | Wonders if it would be better not to use the stickers | Dyslexia as disability, dyslexia as an excuse.  |
| **114** | G: self as done downH,M,J: G as expecting too much | G: feels that more leeway should be given when a sticker is on assessed work – current system is still not fair. G argued about this with her lecturer.  | Dyslexia as disability, rights, social justice, environmental construction |
| **115** | G: self as deserving, as disabled as entitled | G: feels the assessment process should be made fairer, argues this is what the Equality act is for. Fights her corner. | Dyslexia as disability, as legal rights, social justice |
| **116** | J: self as capable, independent, strategist, not needy, G as being lazy | J: feels that G is asking for too much, that being able to remember names and dates in exams is a fair expectation for everyone – you should just find strategies to help.  | Dyslexia as an excuse |
| **117** | G: as unfairly treated by assessment system, as intelligent, capable | G: blames the assessment system and lack of reasonable adjustment for the fact she did not get a first in a number of her assessments.  | Dyslexia as disability, as legal rights, social justice, environmental construction |
| **118** | N: self as hard done by, sb who has a right to be a bit bitter | N: fees annoyed that he had little assessed coursework because he would have done better on that than exams – feels unfairly assessed.  | Dyslexia as disability, environmental construction |
| **119** | G: self as scrupulous, sb with high standards, done down by assessment systemJ,M: G as expecting too much | G: thinks the assessment system should be different | Dyslexia as disability, as legal rights, social justice, environmental construction |
| **120** | N: self as rational voice, and subject to a pointless assessment of memory | N: exams as unrealistic measures | Dyslexia as environmentally, socially constructed.  |
| **121** | N, G: selves as treated unfairly by examination systemJ: self as treated fairly by system | N: feels the assessment system means he is done downJ: feels happy with the adjustments she has | Dyslexia as disability, as legal rights, environmental construction |
| **122** | R: self and dyslexic others as not deserving of special treatment | R: compares with down’s syndrome – if you aren’t capable, then you shouldn’t be doing a degree. Wouldn’t want to be marked more generously than anyone else, | Dyslexia as an excuse |
| **123** | G: self and dyslexic others as deserving of different treatmentM,J,H,G: dyslexic people as deserving of different treatment | G: challenges R, argues for reasonable adjustments. M,J,H,G: imply or say exams are unfair on dyslexic people | Dyslexia as disability, as legal rights, social justice, environmental construction |
| **124** | M: self as treated unfairly by examination system | Against exams |  |
| **125** | M: self as responsible, self-sufficient; G as using dyslexia as an excuseG: as genuine, deserving, entitled | M: would not want favourable marking, feels that through support you should be able to compensate for difficulties. Any remaining difficulties are his problem, and he should deal with them.G: differential marking is appropriate as not all difficulties can be compensated for | Dyslexia as an excuse, dyslexia as disability |
| **126** | N: M as mistakenG: self as justified; M as mistaken | M: would like to use yellow stickers for more careful feedback, but not have leeway in marking, N: there should be a choice between exams or coursework.  | Dyslexia as disability, as excuse |
| **127** | M: everyone as disadvantaged by examsG,J: selves as disadvantaged by exams | M: exams s a silly way to assess people | Dyslexia as disability |
| **128** | R: self as independent , self-sufficient, not entitledG: entitled, disabledM: dyslexia people as not entitled, G as wrong | R: doesn’t think there should be allowances/ adjustments for dyslexia.G: feels that reasonable adjustments are important and fair. M: doesn’t think that reasonable adjustments are necessarily appropriate |  |
| **129** | R: self and dyslexic people as responsible for their own difficulties, not entitledJ: Self as independent, self-sufficient, not entitled, survivorM: self as independent, self-sufficient, not entitled, survivor | R: knows it’s hard, but just have to get on with it. J: feels that having help for dyslexia would diminish the value of her degree grade – doesn’t want it to be that the dyslexia got the ‘first’. M: concerned that with some adjustments, his degree classification may not be comparable to someone else’s classification – not as valuable. Wouldn’t want this.  | Dyslexia as excuse, dyslexia as disability |
| **130** | H: dyslexic people as having strengthsJ: dyslexic people as good problem-solversN: dyslexic people as good observersG: dyslexic people and self as compensated | J,N: imply they have natural strengths attributable to dyslexiaG: that her strengths may be a result of what she has had to learn to do differently because of the dyslexia, not because of some natural talent.  | Dyslexia as strength, dyslexia as learning difference |
| **131** | T: self as just himself | T: doesn’t matter where the difficulties come from. | Dyslexia as normal variation, as identity |
| **132** | H: dyslexic people as creative, socially competent, business-minded |  | Dyslexia as strength |
| **133** | R: self as autistic and dyslexicG: self as sensitive | R: interested in G’s perspective |  |
| **134** | R: self as autistic, and dyslexicH: R as owning these labelsG: self as expert | R: doesn’t separate these – just has one brain. Humour. | Dyslexia as global thinking |
