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From Entering Higher Education to the End of Year 1: The Previous and Current Experiences of Mature Students with Dyslexia.

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Richard Scothon

Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Durham

The School of Education

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30th of September 2005

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Abstract

This research examines experiences of ten mature dyslexic student respondents at five British universities; two pre-1992, and three post-1992 institutions. Each respondent was interviewed eight times concerning their school, work and HE experiences as mature dyslexic students. In addition to these student interviews, various support staff were interviewed to gain an extra perspective on the site under investigation.

Unstructured and semi-structured interviews took place within the first year of the respondents returning to education, in an attempt to gain rich and raw data from the respondents as they progressed through their first academic year, with a close understanding of their experiences in every aspect of their lives: home, work and university. The social model of disability and critical social research provided the overall theoretical framework, but grounded theory was used in data analysis.

Through analysis of the data generated by the respondents and the support staff, the study gained access to the experiences of dyslexia in the lives of the respondents, and how they felt this condition had affected them in their relationships at school and at work. In addition to this the study observed the experiential progress of the respondents as they returned to the higher educational environment. Finally, the research exposed difficulties and barriers that respondents faced in their return to education from the workplace, taking account of the support systems in place to help them through their academic difficulties.

The results of the research uncovered a range of educational, sociological and psychological factors in the respondents' school and employment background. The research also showed how the respondents changed over one academic year, and reports their ambitions for the future.

Contents

Abstract ii

Contents iii

Abbreviations xvi

Declaration and Copyright xviii

Dedication and Acknowledgment xix

List of Appendices xx

Chapter One: Introduction **1**

Introduction **1**

Genesis of the Research 2

Outline of the Study 5

Chapter Two: Literature Review – Disability and Education **9**

Introduction **9**

School Education **10**

Pupil Experiences 10

Teacher Feedback – Building Confidence 11

Environment – Exposing the Dyslexic Pupil 11

Teachers – Encouraging or Discouraging Academic Self Esteem 12

Being Dyslexic Without Knowing About it. 13

Policy development 14

"Statementing" 15

Further Education 16

Student Experiences **17**

Dyslexic and Non-Dyslexic Student Relationships 17

Positive Relationships Between Dyslexic Students 20

Policy development **22**

Educational Policy 1992 22

Policy Target: Inclusive Learning 23

FEFC Educational Funding Policy 1994 23

Educational Policy Disability Discrimination Act 1995 25

Progression into HE **25**

Clear Prospectus 26

Dyslexic Encounter 26

Conclusions 27

Specialist Courses Providing Help to Dyslexic Students **27**

History and Development 28

Past Experience Recognised 28

Extra Help 29

Quality Assurance 30

Specific Courses for Dyslexic People 31

Acts and Reports 31

Changing Attitude 32

Conclusions 32

Discussion **33**

Higher Education **34**

Student Experiences **34**

Dyslexia and Relationship in HE 35

Openness of Dyslexia 36

Being Cautious 37

Pre-HE Effects on HE Learning 38

Policy development **41**

Policy: Minimum Support Levels 1999 42

Policy: Dearing Report 1997 43

Other Recommendations 43

Policy: SENDA 2001 44

Policy: The Disability Discrimination Act 2005 45

Reasons and Problems in returning to Education 46

Limited Research 46

Discrimination 46

Shared Histories 47

Career Improvements 48

I Need to Study 48

Middle Class v. Working Class 48

Changes in Pre-Degree Courses 49

School as Basis of Educational Failure 50

Working v. Middle Class 51

Confidence and Hurriedness 52

Discussion **53**

Finances 53

Is Education Oppressive to Dyslexic People? **54**

Oppression from Teachers 54

Oppression from Peers 55

Oppression from Parents/home 55

Oppression from self-perception 56

Oppression from teaching environment 57

Oppression from Lecturers 57

Oppression from Non-dyslexic Students 58

Conclusion 58

Chapter Three: Literature Review 2: Theoretical Perspectives **60**

Dyslexia as a form of disability **60**

Education as Opportunity 60

Dyslexia and Literacy 60

Medical and individual models of disability **62**

Different Models of Disability 62

The Medical Model of Disability (MMD) 63

The Medical Model and Dyslexia 65

The Individual Model of Disability (IMD) 65

Social Model of Disability SMD **67**

History 67

Theory 68

Criticism and Refinement 69

The Social Model of Impairment: An Advance on the MMD? **70**

History 70
Theory 70
Criticism 71
Can the SMD help to expose barriers in Education? **72**
The Social Model: Higher Education 74
Grounded Theory as a way of analysing data within the overall framework of CSR **75**
Critical Social Research and Grounded Theory 75
Critical Social Research 75
Grounded Theory 77
Combining SMD and Grounded Theory to Expose Respondents' Experience **79**
Social Model of Disability and Grounded Theory 79
Social Oppression 79
Intricate Data 79
CSR and the SMD, as a Methodology for Investigating the Experience of Mature Students with Dyslexia **80**
Knowledge 81
Changing Knowledge 83
Data Analysis **84**
Qualitative or Quantitative Information 87
Coding 88
Conclusion: Overall Research Approach **89**
Critical Observations of Joint CSR and Gth 90

Chapter Four: Methodology and Research Tools **91**
Introduction **91**
The Pilot Study **97**
The Pilot Stage 98
Using Pilot Study Data in Planning the Main Study **100**
Sequence of Interviews and Design of the Research **103**
Constructing interviews of the main study 104

Venues and Protocols 105

Research Tools 106

Sampling 107

Limited Numbers of Respondents 109

Interviewing Method 114

Semi Structured Interviews 115

Validity and Reliability in Critical Research. 115

Researcher Intervention and Respondents' Trust 116

Representative Examples of Research 118

Alternative Ways of Researching 120

Alternative Research Approaches 121

Alternative Data Collection 122

Assisting Dyslexic People 124

Validity and Reliability in Grounded Theory 125

Respondent Lead Validity 126

Transcription and Reliability 128

Triangulation 129

Ethical Considerations 131

Anonymity 134

Choice of Theory and Data Analysis and the Choice and Role of Theory 136

Grounded Theory – Substantive Theory 138

Grounded Theory – Formal Theory 139

Grounded Theory and Cumulative Theory 140

Grounded Theory and the Educational World 141

Coding of Data 142

Computer Aids to Analysis 145

Theory to Field Work 150

Chapter Five: School Experience: Creating Failures 151

Introduction 151

Teachers' Lack of Understanding of Dyslexia 151

Identification of Dyslexia 153
Dyslexia as a Term of Abuse 154
Parents and their Children's Education **156**
Negative Parental Attitudes 157
Positive Teacher and Parental Attitudes 160
Coping Strategies: Confidence and Rebellion 161
Bullying 162
Truancy 162
Vandalism 163
Disruption 163
Mute Silence 164
Depression 164
Being Bullied 165
Self Harm 166
Social Relationships with other Pupils 166
Friends with Dyslexia 167
Pupils Modelling a Teacher's Negative Comments 168
Negative and Positive Labelling 169
Negative Labelling 160
Positive Labelling 171
Systems for Support in School 172
Help with Spelling Test 172
Peer Tutoring 174
The Backward Child 174
SEN/Remedial Classes 175
SEN Pupils and Friends 175
Minimal Workload 176
Cognitive Responses to Dyslexia 177
Pencil and Pens 177
Copying From Other Pupils 178
Discussion **179**
Teaching Staff and Dyslexia 181

Chapter Six: Respondents' Experiences in the Workplace **193**

Introduction **193**

Career and School Friends **193**

Leaving School 194

Work v. University 195

Pressures from Family and Friends 196

Worry about Writing and Reading at Work 197

Hiding Dyslexic from Colleagues 199

Courses at Work 200

Work and School Compared 201

Social Relationships at Work 202

Confidence, Frustration and Motivation 203

Career change, what and when? 204

Regrets and Attempting to Leave Work. 206

Discussion **209**

School Experiences Within the Workplace? 210

Work as University 211

The Decision to Apply to HE **212**

Compliment 214

Example 215

Recognition of Dyslexia 215

Chapter Seven: Re-entering the Educational Environment **218**

Introduction **218**

Deciding Factors 218

Difficult to Leave Work 218

Word of Mouth 219

Something Missing in Life 220

University as Recovery 220

Self Belief and University 220

Which University and Why? 221

Proximity to Home 221
Which Course? 223
Finance to Attend Interviews 224
Time off Work 225
Getting Everything Wrong 226
Self Image as Fraud 226
Old University 227
Anxiety About Starting University 228
Return to School 228
Can I Perform Academically? 229
Not Like School 231
Grown-ups at University 232
Psychologically Moving on from School 233
Moving on Academically 233
Moving on Socially 235
Moving on Personally 238
Working Class Changes at University 238
Encouragement from the Family 240
Supportive Families 241
Positive Encouragement from Parents 241
Positive Encouragement from Partners 242
Changing Opinions from Family 243
Qualifications as Career Boost 244
Unsupportive Families 245
Negative Attitudes 245
Loss and Jealousy 246
Degree V's Apprenticeship 247
Support Offered at University 248
Publicity for Pre-degree Support 248
Degree Support Advertising 248
Discussion **249**
Courage in Applying to HE 249

Restarting Life 250
Something Missing in Life 251
Advertising of Support as Motivation 253
Lower Entry Grades – Lower Academic Expectations 255
Family Support and Class – Betrayal of Background? 256
Class Issues 258
Notion of Class and HE 258
Knowing One's Place 259
Family Values 260
Practical Difficulties in Gaining a Place 261
Leaving Work 262
Affording the Interview Travel Fees 263
Locating a Suitable Course of Study 264
Being Reminded of School, Finding Social Support, and New Identity. 265

Chapter Eight. Starting Academic Work and Accessing Support Services 268
Introduction 268
The Classroom Environment 269
Negative Experiences in the Classroom 269
School and University Merge into One 270
Isolation 270
Ridicule by Unsupportive Lecturers 272
Unchanged Teaching Styles 274
Note-takers 274
Positive Experiences in the Classroom 276
Re-starting Life 276
Personal Promotion and Elitism 277
Writing Essays 278
Support or Not in Early Stages 279
Plagiarism and Copying 280
Internet Plagiarism 282