| **135** | R: self as self-aware, comfortable with identityR: self as motivated  | R: mild rejection of G’s autistic stereotype |  |
| **136** | H: dyslexic people (via press) as cheats, as stupid,  | M: rejects these ideas with humourG: rejects these ideas by citing her and N’s working-class backgrounds. | Dyslexia as myth, excuse, stupidity |
| **137** | Positioning carried over from 136 | J: partially acknowledges the pushy parent ideaM: partially accepts that pushy parents may push for dyslexia diagnosis as an excuse for their child’s perceived lack of achievement.  | Dyslexia as myth, excuse, stupidity |
| **138** | J: dyslexic people as part of normal variation – people with strengths and weaknesses | J: agrees with programme on the social construction if dyslexiaM: agrees with J – ‘a necessary social construct’ | Dyslexia as a social construction |
| **139** | G: autistic people disabled by the social world (and by implication, dyslexic people).R: Autistic people disabled by the social world, but also innately different.  | R: comments upon how autistic people may do better in Japanese society, for example.  |  social construction, innate pathology |
| **140** | H: G ashypocritical? (this isn’t quite right – but I remember I was challenging her somehow to explain how ME was anything but a social construction). G: self as genuine | H: challenging G on her social construction v innateness perspective.G: ME as having very physical symptoms as well as socially constructed ones.  | Social construction |
| **141** | H: dyslexic people as valid, genuineH: dyslexic people as slow, daft, hiding from true inabilityJ: self as genuineG: self as intelligent | J: would be very angry at suggestions she was just slow – wouldn’t know what to say backG: would show them her IQ report | Dyslexia as myth, excuse, stupididtyAs intelligence, as acceptable explanation |
| **142** | M: Self as outside dyslexia, not affectedJ: dyslexic people as not stupid | M: wouldn’t relate any accusations of stupidity or slowness to dyslexia. Considers dyslexia separately from his identityJ: reiterates, justified her anger if she was called slow.  | Dyslexia as myth, stupidity,As irrelevant, As not stupidity |
| **143** | N: dyslexia people as learning differentG: dyslexic people as not stupid or slowT: dyslexic people as ‘less intelligent’ according to a given categorisation.  | N: explaining why more and more people are being ‘diagnosed’G: objecting to the idea of being slow or stupidT: fees that brains work differently, and if the way your brain works is put into the category of ‘less intelligent’ then ‘so be it’. Acceptance of category.  | Dyslexia as a medical/ psychological condition, As brain-based Rejection of dyslexia as stupidity.  |
| **144** | M: dyslexic people as learning different, as a minority group | M: blames the education system which is set up for the ‘majority mind’ and where the dyslexic minority don’t exactly fit.  | Dyslexia as a repressed minorityDyslexia as learning difference |
| **145** | N: dyslexic people as genetically wired to be dyslexicM: Dyslexic people as outcome of random variation | M,N: use genetics to explain dyslexia | Dyslexia as evolutionary product |
| **146** | G: dyslexic people as not all the sameM: some dyslexic people as cheats | G: thinks different kinds of dyslexia may have different causesM: feels dyslexia is an invention that some people use as an excuse | Dyslexia as invention, myth, excuseDyslexia as an umbrella for different things |
| **147** | G: self as innately dyslexicM: self as labelled dyslexic | G: argues for the innateness of dyslexiaM: argues for the social construction/ invention of dyslexiaM,G: questioning the existence of dyslexia | Dyslexia as invention, myth, social constructionDyslexia as innate thing, static. |
| **148** | H: dyslexic people as products of history | H: questioning the existence of dyslexia | Dyslexia as a historical, social costruction |
| **149** | J: dyslexic people (and all people) as socially constructed.N: dyslexic people as learning different, not disabled | J: compares construction of dyslexic people to construction of cowards in the World Wars. Considers that the category of dyslexia will change in the future, branch out, according to society’s direction. Places the creation of dyslexic as separate from herself. N: feels there may be many new categories for learning differently in the future.  | Dyslexia as social construction. As fluid.As learning difference |
| **150** | G: self as intelligent, intelligent people as able to get round things; people who are unintelligent as not able to get around things.  | G: refers to R.Nicolson’s automatic lerning deficit. Feeling that intelligence is vital. | Dyslexia as innate automaticity deficit.  |
| **151** | N: self as feeling a bit stupidH: N as being modestG: N as suffering from ‘imposter syndrome’J,G,M,R: selves as not ever feeling stupid | N: comparing self to peers in his departmentG: used to feel stupidM: sometimes doubts own work | Dyslexia as stupidity, and rejection of this.  |
| **152** | H: self as middle class, working class students as disadvantaged.N: self as intellectually inferior to departmental peersM: people who N describes as superior as ‘freaks’.  | H: questioning idea of intelligenceN: comparing self negatively to peers according to their academic achievements. M, G, J: emphasising that N’s peers are unusual and weird and ridiculous.  | Dyslexia as stupidity, and rejection of this.  |
| **153** | End |  |  |