Educational Support Equipment 283
Computers and their Software 283
Spellcheckers 283
Voice Recognition 284
Optical Character Recognition 285
Dictaphone 287
Support Sessions: Positive Experiences 289
Overstretched Support System 291
Learning Techniques 292
Group Sessions 292
Getting Left Behind 293
Negative Experience 294
Expectation vs. Reality 294
Poor Proof Reading 297
Discussion **298**
Early Experiences at University were Reminiscent of School. 298
Variability in Quantity and in Perceived Quality of Support Services. 300
Dependence on Academic Dyslexia Support 303
Academic Support Systems 304
Dependency on Specialist Computer Software 304
Dependency on Other Technologies 305
Dependency on Amanuensis 306
Over-reliance on Academic Support Mentors 307
Consequences of Lack of Academic Support 308
Developed Systems of Community 308
Clubs at post 1992 Universities 309
Finding Support Through Belonging 310

Chapter Nine. Entering Higher Education: Changes in Psychosocial Adjustment **312**
Introduction **312**
Reflecting on the Past: What Sort of Person Was I Then? 312

Coming to University 313
Could never go back 314
Academic Progress 315
Self Development 316
Social Development 320
Losing Old Friends 321
Making New Friends 324
Taking Stock of the Present: Who Am I Now? 326
Who Am I Academically? 326
Essay Writing – Positive 326
Essay Writing – Negative 327
Essay Writing – Motivation 327
Who am I Psychologically? 329
I'm a better person now 329
Academic Discussion 330
Who am I Socially? 332
Social Contradictions 334
Planning for the Future: Where Next? 336
The Next Step 337
First Year Exams and Continuing in HE. 337
Starting a Degree Course 340
Transition from Pre-Degree to Degree Courses 340
Back to Work 343
Aspiration Changes as a Dyslexic Adult 344
Career Changes 345
Postgraduate Ambitions 346
Graduate Recruitment 347
Helping Others to Achieve: the Role Model 348
Discussion **350**

Chapter 10: Discussion **363**
Introduction **363**

Original Research Material 364
Longitudinal Nature of Research. 365
Positive Researcher Impact on Respondents 365
Unnamed Respondents 365
Specific New Findings from this Study 366
The Effect of Education Reform 374
Access to Assessment for Dyslexia 377
The Medical Model of Disability 379
The Power that Professionals Hold Over Clients 380
Individual Modes of Support: Do they Foster Dependency? 381
More Students: Change of Ethos 386
Academic Success without Academic Support 387
The effect of dyslexia in wider society 390
Media and Disability 393
Limited References 395
Disability Movement 397
The Body as Disability 398
Film and Television 399
Location of Dyslexia 399
Appraisal of Methodology and Theory 401
Respondents and the Social Model of Disability 404
Researcher Impact 405
Practical Benefits to Respondents 407
Dissemination 408
Research Control 408
Rich Data 410
Chapter Eleven: Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research. 414
Introduction 414
Overview 414
School Background 415
Positive Experiences of University 417

Flexibility of University Policies 418
Smaller Groups and Computer Learning 418
Peer Help 419
Negative Experience of University 419
Support Services 420
Academic Staff 420
Effects of Dyslexia on Information Processing 420
Positive and Negative Effects 421
Methodology and Framework **422**
Recommendations 422
School Education 423
Universities 426
Workplace 427
Various University Courses 427
Role Models 428
Peer Mentoring 429
Staff Attitudes and Training 430
Academic and Support Service Collaboration 431
Professional Recognition 432
Further Research 433
Social Class 434
Initial Support Programmes 434

Bibliography **437**

Abbreviations

A to HE Access to Higher Education

AVAs Authorised Validating Agencies

BDA British Dyslexia Association

BPS British Psychological Society

BTec Business & Technology Education Council

CSE Certificate of Secondary Education

CSR Critical Social Research

DEE Disability Equality in Education

DES Department of Education and Science

DfES Department for Education and Skills

DI Dyslexia Institute

DRTF Disability Rights Task Force

DSA Disabled Students' Allowance

Ed.Psych Educational Psychologist

EQuIP National Disability Co-ordination and Development Team

FE Further Education

FEFC Further Educational Funding Council

F to HE Foundation to Higher Education

GCE General Certificate of Education

GCSE General Certificate of Secondary Education

G.th Grounded Theory

HE Higher Education

HEFCE Higher Education Funding Council for England

IDA International Dyslexia Association

LEA Local Educational Authorities

NADO National Association of Disability Officers

NUD.IST non-numerical unstructured data indexing searching and theorising

NWPD National Working Party on Dyslexia

PGCE Postgraduate Certificate in Education

QAA Quality Assurance Agency

SEN Special Educational Needs

SENDA Special Educational Needs and Disability Act

SKILL National Bureau for Students with Disabilities

SpLD specific learning difficulties

UCAS Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

UPIAS Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation

Declaration and Copyright

Declaration

The material contained in this thesis is the work of the author alone and no part of it has previously been submitted for a degree at any university.

Copyright

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Dedication and Acknowledgement

Dedication

To Kirsten and Henry, what would my life be without you both?

Acknowledgement

To the respondents in this study. Every one of them is remarkable, not only in their academic achievements, but in letting a stranger discover some of the most intimate moments of their lives. They are all strong people, even though they might not realise it, and each one of them deserves every possible academic success in their lives.

To Professor Galloway. David has provided some of the most thought provoking ideas I have ever come across. It has been an honour to have been supervised by an internationally renowned academic, with so many years of experience in the field, and a widely held reputation for extremely high academic standards. Not only that but he has one of the driest senses of humour in this country. He is an inspirational mentor in the field.

To the dyslexia support professionals at each of the universities for assisting me with this study. They have been extremely kind in helping me locate respondents and academics. Not only that, but to tell me about their experiences of assisting dyslexic mature students to achieve academic success.

To the academics, administration staff and postgraduate researchers in the School of Education at Durham, for their support and kindness shown to me during my time in the school. The opportunities that Professor Byram has given me to present and discuss my work has been extremely helpful.

To the Master, Officers, SCR, MCR and JCR of my college for supporting me in this study, and allowing me to present papers and debates within college, especially to Anastasia and Stuart Foyle (Castle and Chad's respectively) for their helpful academic comments.

List of Appendences

Appendix 1 Early Examples of Respondents' Pre-edited Academic Work. 444

Appendix 2a Interview Schedule 1: Why Return to Higher Education? 445

Appendix 2b Interview Schedule 2: School Life. 447

Appendix 2c Interview Schedule 3: After School. 449

Appendix 2d Interview Schedule 4: Return to University. 451

Appendix 2e Interview Schedule 5: Being Dyslexic Whilst at University. 453

Appendix 2f Interview Schedule 6: Support Systems at University. 455

Appendix 2g Interview Schedule 7: How are you coping with the Academic Work at University? 457

Appendix 2h Interview Schedule 8: Final Schedule. 459

Appendix 3 Appendix 3 Initial Questionnaire. 461

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

This chapter introduces the research by explaining my reasons for undertaking the study. I will explain my interest in the field of dyslexia and its relevance to my own academic journey. I will also make a link to the psychosocial issues that many dyslexic people experience as part of their educational growth both in compulsory education and in the workplace. I will connect this to my interest in the higher education system's role in expanding the opportunities available to mature dyslexic students.

My work is motivated by a personal experience of dyslexia in higher education, and a wish to increase the opportunities for other dyslexic people in higher education or those considering it. My interest in the psychosocial experiences of dyslexia for mature students within education stems from personal experience. Throughout my time at school I experienced difficulties in many aspects of my academic work; this could well have been linked to very prescriptive ways of teaching, limited understanding of dyslexia by some teachers, or even a refusal to accept that dyslexia exists.

My own dyslexia was first diagnosed at the age of 24, when I started a general pre-degree course, after a colleague recommended that I visit the disabilities co-ordinator. She and an educational psychologist tested me for learning difficulties and discovered that I had severe dyslexia. This label of 'dyslexia' started a reaction affecting every aspect of my life which gave me a new confidence in both academic and social interaction, yet made me introspect

and question my school years and how things could have been different. It was the 're-branding' of my self-perception from 'academically unable' to 'able but with educational difficulties' that gave me the self-belief to apply to institutes of higher education, finally gaining admission to an university.

With continued support from the university and its support unit for students with learning difficulties, I was able to access the Disabled Students Allowance which allowed me to purchase equipment, such as a tape recorder, to assist me in my studies. With the equipment and support, I was able to complete my undergraduate degree successfully, and start the postgraduate research for this study.

Genesis of the Research

In the last year of my undergraduate degree I started to become aware of other mature dyslexic students, in my university, who had startlingly similar educational life stories to that of my own. On further investigation I met mature dyslexic people who were minded to enter higher education, but simply did not have the belief in themselves to apply. This group of people were being left behind educationally but might, with appropriate assistance, have been capable of the academic success that I had achieved.

This made me ask such questions as:

1. What are dyslexic people's views of applying for admission to University?
2. Does their past educational history play a part in their return to the lecture hall?
3. Are these dyslexic adults negative or positive about their educational potential?

4. Do universities put off these people from applying, or are the application processes welcoming?
5. Are all types of universities offering mature dyslexic students an opportunity to achieve in education?
6. Has the work environment affected people who return to education in any sense?
7. What can we learn from dyslexic mature students while they are initially studying in the higher education environment?
8. Could the student experiences resulting from question 5 assist in creating a set of models or theories which could assist universities in their:
    a. Admission strategies
    b. Advertising campaigns
    c. Dyslexia support, specifically for mature students
    d. Counseling support for dyslexic mature students
9. Could the students' experiences resulting from question 5 assist in creating a set of models or theories which could help other mature dyslexics to develop:
    a. Beliefs that they will not repeat any potential past negative educational experiences in the F/H Ed. setting, and hence:
    b. Confidence in applying for Higher Education, and finally:
    c. More ways in which that their potential university will help them to succeed.

During my final undergraduate year I looked into the research that had been undertaken in this field, and found a dearth of dedicated work that matched my specific questions.

There had been much work on ways of encouraging mature students into further/higher education (e.g. Connelly et al, 1999), studies of childhood psychosocial problems (Woolfson, 1998) and a great deal on dyslexia in education (e.g. Brown, 1997). The work of Riddick et al (1995, 1997, 1999, 2000) has investigated the various difficulties that mature dyslexic students face in the HE system and is of particular importance. These studies have thrown light on respondents' experience at different points on their academic journey. However, they did not set out to explore the possibility that students may undergo massive changes in every aspect of their life, during their first year of study in HE. In addition to this, they focused on two or at most three mainly modern institutions which cater for a wide range of learning disabilities. They did not explore the possibility that students' experience might be substantially different in older universities where there may be fewer mature students with dyslexia and less provision.