Appendix v: glossary of terms

Below is a brief clarification of the intended meaning of the following terms in the contexts of this thesis.

**Conceptions:** Throughout this thesis I refer to different conceptions of dyslexia. I use the term ‘conception’ to mean a discursively produced idea about a socially constructed object. ‘Conception’ differs only slightly from ‘construction’ in that I use the latter term to indicate the discursively produced object, and the former to indicate a discursively produced idea about that object. At times these are inseparable.

**Discourse:** I use the word ‘discourse’ in a number of ways, sometimes to refer to a particular text, for example, the statements of a particular participant in a focus group. In other words, I might refer to S’s discourse to indicate the words S spoke in a given moment. I also used the word discourse as the text(s) which make(s) up the world, people, and objects in any meaningful sense. From this position, I might say then that dyslexia *is* a discourse; dyslexic students *are* discourses. This is not to say that there are no extra-discursive elements interacting in the production of such objects as we know them, but that they exist meaningfully to humans only as discourse. Finally, I also speak about a discourse *of* something; for example, a discourse of deficit. By this I mean the language used which produces, reproduces and maintains particular ways of being or ways of understanding people and objects; or the language which is used in a particular domain, or field (such as education) and which therefore colours the objects which are constructed from within that domain or field.

**Identities and subject positions:** When I write of a student’s identity or identities I mean the relatively enduring discursive positions they take up or are given in a broad social context (e.g. in education). My use of ‘identities’ differs from my use of ‘subject positions’ only in the degree of stability these appeared to have for the participants. What I mean, here, is that a student’s identity or identities might have some sort of continuity beyond the conversational context; for example, let us say student A has a relatively enduring identity as someone who is ‘not very academic’. This relatively enduring identity (produced through a complex interaction of personal history, institutional power, social and cultural context, and so on) is likely to influence the more local subject positions that person takes up or is given in individual local contexts (such as in a focus group). The participants brought particular identities with them to the conversations; they were not all made afresh within the focus groups. In short, I understand the subject positions as the specific discursive location a student took up or was offered in a particular conversational instance. If a student consistently took up a particular subject position, I understood this as forming more of a stable identity, either across the whole of the focus group conversation, or both within the conversation and beyond.

**Ideology:** In this thesis I consider ‘ideology’ to mean a system of ideas or assumptions about people and the world that is constructed in and through language. For me an ideology is therefore a hegemonic discourse from which narrower discourses (for example, discourses of dyslexia) are built (see page 78 of this thesis for further discussion).

Appendix vi: participant information sheet

*NB. This information sheet has some information removed for confidentiality reasons. This is clearly indicated in square brackets.*

Information sheet

**The discursive construction of dyslexia by dyslexic students in Higher Education**

You are invited to take part in this research project. Please read the information here carefully before you decide whether you would like to take part. You can contact me to talk more about what the research will involve and what its aims are, or to ask any further questions.