Another aspect of the literature at the start of my research, was that the interviews in other studies were able to dedicate a limited amount of time to interviewing; for instance, three sessions of one hour. This may not have given the fullest possible depth of information, nor have given the opportunity for the respondents to build a trusting relationship with the researcher. A further limitation in previous research is that some of it was based on psychological tests. These 'tests' could be regarded as placing the researcher at a distance from the respondents and thus restricting the data gained from the interviews. This distance may be aggravated by the researchers coming mainly from University staff backgrounds; respondents might have felt cautious about imparting information which they fear might be reported back to their lecturers. Another important issue within the field is that there has been a lack of direct research into adult respondents who have all left employment and

entered the HE environment without realising they were dyslexic. This has the potential to shed interesting light on their views of themselves as simply academically unable, as opposed to academically disabled. With these new potential avenues of inquiry, I was able to build an outline of my study.

Outline of the Study

My study is principally an investigation of the experiences of ten mature students with dyslexia enrolled on various courses at five contrasting British universities. The study is supplemented with the experiences of the non-academic support staff who work with these dyslexic students and of academic staff with an interest in dyslexia. The field work lasted one academic year between October 2002 - August 2003 and took place within the five institutions.

The study uses the method of critical social research (Harvey, 1990) to look at the experiences of the respondents, and employs the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1967) to guide the analysis of the data drawn from the interviews. To frame the whole research, I have chosen a social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) as it marries the psychosocial aspect of the study with the idea of opportunities, or lack of them, within HE systems. This can be seen in the link between the methodology and the theoretical framework which are often used together in disability research of this nature; both the framework and methodology highlight the oppression that minority peoples face in society and, hopefully, assist in changing it for the better.

To explore the respondents' experience, qualitative methods were used to collect data, almost exclusively through semi-structured interviews, and a very short questionnaire to gather simple information such as name, d.o.b, degree course, etc.

To sum up: this study looked at ten mature dyslexic people who were just returning to the education system and follows them through their crucial first year in HE. It draws on some eight to ten hours of interviews per student, producing in-depth personal insights into this group who are studying at five extremely different institutions. These students had all worked in the 'outside world' for between 5 and 20 years and all came from working class backgrounds. This makes my study the first of its kind to look into the psychosocial aspects of the mature dyslexic entering the educational setting. I set aside four years to investigate this subject to throw light on the needs of this group of people, many of whom may remain excluded from achieving their full potential in life.

In an attempt to investigate the main research questions, I focused on six main aims:

1. To identify and compare the experiences of mature students with dyslexia in their first academic year of education within five contrasting UK universities.

2. To gather as much history as possible about the respondents' lives, with specific relevance to dyslexia, drawing on their experiences in school, the workplace and university.

3. To use interviews to explore how and why respondents have made the decision to seek admission to HE, and the personal consequences of this decision.

4. To identify and explain the personal and relationship problems that students may encounter in their first year in HE.

5. To evaluate formal and informal responses within the university setting that affect the students' adjustment to the HE environment.

6. To further the understanding that there are more than academic reasons why mature dyslexic people experience difficulty on entering higher education.

7 To discuss the findings in terms of the light that they shed on the experiences of a group of mature students with a disability as they progress through their first year in HE. This discussion is provided at the end of each chapter reporting results of the research. In addition, a further chapter discusses the data in light of previous research.

Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature on disability and education, with particular reference to dyslexia. Chapter 3 discusses possible theoretical perspectives, opting for the theoretical framework of critical social research, and the data analysis procedures of grounded theory. Chapter 4 describes the methodology and chapters 5–9 report data from in-depth interviews. At the end of each chapter there is a discussion section, drawing attention to issues of particular interest and importance. Finally, chapters 10 and 11 provide a more general

discussion of the data and conclusions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review – Disability and Education

Introduction

This review of the research literature demonstrates how the experiences of respondents in previous research leads my methodology to investigate potential oppressions and barriers that may be in place within the school, further and higher education systems, and how these barriers potentially disable, or at least maintain the status quo of, the dyslexic student.

The literature suggests that a number of dyslexic pupils (whether recognised as dyslexic or not) have negative experiences at school; they are not appropriately supported and thus fail to achieve their academic potential. This academic shortfall means that they may leave the compulsory system at the earliest possible point, vowing never to return to education, as their experience has been shrouded in negativity and subject to oppression from a system that claims to help them achieve their potential.

After a brief overview of the school literature, there is a review of the experiences of dyslexic students returning to the Further Education system, and the various policies to help these dyslexic students in this sector of education. This will also demonstrate that there is oppression within this field, even though more academic support appears to be available than in the school system. Turning to the literature from the HE system, there is a review of the experiences of students, and the policies that govern support in the HE field.

The chapter concludes with a short discussion highlighting the oppression reported in the findings from all three sectors of education. This provides a basis for my study, which

investigates the experiences of first year students entering five different universities, observing the various challenges they face as they start their new academic life.

School Education

1. Pupil Experiences

Research by Farmer, Riddick, and Sterling (1997) revealed that some dyslexic pupils left compulsory education with their needs unrecognised by their school. This led some respondents to take a negative attitude to education as a whole and initiated a history of academic failure. To illustrate the link, or lack of link, between pupils' experiences at school and the policies adopted for "second chance" education at FE and HE, various examples of support within the compulsory education system have been highlighted below. The list is not exhaustive, as this has been well documented elsewhere (Pollak, 2003; Anderson and Meier-Hedde, 2001), but emphasizes the various issues that dyslexic pupils face in the classroom setting in the years of compulsory education.

In this overview of school education, I will provide an overview of some key problems that dyslexic children have faced. This will show that there are issues, such as teachers' general encouragement, and dyslexic pupils' own awareness of dyslexia, that impact on the dyslexic child in the school setting and, more specifically, on their social interaction. These examples provide a useful background to the experiences reported in the Further and Higher education reviews, and help expose the needs that have not been met within the school setting.

Teacher Feedback – Building Confidence

Looking at how dyslexic pupils have been treated in the classroom setting Pollock (1993) argued that teachers should not pick up on minor spellings or grammar in a written piece of work, but only point out a handful of errors, so as to not overwhelm the pupil with negativity. He suggested that a child needs a structured and clear feedback system to reinforce good work, and to encourage an even greater effort in the future. Riddick (1996) agreed with this view and cited examples of how strategies for positive feedback work within the classroom. This in turn led Riddick to consider how much children should know about their difficulties in order to accept help. Questions about acceptance opened a much wider range of questions as to whether support or help should aim to improve the individual's success in coping with difficulties in academic work, or to improve the environment that the pupil works in.

Environment – Exposing the Dyslexic Pupil

The importance of the environment in which the dyslexic child works has been emphasized in previous research. Help has been given with extra time in exams, and colored photocopies of hand-outs, but this apparent help can cause difficulties from a social point of view. Farmer, Riddick and Sterling (1996) stated that some dyslexic pupils, as they progressed through the school system, wanted to hide their academic difficulties from their fellow pupils. She suggested that what could be good for:

"...one child may be highly unacceptable to another child and much might depend on how obtrusive or unobtrusive the intervention is." (Pg. 128, Farmer, Riddick and Sterling, 1996)

If this positive intervention is not handled with care, the child could experience a negative environment in which to learn, thus making their schooling even more oppressive.

Teachers – Encouraging or Discouraging Academic Self Esteem

Farmer and Riddick (1996) identified another influence on the progress of dyslexic pupils. Riddick asked for the opinions of both mothers and children regarding their perception of the best and the worst teachers. A positive example of a teacher was:

> "She boosted his self-esteem and he progressed a lot with [Teacher]" (Pg.133, Farmer et al, 1996).

and:

> "She used to encourage me and she used to help me with my work." (Pg. 133, Farmer et al, 1996).

This positive attitude was not always in evidence within the classroom. Bad teachers were identified by both mothers and teachers, as one pupil remembered:

"She said I was useless at everything and I couldn't do anything." (Pg. 134, Riddick, 1996).

This was also echoed by another pupil who had a teacher with a short temper:

> "There was red writing all over his books." (Pg.134, Riddick, 1996).

This illustrates how teachers can have a negative influence, subjecting dyslexic children to a barrage of criticism and humiliation, and showing an attitude that was not understanding of the child, making them feel bad. Riddick's research reinforced the work of Burns (1982) who also saw good and bad teachers as playing a crucial role in the lives of pupils. This negativity could create barriers within the classroom, and make the child feel that they were not able produce worthwhile work.

Being Dyslexic Without Knowing About it.

Significant research on children's experience of dyslexia is reported by Barga (1993) and Riddick et.al (1997) who looked closely at what it was like to have grown up with dyslexia without knowledge of the condition. They put forward the case that their respondents had negative experience of school with perceptions of:

> "... punishment and humiliation owing to their teachers' perception of them as being lazy and failing to work hard enough." (Pg. 170, Riddick et. al, 1997).

The students' negativity could be seen as a logical result of circumstances at the time, when dyslexia was not so well accepted within the educational system. Having said this, some of the younger respondents provided clear evidence of negative attitudes, reporting teachers not able or wishing to recognize their disability, and thus give them the support they needed. These examples and others such as peer pressure, parental negativity, homework and negative self perception in the classroom, led the pupils to feel that they were faced with an oppressive regime.

Policy development

Recognising that past research has found evidence of oppression in the classroom setting, it is important to see what policy has been developed to attempt to assist pupils with dyslexia. It is important to identify policy that was designed to enable dyslexic children to work on an equal academic footing with their peers, thus helping them to achieve their potential. Such policies would thus need to break down barriers and remove oppressive regimes.

The historical and policy background to dyslexia in the compulsory sector has been summarised in the work of Miles and Miles (1999) and Anderson and Meier-Hedde (2001). My study, focuses on the psychosocial needs of the dyslexic person, and not necessarily the causes of dyslexia, nor policies that provide academic help. Much of the school policy over the years has been directed more towards academic assistance for pupils with dyslexia in the classroom, than towards assisting dyslexic pupils with their psychological and social adjustment.

Sometimes with government support, voluntary agencies (such as The London Word Blind Centre, The Invalid Childrens' Aid Association, The Helen Arkell Centre, and the Dyslexia Institute and Association) have helped put dyslexia into the public domain; yet there is noticeably less emphasis on the social and psychological needs of the pupil; instead the 'handicapped/disabled' medical nature of dyslexia has been stressed.

Two important policies helped to change the academic *and* social provision for dyslexic pupils in English schools. The first was the 1981 Education Act. In an attempt to make provision for all pupils with learning difficulties, the 1981 Education Act replaced all previous categories of pupils requiring special education, (which did not specifically include dyslexia) with the generic concept of special educational needs. The Act was important in acknowledging that Special Educational Needs (SEN) should, wherever possible, be met in the ordinary school, rather than as previously, in special schools.

"Statementing"

A notable policy development was the 1981 Education Act which, although not exclusive to dyslexia, affected the experience of all children with disability. The Act made provision for the statutory assessment of pupils with SEN. Following assessment, the LEA would decide whether to issue a "statement" of the child's SEN. The Statement was expected to specify the nature of the child's special education needs, how and where they should be met, and any additional resources that might be needed.

However, the assessment process was problematic, (Leicester, 1999; Galloway et.al, 1994, Hill and Mosley [Warwick Report], 2004) as the whole process was lengthy and was perceived by parents as excessively bureaucratic, even intimidating. In addition the Audit Commission (1992) reported discrepancies between LEAs in their willingness to provide funds for some groups of pupils.

Recognising criticisms of the 1981 Act, the government tried to tighten up the procedures for assessment and issue of statements in the 1993 Act. This Act also introduced a Code of Practice on SEN and required schools to "have regard" to it (DFE, 1994). The Code was revised a few years later (DFES, 2001). Although the revision took account not only of the consolidation of the 1993 Act into Part IV of the 1996 Education Act and, more importantly, of the SEN and Disability Act (2001), it has been criticised as a missed opportunity (e.g. Galloway, 2003). It certainly does not constitute the high level independent review of provision for SEN called for by the Audit Commission (2002). While there can be little doubt that budgets for SEN have expanded since the Warnock report (DES, 1978), there is equally little doubt that the quality of school experience for many pupils with dyslexia remains a cause for concern.

Further Education

Literature on the FE system suggests that it is perceived by students as less oppressive than the school system. This could be because the respondents are all in the FE system to gain a

second chance in their education and thus overcoming the effects of dyslexia may be viewed as part of that second chance process.

For people returning to an educational environment, with the baggage of school experiences, the FE system should be as transparent as possible in its provision of both academic and emotional support, yet the literature review suggests that disability is not always accepted and those with dyslexia feel that they continue to be stigmatised in various ways.

Student Experiences

The work of Palfreman-Kay (2000) highlights the needs of disabled people in the Further Education environment. This work expressly focuses on disabilities, amongst which dyslexia features in the Access to HE (A to HE) programs hosted by local FE colleges. Palfreman-Kay reports evidence of a need for greater awareness of disabled people in FE and especially dyslexic people's personal needs. Some key areas are highlighted below:

Dyslexic and Non-Dyslexic Student Relationships

There were both positive and negative examples of dyslexic and non-dyslexic relationships being fostered in the FE environment. Palfreman-Kay (1998) recognized the importance of understanding respondents' progress through their FE course as corporate and not individual:

"It was not because I was dyslexic it was because everybody else struggled in some way or another, so everybody was helping each other." (Pg. 4, Palfreman-Kay, 1998, Female Respondent).

This corporate identity could be seen as the mature students on this course were all struggling together to re-start their academic careers; the group contained no 16 year olds who came directly from school. A to HE was seen as:

> "Another chance to do something better with their lives." (Pg. 40, McFadden, 1995).

So there was a chance that the non-dyslexic and dyslexic mature students would share the same goal of achieving success after previously poor educational experience. This supportive attitude can also be seen in the work of Stephenson et al (1989):

> "It gives you like a unison, you'd all get your heads together. If you only sat and listened… you'd learn something." (Pg.35, Male Respondent, Stephenson et al 1989)

Palfreman-Kay (2000) also identified various negative attitudes towards dyslexic people enrolled on FE courses. One respondent saw herself as being identified as a source of humour:

"They would play silly games such as not speaking to me or her today. Or if you are going for a break, I would say do you want a coffee and she would say I am staying and I would bring you one up. I would go down with them and they would look at me and then run out the door." (Pg. 42, Palfreman-Kay and Taylor, 1996, Female Respondent)

This demoralizing situation made the respondent feel bad about herself and her friend and later she questioned the usefulness of remaining in FE.

The existence of dyslexia was called into question by some non-dyslexic FE students, who made the respondents question their learning abilities:

> "She was very patronising; I can't imagine she's dyslexic the way she thinks she is ... it was just too much, makes no difference to me." (Pg. 47, Palfreman-Kay and Taylor, 1996, Female Respondent)

This negativity contributed to the segregation of groups of learners and did nothing to help corporate learning. The question needs to be asked as to why these other students did not accept dyslexia in these respondents? One possibility is that the remedial/SEN classes at school were remembered by many non-disabled people as simply a dumping ground for the

less-able students. In addition children who had attended 'special schools' were not used to being around non-disabled children:

> "I went to a special school for disabled so that I feel it cut me off from society. Because I was mixed in with children that had disabilities I never had the experience with people who didn't have disabilities and it was the same at college." (Pg. 113, Leicester et al 1997)

This experience of segregation, which Leicester (1997) termed a form of 'apartheid', is also reported by Oliver (1996) and Low (1996).

Positive Relationships Between Dyslexic Students

Palfreman-Kay (1998, 2000) identified a number of positive relationships within the FE environment. This respondent was enrolled on the same course as her friend, and identified with her throughout the course:

> "Like Sharon, she stuck by me all the time; we would do work together, study together, she saw me as me." (Pg. 9, Palfreman-Kay, 1998, Female Respondent)

With the recognition that there are friendships to be found within the dyslexic community the respondent was encouraging other people to take the assessment test:

"She even said I am sure I am dyslexic and I said why don't you get a diagnosis." (Pg. 9, Palfreman-Kay, 1998, Female Respondent)

This community of disabled people saw themselves as a separate group and one that Palfreman-Kay (2000) identified as a sub-culture or a deviant group. This effect can also be seen in the work of Becker (1963) who recognizes that deviant groups have their deviance as a common cause:

> "It gives them a sense of common fate.... From a sense of common fate, from having to face the same problems, grows a deviant subculture: a set of perspectives and understandings about what the world is like and how to deal with it." (Pg. 38, Becker, 1963)

This cultural identity amongst the dyslexic respondents could bring rewards in that the unity of community of dyslexic learners became stronger as they supported each other in the FE environment. This identity, or commonality, was often stronger than with non-dyslexic students, as was shown by Palfreman-Kay (2000).

Within these studies, it is seen that dyslexic students are able to experience both positive and negative experience in the FE setting. However, the studies also show that there is a variation in the students' experiences at different colleges, and thus in their support mechanisms.

Palfreman-Kay (2000) emphasized the need for greater disability awareness in the FE system, by encouraging students to recognize the needs of this group of mature learners at their college. This would be further cultivated with a system of role models from past years who would explain their life journey, and by specialist courses for dyslexic mature students, such as A to HE. These might lift psychological barriers and enable students to achieve their full potential

Policy development

As seen in the school system, legislation and official reports have played an important part in extending provision for students with special needs in FE.

Educational Policy 1992

The most notable action taken by the government was the Further and Higher Education Act (1992). This act created new bodies: The Further Education Funding Council and the Higher Educational Funding Council (FEFC and HEFC). The act speaks about the councils' need to address the requirement of students with learning difficulties. The FEFC acknowledges that prior to 1992 the provision for FE students with learning difficulties:

"Varied significantly from college to college and from one local education authority to another, in size, quality, range, and in the commitment and effectiveness." (FEFC, 1996:1)

The FEFC received advice from the Tomlinson Committee who reported in 1996 with a brief to look at:

> "Educational provision for those with learning difficulties … and to say whether the new legal requirements of the Further and Higher Education Act, 1992 were being satisfied." (FEFC, 1996:1)

Policy Target: Inclusive Learning

Tomlinson identified many areas of importance to students with special needs, but the key recommendation was that the FE sector should be open to inclusive learning. This formed the background to proposals designed to enable students with learning disabilities to achieve success within further education and thus increase their potential for qualifications and employment in competition with their non-dyslexic peers.

FEFC Educational Funding Policy 1994

From 1994 the Council made strides to improve social and educational avenues into FE by providing suitable funding strategies which in part provided for:

> "those students who require additional support." (FEFC, 99/05)

This funding aimed to help FE colleges to obtain finance to deliver the appropriate support to groups of students who needed it. Funds were available for counseling, one-to-one tutoring, and computer resources. Each college was given clear guidelines for applying for student funding. In applying the Council recommended:

> "How to build these additional costs into college budgets." (Pg. 3, FEFC, 96/05).

This policy had great success in its first three years with an increase in students who had received additional support, from 75,000 to 116,000. This extra funding was clear proof that institutions were receiving the opportunity to help make their college courses as accessible as possible to students with exceptional needs.

The Council made further advances in supporting students with extra needs with publication of the report 'Provision for Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities (FEFC, 1996). This saw good practice as being a strong leadership who provide an:

> "... 'inclusive' approach to education in which all students are perceived to be equal value, and demand the same level of rigour as they do for any other area of provision. Responsibility for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is shared by the college as a whole." (Pg. 13, FEFC, 1996)

This report viewed the provision of support as being of paramount importance in levelling the playing field for students with disabilities, and asked that all academic and support departments of individual colleges should be aware of the support needed to help dyslexic students. This holistic approach was reinforced by a team of inspectors who evaluated provision for this group of learners.

Educational Policy Disability Discrimination Act 1995

In 1995, the government unveiled the Disability Discrimination Act. The act aimed to assist FE colleges to further attract disabled students into learning. This act made it necessary for the council to report to the Secretary of State regarding its progress throughout the year and its provisions for students with disabilities now and in the future.

This reporting kept the government up to date with the current changes within the FE system, ensuring that the FE system was keeping to its commitment of inclusive provision and operating a policy of transparency. This report also recommended changes to existing policy as different experiences arose. In addition the act also required individual FE colleges to produce an annual statement giving details of its policies of support and its facilities to help disabled students. The government set strict requirements regarding presentation and these documents were published and were used as a means to attract new students into the college.