**Background**

Having been a dyslexia support tutor at The University of Sheffield for a number of years, I became interested in the very different ways dyslexic students make sense of the label of dyslexia and in the impacts this had upon their learning identity at university. This is a doctoral research project which aims to explore this further.

**Aims**

The aims of the project are to see how dyslexic students construct meaning around dyslexia, to analyse the language used in doing so, and to better understand the ways that different ideas about dyslexia and ability open up different ways of being as learners in Higher Education. A further aim is to involve the participants in this study in a discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of particular ideas about dyslexia, and how certain conceptions might be presented or resisted.

I aim to complete the project by June 2015, but I hope the main data collection stage to take place between March 2011 and September 2012.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been invited to participate because you are registered [confidential information removed]. All other dyslexic students registered here have also been invited to participate.

**Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time. You do not have to give a reason.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you agree to take part in this project, you will be invited to join in a small-group discussion (focus group) with 4 or 5 other students who have an identification of dyslexia [confidential information removed]. You and the other participants in the discussion will be encouraged to share personal experiences and stories of living with dyslexia and asked about the feelings and meanings you and they attach to the label. The discussion will be audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis.

You may also be asked to take part in an individual interview with me to follow up some of the issues raised in the focus group discussion; and also invited to an additional, follow-up focus group discussion where you will have the opportunity to discuss my analysis of the conversations up to that stage, and share your own interpretations of what you have discussed and experienced. I will also request a copy of your dyslexia ‘diagnostic’ assessment to build upon the ideas of dyslexia constructed in the study. If you would prefer not to provide a copy of you assessment, you do not need to do so, and you do not need to give a reason.

Below is a flow chart outlining the process if you agree to take part:

If you agree to take part in the project:

You will be invited along to a group discussion with 4 or 5 other dyslexic students studying [XXXXX].

You will be asked to read and sign a consent form

The discussions will be audio-recorded and then transcribed and analysed

You may be invited to an individual interview with me to follow up some of the issues raised in the focus group

You will be invited to a follow-up focus group where you will have the chance to comment upon my analysis of the discussions so far, and talk about your own interpretation of the data.

You will be sent my analysis of the group discussion.

You will be invited to a debriefing session where you will be able to talk about your experience of the research and express any concerns you may have.

You will be sent a final copy of the research project if you wish.

I may request a copy of your dyslexia assessment for analysis.

The focus group discussions and interviews will take place in a quiet and confidential room on [XXXX] in within normal University hours.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

It is important that you carefully consider any potential risks you may be exposed to in taking part in this project. Firstly, there is a chance that you may recognise one or more of the other students taking part. Others will therefore know that you have an identification of dyslexia. You should consider this possibility, and how you feel about this before you agree to take part. Secondly, as the discussions will involve talking about personal experiences and feelings, there is a chance that you (or others) will feel distressed, particularly if dyslexia has meant a struggle for you, at some point in your life. While I will be monitoring the conversation carefully, and steering it onto a different area if a participant appears to be upset, you need to consider whether you will feel comfortable discussing your perspectives and experiences in this context.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

You may find taking part in this project to be interesting and enjoyable. You will have the chance to speak to other students who have similar or contrasting experiences of living with dyslexia and this may be a positive experience. As part of the aim of the research is to consider how the meanings given to dyslexia may impact upon a wider sense of identity as a student in Higher Education, you may find ways of re-framing prevailing ideas about dyslexia so that they are more personally useful. You may also begin to recognise ways in which less personally useful conceptions of dyslexia may be resisted.

**What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

If this happens, you will be informed immediately, and full reasons will be given.

**What if something goes wrong?**

If you feel that you are unhappy with any aspect of the research project you may raise issues directly with me:

Harriet Cameron,

The University of Sheffield, 277 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2HB

Tel: 0114 222 1787

e-mail: h.cameron@sheffield.ac.uk

You can also contact my doctoral supervisor:

Dr. Tim Corcoran,

Educational Studies, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2JA.

Tel: 0114 22 28185

E-mail: t.d.corcoran@sheffield.ac.uk.