Progression into HE

In discussing developments in improving the opportunities for disabled people to study within further education, it is crucial to consider whether dyslexic people found this support sufficient to encourage them to proceed into the higher education sector. These developments were solely based in the FE system and contributed enormously to accessing what was commonly perceived as 'A' level education.

The measures, discussed below, seemed well designed to encourage a natural progression to higher education, but it is important to consider how potentially dyslexic students were made aware of a 'friendly' FE system. Riddick (1997) suggests that a large hurdle for potentially dyslexic students had to be that they had experienced a negative learning environment in the school classroom. The FE college needed to have measures in place to reassure potential students that this would not happen again, so that their learning experience could be a positive one. This message could be delivered in two important ways:

Clear Prospectus

First, the FE college had to ensure that their prospectus clearly stipulated that they had a full range of support services in place, both within the course, and outside it. This instantly showed those people who knew they were dyslexic that their condition was recognised and would be taken seriously, which in turn meant that they could start their new academic career successfully.

Dyslexic Encounter

The second route was necessarily less planned, perhaps by meeting a past dyslexic student or member of staff who was aware of the developments to support disabled students. This random dynamic could lead to a potential student realising that they might be dyslexic.

Conclusions

The government's efforts to increase the support and funding to improve the situation for disabled people within FE has been key in increasing the number of students with dyslexia entering this sector. The recognition that there is a need for such support is important as disabled people need to reach the same standards as non-disabled people. If dyslexic students have a supportive and successful experience of the FE system, then they are likely to feel motivated to move into the Higher Education field, with the understanding that they will be supported in degree level education.

Specialist Courses Providing Help to Dyslexic Students

In looking at the ways in which dyslexic adults progress into HE it is important to understand some of the 'lead in' courses that can assist students to achieve entry to a degree course. These courses are a well known way of fast-tracking non-traditional learner groups, including mature students, into a degree programme; but they have been criticised for being too rushed and leaving dyslexic learners behind, often causing them to quit the course (Palfreman-Kay, 2000). To fully understand the nature of these pre-degree courses, it is important to give a brief overview of their history and development.

The literature on A to HE and F to HE courses identifies a broad range of issues. Most of these issues focus on these courses' history and whether they are successful in progressing non-traditional learners into HE.

History and Development

The Further Education Unit commissioned Murray (1987) to investigate the history of the A to HE course. He concluded that the first course was in 1978 under the auspices of the Department of Education and Science DES. A selected number of LEAs were encouraged to open A to HE courses with the intention that these should be based at local FE colleges. The courses were designed to attract people from backgrounds that would ordinarily not consider attending a FE college, and more specifically those people who had received a poor experience of compulsory education, such as the disabled and minority ethnic groups.

Murray's (1987) findings were reinforced by the work of Kearney et. al (1990) and Kirton (1999) when they claimed that A to HE and F to HE placed special emphasis on the education of ethnic minority adults. Murray (1987) thus argued that A to HE gave non-traditional learners a second chance to gain an education and progress on to HE.

Past Experience Recognised

FE colleges were identified as places for adult learners to re-enter education, as they are not schools and thus the stigma of school is not necessarily attached to the social surroundings.

He went on to say that it was important for institutions to recognise that previous educational experiences could well have a negative impact on the learner, and thus it was imperative that institutions recognised this impact as a barrier, and that lecturers should develop strategies to help these learners to achieve their potential and come to terms with past negative experiences in education.

Murray identified the curriculum as a major issue, arguing that learners would be unhappy with a curriculum in which the lecturers ignored or, worse, patronised life experience. This enabled Murray (1987) to comment that students from a disadvantaged background still faced obstacles, especially arising from previous educational difficulties. Yet he added that once the course was completed, the students made very impressive HE students, and the pre-degree courses were praised for their success in preparing students for HE.

Extra Help

In a section on: Responsiveness of Programmes to Needs of Target Group, Benn et.al (1995) placed their findings under four sub headings:

1. Curriculum and Syllabus

2. Practical Support

3. Selection Criteria

4. Social Purpose

Issues such as the course's ability to reflect the needs of the target group were identified as important to the students taking the course. Other important issues were that respondents recognised that they received help through timetabling and finance. Having said this, there was very little evidence of suitable help for ethnic minorities, such as language support. Another important issue was that the targeting within the courses was felt to be contradictory. With the exception of age as a selection criteria, there was almost no positive discrimination for non-traditional groups.

Quality Assurance

Looking at the final heading: *Results from the survey: Authorised Validating Agencies*, the data was, again, put under 3 categories looking at the requirements of targets in programmes, target policies and authorised validating agencies (AVA) and their social purpose

Bearing in mind that AVAs aimed to provide a framework for national recognition for A to HE courses, the AVA needed to be fair in their implementation of their work, acting not only as an award body for courses, but monitoring quality as a quality control agency.

Local arrangements gave AVAs considerable freedom in changing the A to HE syllabus and output. From their research Benn et al (1995) showed that 77% of AVAs required their courses to have a policy that targeted specific groups. They also found that 62% of AVAs saw courses as changing the position of various social groups and 20% saw that courses not only would change students' position in society, but enhance the prospects of individuals attending them.

This research noted that these courses had an important academic and, more specifically, social function by making a commitment to targeting certain key groups. Yet, it also noted that selection criteria for these courses often placed a great emphasis on each individual's motivation to drive themselves forward to achieve academic success. This individuality of achievement resulted in some colleges 'mainstreaming' the course without placing any special emphasis on non-traditional learners and their needs. This view was supported by Connelly et al (1999) who reported a continued lack of disabled and ethnic minority groups on general/pre-degree courses and called for this to receive attention.

Specific Courses for Dyslexic People

Whilst looking at the background to the A to HE and F to HE, it is important to consider whether the courses did genuinely offer dyslexic students the opportunity to progress to HE and gain an HE qualification. From the origins of the courses it is apparent that they did not focus on disabled/dyslexic people. This meant that the opportunities of HE success were not always available to dyslexic people via a dedicated course. This background of educational opportunity for minority education links directly to the next consideration: Why do A to HE and F to HE now see disabled people, which including dyslexic people, as a necessary part of the non-traditional minority group of people to encourage into HE?

Acts and Reports

Turning back to policy, the 1992 Education Act and the Tomlinson Report (Learning Difficulties and Disabilities Subcommittee. FEFC, 1995) sought to improve the opportunities for disabled people to enter FE and HE. The 1995 Disability Act, which strove to make all aspects of life open to those who were seen as impaired in any way, emphasised their overall rights to gain the same level of education as non-disabled people.

Changing Attitude

Prompted by the 1995 Act, changes in attitude led colleges to take note of this group of potential learners, tailoring their facilities, both physical and educational, to the disabled 'market'. This change suggests that before these developments, very little consideration was given to the needs of disabled people by A to HE and F to HE courses. Benn et al (1995) agrees broadly with this view, citing evidence that colleges were slowly identifying disabled people as target learners. These findings were also corroborated by Palfreman-Kay (1998, 2000) when he found that FE colleges were slow in their acceptance that disabled students needed additional support.

Conclusions

According to Palfreman-Kay (2000) there was a greater chance of success if a dyslexic student had located a course with dedicated staff who were able to support the needs of the student and thus increase the chance of progression to HE education. Colleges that supported dyslexic students invariably had special provision for the support of disabled students and were well versed in helpful approaches to assist and encourage students. This

led students to feel that they were in an environment that was able to provide academic success, and most importantly gave them the feeling of self-confidence that had often been missing for them. It was important for colleges to provide immediate and wide-ranging support throughout the period of study, which was often one academic year, and for the student to receive the necessary support.

On the other hand, a dyslexic student who was at an institution that was not dyslexia aware, was immediately disadvantaged and would have to wait for support to be brought into the college. This delay could often lead to dyslexic students being left behind within the classroom and having to catch up on their work at a later point. This later point was often too late as the pace of F to HE and A to HE courses was so fast. Many students simply decided to quit, as there was so much catching-up to do. This could have very serious implications for the dyslexic person as they could view the whole experience as a failure and see themselves as unable to ever progress to HE and gain the suitable qualification that could well change their lives.

Discussion

More support is currently available to students with disabilities in FE than previously provided by the FEFC. The Funding Council's approach is not to provide money directly to each student through a 'statement' as in schools, but to encourage individual Colleges to build a disability fund into their budget. This is intended to raise awareness of the whole of the college staff that disability is mainstream, and part of the everyday budget of the institution.

Palfreman-Kay (2000) argued that, there has been a generally positive effect by opening the FE sector to the disabled community. He noted that there was a greater chance of success if the student was aware of their dyslexia before they attended college, as the support staff were in a better position to offer immediate support; and because they had evidently enquired about their dyslexia, they were aware of what they needed to help them succeed. The opposite scenario shows a person who was unaware of their disability, but who wished to return to college to try and improve their educational standards and career prospects. Once at college, they started to undertake academic work, and discovered that they had dyslexia. This new discovery could have two important consequences according to Palfreman-Kay (2000). First: it was often quite confusing and caused the students a period of upset, if not anger, which could impinge on their academic development. Second: If the college they were attending did not have the support and experience needed to assist dyslexic students, it was possible that the students would experience failure, through no fault of their own. Clearly, if students were able to choose a college that was in a position to support them through their course, they would stand a better chance of achieving academic success.

Higher Education

Student Experiences

Research on Higher Education and mature students' return to education, has recently been augmented by Farmer, Riddick and Sterling (1999) and most recently Pollak (2003). These researchers interviewed a number of respondents to gain specific information about their

views on HE at whatever stage they were in the academe, be it new undergraduates, or postgraduates.

Revealing examples from the research highlight specific areas of interest to this study.

Dyslexia and Relationship in HE

Some respondents in Farmer et al (1999) identified their interpersonal relationships as being poor when they entered the HE environment. These respondents spoke about aspects of their life which had contributed towards their self-perception and how they felt they brought this into HE with them:

> "I was absolutely crushed and really upset, I just didn't want to go back and see this particular person, [teacher] now I just cringe if I see him." (Pg. 58, Riddick et al, 1997).

and:

> "The dyslexic problem as I have seen it is not just restricted to... work. It tends to affect your whole life. It affects areas that other people mightn't think about. It affects relationships and forming relationships, and the difficulty in forming relationships can be a problem. [It] might ruin someone's entire life, not just, as it's seen, as the difficulty in doing academic work." (Pg.75, Riddick et al, 1997).

These frustrations suggest that some dyslexic people in HE have a sense of overwhelming despondency that makes them feel like second class students who cannot achieve in the same manner as their non-dyslexic counterparts. They do not see that there are barriers in the way of their education. Relating this directly to studying in HE, some of these thoughts were generated from respondents who entered HE as mature students. They identified education as the source of their personal problems as a child and felt that any re-engagement could reinforce their lack of self-esteem.

Openness about Dyslexia

Various respondents identified their position as a dyslexic student in HE as being one that *could* help them or one that *would* hinder them. The decision to 'come out' about their dyslexia was one that all of the respondents had to deal with and each respondent was different:

> "I do tell other students that I'm dyslexic, I don't know why, maybe because I'm an attention seeker!" (Pg. 124, Riddick et al, 1997)

and:

> "A lot of people kind of know, but it doesn't worry me. I think if I had at school I would have been very cagey about telling people, now I just couldn't care less what

other people think. If they think I'm stupid, or if they are being funny about it, then it's their hard luck." (Pg. 56, Riddick et al, 1997)

Some respondents felt that they really should not tell anyone about their dyslexia, or if they did tell someone, only a very close friend indeed:

"No, [I've told] just my girlfriend" (Pg. 40, Riddick et al, 1997)

But some students were open about "using" their dyslexia:

"What a good con to get a computer, wangled in next year's grant', because I used dyslexia as a way to getting part of next year's grant'... Just a big con really. Everyone takes it as a bit of a joke. I had to push like mad to get the extra half hour [examination time]. They weren't going to give it to me." (Pg. 108, Riddick et al, 1997)

Being Cautious

Some respondent felt they could only tell people about their dyslexia if they could explain their situation:

"Only very recently, a flatmate... it just came out and I decided to say something. [Flatmate said:] 'You know there are so many dyslexic people doing Engineering and

I hate getting in a group with them because they can't write.' And I'm just sitting there…" (Pg. 140, Riddick et al, 1997)

and:

"In a way I do, but I do it in a humorous way. I don't believe now that you should tell everybody, I believe now that you should only tell somebody if they need to know it." (Pg. 72, Riddick et al, 1997)

These different responses to dyslexia suggest that there are many aspects of the HE experience that impinge on the students, and their feeling of openness in 'coming clean' about their learning difficulty. For some, dyslexia could be almost a dirty word, with negativity attached to it, simply providing an excuse, not just for academic work, but for the acquisition of money. Others felt that it was not anyone else's business to know about their private dealings. But for some respondents there was a sense that their dyslexia was nothing to hide. In fact it could have been important for other people to know about their educational problem, and to understand how to react to it. This turned out to be an important issue in the present research.

Pre-HE Effects on HE Learning

A small number of respondents spoke about their pre-university experiences impinging on their HE experience. These make interesting reading as they were almost entirely negative, and at best said with casual ambivalence:

"The experiences I had at school were so dramatic, because when I went to school dyslexia was not even heard of. If it was I certainly never heard of it, and the teachers punished me, not just giving lines and keeping me in [school], but physically punishing for mistakes that I did not understand. I simply couldn't see them and I knew that I was different from other children, but I got more and more smacked and more and more punished and humiliated, so that I actually withdrew into myself and become so ashamed that by the age of 8 I'd withdrawn so much that I was frightened of other people finding out that I had an English problem, and I really went into a world of my own. I didn't have friends, I was too ashamed, and that stayed with me until a few years ago, and still it can have an effect unless I particularly bond with somebody straight away and get on with them and I'm open and honest with them, then it's all right; but with some people you cannot gel with straight away you do stand back a little bit and people then think that you're reserved and shy, but you're not, you observe and assess people before you ever tell anybody." (Pg. 87, Riddick et al, 1997)

This student remembered junior school as being the route to her subsequent academic problems:

"Junior school was very difficult; I was being bullied. I was always in the bottom group; I could understand what was going on, but I couldn't get it down on paper. One of my lasting memories of junior school is that I produced a piece of work which looked fine to me and after the lunch break the teacher came back to the class and said: 'Everyone's done a wonderful bit of work except for one person and that person is [name] and I want him to come out and hold up his book so the rest of the class can see it'. So I dragged myself up and again this feeling of being so small, so stupid, I held up my work, I didn't know what was wrong with it and the whole class gasped... That's what haunts me at university." (Pg.35, Riddick et al, 1997)

and:

"If it was down to school I would never have come [to university]. Basically, it was so awful I left at 16. I just got out because I hated it so much. It was just so bad." (Pg.47, Riddick et al, 1997)

These respondents showed that there may still be a background of difficulties that could be brought to the HE sector, even many years after their school days. My study investigates this baggage of oppressive school experiences but then seeks to show how the educational system itself can help students to overcome these negative experiences by putting them into a context of success and achievement.

Policy development

Turning to policy, the 1990 Education Act introduced important changes in HE by changing aspects of the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). The Act enabled students with disabilities to apply for a raft of support facilities and funds (Hurst, 1998). This allowance aimed to help disabled people within education in a way never seen before, and can be viewed as a policy that took account of the social model of disability in its formation by placing the students at the centre of their own educational experience. It placed disabled people in a stronger position to read for degrees on an equal footing as their non-disabled academic peers by providing appropriate forms of support. This funding was renewed regularly and led to other developments, mainly focusing on extra funds paid directly to the universities, to pay for support for their registered disabled undergraduates. This money was further increased in 2001, enabling many universities to fund specific staff appointments to deliver essential academic support.

The HEFCE (1995) published a guide for good practice. This aimed to further help students with disabilities. The report was a response to the 1995 disability and Discrimination Act which led the Funding Council to ask HE institutions to produce an annual statement concerning their disability support facilities. As with the statement required for the FE system, the report detailed 22 recommendations for the content of an annual statement, covering everything from its presentation to its key points.

The statement was a document that told disabled students what to expect in each University. The statement was helpful as it gave disabled students a choice of institution, potentially

enabling them to decide whether one university was better suited to their needs than another. The statement was also useful for the individual institution, as each institution could compare and contrast its own facilities with other institutions, and thus potentially provide better service to its disabled undergraduates.

Policy: Dearing Report 1997

The Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry Into Higher Education, 1997) was hailed as a significant milestone in educational policy. It affected the HE sector in many ways, having a special remit to consider HE's:

> "... teaching and research, the shape, size, and structure of the system, the wider contribution of higher education to national life." (Pg. 163, Hurst, 1998)

To take into account the needs of disabled people within HE, in early 1997 Dearing asked SKILL to report on the then situation in HE and on any measures needed to combat problems that had arisen. This evidence was taken one step further when a group from SKILL was asked to report directly to the Dearing committee, and spoke about the:

> "...factors for which the sector itself could be held responsible (for example, staff attitudes and prejudices, and lack of appropriate support systems) and those outside its control (for example, the poor education provided in some special schools/colleges and its impact on qualifications prior to entry, and the low expectations of some teachers, parents and students)." (Pg. 68, Hurst, 1999)

This report was important as it sought to identify the obstacles in the system and change them. The broader aim was to build on positive developments, which would make the HE system more open to disabled students.

Policy: Minimum Support Levels 1999

Guidance on base-line provision for disabled students in HE institutions (HEFCE, 1999) was another step in improving the situation for disabled students in HE. This report, funded by the Funding Council for England and Wales, noted a minimum level of support that each institution should adhere to. It outlined such things as the provision for individual needs, procedures, support workers and placing disabled students on an equal footing with their non-disabled peers.

This comprehensive list of measures provided a minimum level of provision for students with disabilities, enabling the Funding Council to give guidance to institutions on how to develop an inclusive programme of support for students. This provision had the effect of making disabled support programmes part of a university wide approach to disability.

Other Recommendations

Dearing also reported on the remit of covering Widening Participation in Higher Education by students in lower socio-economic groups and students with disabilities. The fourth section notes that there was little information concerning the overall number of disabled students in HE. The report also looked at the work of SKILL (Para. 4.7) and DSA funding

for extra equipment (Para. 4.14-4.16) and section five considered issues regarding the normalisation of disability and the sensitivity of disability (Para. 5.1). According to Hurst (1999), this section of the report was influenced by the social model of disability and its application to the HE system.

Policy: SENDA 2001

The 1995 DDA included aspects of education within its remit. This included policy which meant that educational and training bodies were not to discriminate against disabled people. This was formalized in the Special Needs and Disability Act (2001) which was implemented in September 2002.

This Act incorporated part 4 of the DDA and was designed to take into account all reasonable adjustments that could be made by providing extra auxiliary aids or services, such as recording machines, or amanuensis. These provisions were to be in place by September 2003, and larger physical changes, such as building work, was to be completed by Septembers 2005.

The Act not only covered HE, but looked at all aspects of learning, with the exception of voluntary groups and private providers of education.

The Act recognized discrimination within education and thus laid down legislation to combat it with policy on enrolment, student services and any exclusion measures. It was the responsibility for each institution to check that no disabled person was treated any 'less favorably' than a non-disabled student. If there was any disadvantage within an institution, steps must be taken to alleviate the disadvantage with measures such as:

1. changing admissions, administrative and examination procedures
2. changing course content, including work placements

3. changing physical features and premises
4. changing teaching arrangements
5. providing additional teaching
6. providing communication and support services
7. offering information in alternative formats
8. training staff

These changes were, in part, designed to make learning more attractive to those who had not previously thought they could enter education, and gave HEIs a University-wide policy to encompass disability.

Policy: The Disability Discrimination Act 2005

Although the respondents in this study were not affected by this Act, it is still important to realize its meaning in the UK. The Act built on the 1995 DDA and SENDA's commitment to equality for disabled people, making it more concrete within society.

The Act realized the wishes of many pressure groups, claiming that the 1995 law was not clear enough concerning wider issues within society, such as housing, the police and transportation. The Act clearly stated the role of the disabled person as equal to that of a non-disabled person, and that all 'providers' of services needed to take special care to include the disabled population in issues such as design and building, education and transport.

The Act recognized a public sector duty, meaning that LEAs and HEIs would need to halt any unlawful harassment and discrimination of disabled people. In addition, they would need to promote 'positive attitudes' with their disabled staff and students, and give 'equality of opportunity' to the disabled people in their workplace.