If you feel your complaint is not handled to your satisfaction at this level, or if you feel you have experienced a serious adverse event as a consequence of taking part in the research, you can contact the University’s Registrar and Secretary:

Dr. Philip Harvey,

Office of the Registrar and Secretary, Firth Court, Western Bank, Sheffield, S10 2TN. Tel:0114 222 1100.
E-mail : registrar@sheffield.ac.uk

**Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

If you wish your name and any other identifying information to be removed from any or every part of the research project then this will be ensured. You can choose to be allocated a different name for use during the focus group discussion so that other participants will not know your real name. You can choose to have your name and other identifying information removed from the transcripts, analysis, and write- up of the project. However, if you prefer your real name and other identifying information to be used, that is also fine.

The discussions will be audio recorded and transcribed and the data will be kept on a personal computer and a University-managed computer and accessible only by myself and the given participant(s). Transcripts or parts of transcripts may also be seen by my supervisor and others who are close to the research project (e.g. a transcriber). All those who view the data will sign a confidentiality agreement. The data will be kept for a year after the doctoral project is completed or ended, and will then be destroyed.

I aim to publish the final project in journal articles or book form, and otherwise disseminate the work within Higher Education Institutions. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout, unless otherwise requested.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

The doctoral research is funded by fees from The University of Sheffield via the Staff Candidacy programme.

**Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

The project has been reviewed and accepted by the Research Ethics Committee within the Department of Educational Studies at The University of Sheffield. The University’s Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University’s Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

**Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded information be used?**

The group discussions and interviews will be audio recorded. These will be transcribed and used for analysis and for illustration in the project write-up, future articles or books, conference presentations and lectures. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

**Contact information**

My details, as lead researcher:

Harriet Cameron,

The University of Sheffield, 277 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2HB

Tel: 0114 222 1787

e-mail: h.cameron@sheffield.ac.uk

You can also contact my doctoral supervisor:

Dr. Tim Corcoran,

Educational Studies, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2JA.

E-mail: t.d.corcoran@sheffield.ac.uk

**If you agree to take part in this study, you will be given a copy of this information sheet and a consent form to keep.**

**THANK YOU for taking the time to read this information sheet, and for considering participation in the project.**

Appendix vii: participant consent form

**Participant Consent Form**

|  |
| --- |
| **Title of Project:** The discursive construction of dyslexia by dyslexic students in Higher Education**Name of Researcher:** Harriet Cameron **Please initial box**1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated

 *[ ]* for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.1. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdrawat any time without giving any reason. The led researcher, Harriet Cameron,

 may be contacted by e-mail: h.cameron@sheffield.ac.uk; by phone: 0114 222 1787; or by mail: The University of Sheffield, 277 Glossop Road,  Sheffield, S10 2HB1. I understand that my responses will be audio recorded. These will be anonymised

before analysis unless otherwise requested.. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses (or non-anonymised responses if this has been agreed). 1. I agree to take part in the above research project.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Name of Participant Date Signature(*or legal representative*)\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Name of person taking consent Date Signature(*if different from lead researcher*)*To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*\_Harriet Cameron \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Lead Researcher Date Signature*To be signed and dated in presence of the participant* |

Appendix viii: notes on transcription

I used a version of transcription based upon the Jeffersonian method\* when transcribing the focus group conversations. Further symbols were not used because I considered that these were interruptive of meaning when reading the transcripts back, and because I felt such symbols were designed for conversation analysis, rather than discourse analysis. The table below is a key to the symbols I used in transcription.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Symbol** | **Example** | **Meaning** |
| underline | Really frustrating | Speaker emphasizes the underlined portion of the word. |
| ? | Is it? | Questioning intonation. |
| . | Falling intonation with pause. | Speaker indicates end of statement or turn.  |
| [] | A: It was [great]B: [yeah ] I know. | Speakers overlap. |
| ( ) | (inaudible) | Descriptions, not transcribed speech |
| CAPITALS | NO I WON’T he told me. | Loud speech.  |
| , | I don’t know, yeah. | Short pause.  |
| HAHAHA |  | Full laughter |
| hhhh |  | Restrained laughter |

\*[Jefferson, G. (2004). Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction. In G, H Lerner, (Ed). *Conversation Analysis: Studies from the first generation*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins: 13-31.](http://www.liso.ucsb.edu/Jefferson/Transcript.pdf)