Various parts of the act will not come into place until December 2006. It will be interesting to see how these changes affect the dyslexic community with HE, especially in the area of positive reinforcement.

Reasons and Problems in returning to Education

It is important to see what other research has been carried out in recent years to highlight the student experience for adults in general and to compare this to the experiences of dyslexic adults.

Limited Research

Brock (1990) criticised the lack of literature focusing on disability within the mature student's environment. This lack of pre-1990 research was changed with the work of Findlay (1992) who explored the equal opportunities issues surrounding disabled people in education. Another important study was by Parker (1996) who highlighted the main points of the HEFCE initiative to improve the situation for disabled people.

Brock (1990) gave some explanations as to why there had been so little discussion of disability, prior to the 1990s. She argued that institutions had not considered disabled people as anything other than traditional learners, but cited black adults, or adult women learners as non-traditional groups.

Discrimination

Brock suggests that job-related market forces were important in the return to education.

Groups, such as black people or middle-aged learners could suffer as much discrimination as

the disabled. The difference between various groups was that they suffered dissimilar types of discrimination. The pre-HE courses were more geared towards benefiting target groups of women and black students, but were not so useful for disabled learners. (Palfreman-Kay, 2000)

Another possible reason for discrimination against people with disabilities was that non-traditional groups, like ethnic minorities, have been at the forefront of the mature student debate because they have been more vocal in promoting their needs. This promotion has given them the political edge over disabled learners and made their minority needs a priority within the educational field. Brock (1990) concluded his research by questioning how long it would take colleges to realise this educational discrepancy.

Shared Histories

Parziarka (1987) looked at the relationships between the mature people studying on one course. He saw that some mature students' shared life experiences were also shared educational experiences. This feeling of unity helped students to bond with each other and gave them a feeling of mutual support; they felt they could share problems on their course, work through them together and overcome them. Parziraka (1987) stated that some institutions had a strong resolve to assist students towards academic success, who had failed in the past both in life and in education. This unity empowered the individuals to success, and made them realise their fuller potential as each adult learner reinforced the other's educational journey.

Career Improvements

A major reason for mature students returning to education was that they were looking to improve their career opportunities. Wisker et al (1990) found this to be the case as did Neville (1994) when he found that 44% of mature students made statements such as to help improve his career and:

> "... get a better job in the future". (Pg. 298, Neville, 1994)

A Need to Study

Another reason for return to education was the influence of friends and family who felt that the potential student had an aptitude for study. Students commented that support from friends and family was extremely important. Yet research shows that men found they became isolated from their families during their courses in a way that women did not. Not all families were happy about their relative returning to education, yet even with that negativity, the students were pleased that they had undertaken their course. Neville (1994) concluded that most of the students were from semi-skilled or unskilled backgrounds and were highly motivated to move into a professional field.

Middle Class v. Working Class

An important piece of work, looking at the attitudes of mature students is by Williams et al. (1988). They explored why mainly middle class students were enrolled on a specific course, and not working class people. This observation is important as much mature student research has assumed that they come mainly from unskilled and semi-skilled backgrounds.

The assumption is that they are from working class backgrounds; Williams et al. investigated the class origins of the students and found this assumption not to be the case. In this study it was found that many of the students finished their education at 16 or younger, and had gone into low paid work as they lacked paper qualifications. The main reason for finishing school at 16 years old was that they had had negative and unhelpful experiences throughout their period in compulsory education.

Changes in Pre-Degree Courses

The experience of undertaking a one year course was investigated in Karkalas et al. (1995). They reviewed what education had given the students and how it had informed and empowered them as they progressed on to a degree. The respondents stated that they had a marked increase in confidence in their ability to learn, and had gained from the intellectual aspect of their studies. Not only was the academic side of the course deemed beneficial, but the social factors were even more important. Respondents spoke about a general social well-being with the creation of new friends and self-confidence in daily activities. Interestingly more men felt a greater confidence in their learning capability than women.

These changes, perceived by students as a result of their course of included:

1. Being confident in expressing own views
2. Presenting reasoned arguments in speech and writing
3. Being analytical
4. Participating in group discussion, and
5. Being excited by intellectual enquiry

Greater general knowledge and a willingness to present rounded arguments in discussions were important factors cited by students, as well as an enthusiasm for intellectual analysis. This change of attitude impacted upon the relationship with the students' partners and families. In married relationships the students noticed distinct strains in their partner's abilities to cope with their changing attitudes; most strain was noted between female students and their non-student husbands. Other strains were noted in younger, unmarried students. These students were being coerced at home to the extent that their families were abusing them in a physical as well as verbal way. Further evidence of this attitude comes from the work of Webb et al (1994). She found that parents were extremely unsupportive of their children's re-education and some were actively trying to encourage them to prematurely end their course.

In conclusion Karkalas et al (1995) noted that the study exposed some important points: the students acquired confidence, stimulation, ability to learn, growth and self-reflection. Not only this, but the course had been extremely useful as a learning tool for academic stimulation and development of pre-HE education.

School as Basis of Educational Failure

McFadden (1995) investigated the impact of previous education on mature students' aspirations for higher education, and their hope that it would give them a second chance to improve their life careers. McFadden (1995) noted that each respondent's view of education had been formed by the experience of compulsory education. The respondents spoke

about their negative experiences throughout their school years, not only academic work, but in their relationships with teachers and other pupils, even as far back as junior school when they realised that they were not achieving at the same level as their counterparts. These negative experiences at school made them feel that they would never return to education as they felt that they would repeat the same negative encounters. Having said that, although students were worried that they would experience the same negativity, a small number of them did seem to return to education, mainly to try and improve their life opportunities. Some students felt that they were in dead end jobs and saw an education as an opportunity to step out of the working world for a time and find a way out of their personal rut. McFadden (1995) also found that students cited education as a chance to make up for missed opportunities in the past, for example laziness at school or parents making them start in the workplace at the age of 16. This was felt by some students as a failure to complete their ambitions in life, and they felt that they had not finished their education yet.

Working v. Middle Class

Social class was an interesting aspect of McFadden's work as his students spoke about their fears of being caught between working class institutionalisation and middle class aspirations. This problem was aggravated by the students' concern that they would not meet university standards, and fail to fit in once they had matriculated in HE. This fear of failure could be seen, not only socially, but at an academic level. The success in completing a pre-degree course and the possibility of failing a degree level course was felt to be of great social concern. McFadden (1995) concluded that negative school education for mature students informed their re-entry into education. This self-identification is not normally taken into account by universities. McFadden stated that it was very important for universities to take

account of previous poor schooling and the emotional baggage that came as a consequence of it. If these issues were addressed there might be a higher chance of students achieving academic success.

Confidence and "Hurriedness"

Confidence, for mature students, was often lacking due to their earlier schooling according to Stephenson et al. (1989). They saw the return to education as an opportunity to gain a better job, therefore obtain future security, or that their current job encouraged them to return to education, or they returned to education because of wanting to contribute to children's education, or finally they returned to education because of a specific experience.

The study revealed a number of states of mind that relate to confidence in studying. The key factor for the mature student was that they needed a sense of confidence if they were to get the best out of their time at university. Having said this, confidence was an active state and the feeling needed to be developed whilst in the educational surroundings. Success would be indicated and measured by viva presentations as well as the more traditional examinations and high standard coursework. Stephenson concluded with the caution that often mature students felt that they should be in a hurry to finish their work, as they were late into education. The worry was that the students would rush through their courses and not realise what else the university environment could give them.

Discussion

From the literature on mature students within the HE sector, it is clear that although there is an increasing reference to disability, many dyslexic people may still find it difficult to access the HE environment. This may suggest that there is the marginalisation of disabled people within the sector that Brock (1990) spoke of. The criticism she made should have been met by the 1992 Education Act, as implemented by HEFC. However, it is not clear how successful this has been. If students with a disability do indeed still feel marginalised, how can the system be made to work better and, more specifically to this study, are there other factors that have not been considered in the implementation of policy to ensure that dyslexic students get the most out of their education? Is it possible that dyslexic mature students may find that staff are unaware of their difficulties, or that universities are not able in practice to help them, even though they claim to do so? Problems for universities could be that they do not have enough staff, or that they have very little experience of how to deal with dyslexia. Another reason could be that courses could be devised in such as way that there is little room to help dyslexic people reach their goals. Bearing this in mind, and the developments to extend access for disabled people, the experiences of many dyslexic students are shaped by how a university interprets its commitment to encourage disabled people into the university environment.

Finances

In all of this, it is important to note that the HE sector is becoming more and more open to disabled people; it is important to constantly keep asking if there are other factors that might encourage or discourage dyslexic students to enter HE. An area that respondents were reticent to talk about within the research, is finance. As grants are no longer available to

students and finances were identified as an important aspect by McFadden (1995) it is likely to play an increasing role. Naturally, a lack of funds will influence a person if they are wondering whether to enter HE, and they will not enter if they feel they cannot complete the course due to their money running out. A dyslexic student may have the ability to move into HE to get a degree, but if they don't have the financial means to do this, they are at a great disadvantage.

Is Education Oppressive to Dyslexic People?

The literature on students' experiences at school, FE and HE, suggests that pupils/students were not able to achieve at the same academic level as their peers. This imbalance creates a culture that sees disability as a problem, and not part of the normal educational environment.

When pupils/students with dyslexia cannot gain the same outcomes as non-dyslexic learners, they can feel oppressed and may eventually become marginalised within their community. They stand out as being different to non-dyslexic learners because of a disability that is not of their making.

Oppression from Teachers

If effective support systems are in place, pupils with dyslexia will be identified and assisted to compete on the same academic playing field as their peers. Yet, as the literature shows, pupils may still progress through the compulsory education system without being identified as needing help. This means that pupils struggle their way through education, getting left

behind and feeling that they could never achieve success in the academic world. This struggle may be reduced if the teaching staff are disability aware, and have an active interest in helping this group of learners. Yet, the literature suggests that a number of children are slipping through the system and, instead of being assisted, feel marginalised and thus oppressed. This oppression is not only felt in the learning environment, but also in social interactions.

Oppression from Peers

Further to the institutionalised oppression felt by some dyslexic pupils at school, there is a secondary oppression that may be reinforced by non-dyslexic children. The literature suggests that the teachers' lack of *apparent* understanding towards the difficulties of the dyslexic child means that the dyslexic child may feel oppression from peers who hear the teachers refer to the dyslexic child as 'stupid' or thick'. This permits other children to act negatively towards dyslexic children, thus further marginalising them and subjecting them to a negative experience of the educational system, possibly creating further oppression in the process.

Oppression from Parents/ home

The literature highlights examples of parents being unaware of their child's educational difficulties, and the negative way in which they accepted that their child had educational problems. This was reinforced by the view that parents simply accepted the teacher's opinions of their child, saying they were educationally lacking in ability. This action helped

place barriers between the child and the parent and fostered a feeling of oppression that was founded in the educational setting, thus making the child feel that there was no safe place for them to learn, as teachers and parents seemed to be hostile to difficulties they encountered.

The dyslexic child may also feel oppression at home in other ways, for example, in completing homework. Without effective support networks in place, and with parents who are not aware of dyslexia, the task of self-guided homework becomes extremely difficult, exposing reading and writing difficulties, and an inability to complete good academic work. This can lead to the pupil feeling that they cannot perform academically under any conditions, and creates a barrier between them and their academic work. As stated above, this reinforces the feeling that there is nowhere safe to experience positive education.

Oppressions from self-perception

The feeling that academic work is beyond the reach of the unsupported dyslexic pupil, both at school and at home has a negative effect on the pupils themselves. This negativity leads to a sense that academic work is beyond their capability. Because academic work is so central to the life of a child, this suggests to the child that they cannot achieve in other aspects of their life and thus places barriers in their way of achieving other non-academic pursuits, such as artistic and social activities.

Oppression from teaching environment

The literature suggests that the learning environment can also be perceived as oppressive by the dyslexic pupil. Chalkboards are a prime example, as the pupils needs to be able to see the handwritten work on the board. The literature shows that there are times when pupils simply cannot write down everything from the board, and their slow writing speed causes them to fall behind. This falling behind could be caused by their dyslexia, not simply by being academically slow. This causes the pupil to feel that they will never achieve the same as their peers, thus placing a further social as well as academic barrier in their educational progression (Riddick, 1996).

In the HE research oppressive barriers were still in place which respondents perceived as familiar. This familiarity came from a realisation that post-school education resonated with school experiences.

Oppression from Lecturers

Like the school experience the literature suggests examples of lecturers displaying little knowledge of dyslexia and its effects. This places students at a disadvantage to their peers as they are seen to be academically unable, and stand a chance of being left behind even though they had come back into the educational environment from a troubled school past. This could lead some students to feel that they were wrong to return to education as their negative school experiences would only be repeated.

Oppression from Non-dyslexic Students

Examples of conflict between supported dyslexic and non-dyslexic students suggest that there is suspicion of dyslexia and it effects (Palfreman-Kay, 2000). These suspicions create barriers in the educational setting and can make dyslexic students feel oppressed in the learning environment. If dyslexic students cannot form relationships in the educational setting, they may feel unable to perform appropriately in the working world, nor to develop working relationships in an environment that requires academic ability.

Conclusion

These examples of perceived barriers and oppressive settings suggest that the school and post-school environments carry an element of difficulty both for the aware and the non-aware dyslexic person. These barriers require investigating to expose further difficulties, and to explore whether the HE setting could foster a less oppressive setting, to attract dyslexic people, from all backgrounds, back into education without fearing that they will experience the same negativity as earlier in life. By building on this previous work my research methodology will aim to assist in exposing details of oppression experienced by dyslexic students entering the HE environment, and to site areas of empowerment that the same group experience. It will consider ways to improve the understanding of other dyslexic people's experience in their educational situation, and thereby seek to improve the opportunities for dyslexic people returning to education.

Chapter 3: Literature Review: 2 Theoretical Perspectives

Dyslexia as a form of disability

This study investigates the feeling of oppression that may come from being a student with dyslexia within the higher education environment. In order to achieve this, I first need to identify why dyslexia constitutes a form of disability in the educational setting, and beyond in the wider world, and in addition why people with dyslexia enter education as mature students.

Education as Opportunity

A fundamental part of society is the sharing of information. This is mainly based around speech, but literacy and numeracy are equally important, especially in the computer based learning of the modern world. Dyslexic people may not have the skills to achieve the qualifications required by employers, and thus they are not able to achieve their potential employment goals, and have to settle for something beneath their true abilities. This can lead to a sense of un-fulfilment and frustration as they feel held back (Sterling, 1997).

Dyslexia and Literacy

Literacy was shown to be a necessary career pre-requisite in Victorian England, when the term 'dyslexia' was first used by Berlin (1872). He was describing a bright boy who did not seem able to write as a boy of his age should, yet was able to do almost every other task perfectly well. His observation gave a casual overview of a dyslexic boy many years ago, but

to find a modern definition that provides a basis for understanding the syndrome and a building block for further study, I have turned to the Dyslexia Institutes' definition that Specific Learning Difficulties can be described as:

> "Organising or learning deficiencies which restrict the students' competencies in information processing, in motor skills and working memory, so causing limitations in some or all of the skills of speech, reading, spelling, writing, essay writing, numeracy and behaviour." (Pg.1, Dyslexia Institute, 1998)

This quote shows a deficit/medical model of the broad learning experiences of dyslexic people. It is broad enough to avoid defining the specific nature of the condition, yet it has provided a basis for much research in the field of dyslexia (Mortimore, 2004). The Dyslexia Institute is one of the many organisations that exists to help and support dyslexic people. Other organisations, such as the International Dyslexia Association (1994) and the British Dyslexia Association (1995), see dyslexia in much the same way as the DI and their interpretations of dyslexia echo this DI definition.

If a person with dyslexia is to succeed in the increasingly information oriented working world they need good, clear reading, writing and understanding skills that engage the person with the information being presented. If that person cannot read correctly, they find themselves marginalised by an inability to understand information correctly and quickly, with a risk that they could be ridiculed as being unable to perform numerous tasks as an employee. This situation might make it difficult for the dyslexic person to find employment, or they might be unable to seek promotion. Thus they would be both financially restricted and

could feel a sense of frustration as they see themselves unable to achieve their full potential. This scenario leads to a feeling of disabling oppression within the working world with very little chance of any escape.

As described above, one potential route to better employment is through a return to formal education. This could give people with dyslexia a qualification that would help them to apply for jobs for which they would not have been eligible before their re-entry into education.

Further and Higher education are a requirement for many jobs in the working environment, but achieving success means a tough academic journey for the dyslexic person. Academic work is made up of the very things that dyslexic people find difficult – reading and writing. Thus the educational setting is disabling to the dyslexic person. This is why universities and colleges are taboo places for some dyslexic people; they feel at a disadvantage to the non-dyslexic people around them, and thus they feel disabled by their dyslexia.

Medical and individual models of disability.

Different Models of Disability

When undertaking research it is necessary to locate a model that assists the research process. In this case there are four major models of disability which are commonly used in explaining the situation of disabled people within society. These models help make sense of the situation for disabled people, but within this study the medical and individual models can be

seen as inadequate within the educational setting. To help show this, all four models are critiqued below:

1. Medical Model of Disability
2. Individual Model of Disability
3. Social Model of Disability
4. Social Model of Impairment

The medical model of disability sees disability as a medical entity. The individual model of disability looks to the rehabilitation of the disabled person in society. The social model of disability sees disability as being created by society's inability to take into account the everyday needs of disabled people. The social model of impairment looks at the experience of impairment from the aspect of the disabled person. By reviewing these models and through exploration, I aim to define disability within the context of this study.

The Medical Model of Disability (MMD)

The MMD is an understanding of disability that is most widely used in the western world today. The model (Crow, 1996) sees disability set in a clinical framework that looks only at the individual body. It sees the disability as a root cause of any disadvantages.

If one sees disability in the light of a clinical understanding, one assumes that disability is the responsibility of the medical services and thus it is their place to find a restoration of health based in a medical setting. Begum (1996) claims that doctors felt that they were able to

provide the necessary medical treatments to help disabled people live within the able-bodied community thus giving them a 'normal' life.

This level of support is important in the lives of disabled people. Yet, while accepting the need for medical investigation and/or treatment, the model can be criticised for placing emphasis on the medical professionals who, in effect, control the lives of the disabled person. This control is clearly recognised within the disabled community as shown by this respondent of Begum's who felt doctors had complete control over her life by controlling her ability to:

> "... have alcoholic drinks and give a full medical for a second mortgage...She has to pay for these services. She did not design the system and would like it to be different." (Pg.164, Begum, 1996)

Within the medical field, staff provide medical help which enables disabled people to live within the non-disabled community, thus assisting them to lead a 'normal' life. Yet this *help* can be seen as distinctly unhelpful as the decision of the doctor to prescribe the medical needs for the disabled person often impinges on their social environment. This control, in effect, is not just medically orientated but holistically experienced by the disabled person, and can easily convey an impression that the medical staff know how their disabled patients should best live their lives, leaving the disabled person at the mercy of the very person who is to help them. This problem has been identified by the disabled community and has caused much criticism of the MMD.

The Medical Model and Dyslexia

Snowling (1987) and Thomas (1990) have discussed dyslexia in the of the MMD. They view dyslexia as predominantly a medical issue, focusing their work on discovering what constitutional characteristics make dyslexic people 'dyslexic'. This is also supported by the early work of Hinshelwood (1917). This medical understanding comes from a theory that dyslexia is a congenital defect that affects children and adults who have apparently normal and undamaged brains. The outcome of the defect is that the dyslexic person suffers a disability in learning to read and write, which is so problematic that they cannot be taught solely within the set curriculum, but need constant specialist educational support to assist their learning. Thus, in this model dyslexia is seen as a pathological condition that requires specialist teaching conditions.

Another supporter of the medical model is Critchley (1970) who has claimed that medical professionals should be responsible for the dyslexic phenomenon and its 'cure'. Galaburda (1993) studied brains of dyslexic individuals. He found that the dyslexic brain differed in cell patterns and organisation, to that of a non-dyslexic brain.

The Individual Model of Disability (IMD)

The IMD is another model that has been widely used in the West. It is most favoured by social services staff and regards an individual's disability as the basis for their inability to exist within society. Oliver (1993) sees this as a frequent problem for disabled people:

> "The major task of the professional is therefore to adjust the individual to the particular disabling condition." (Pg.15, Oliver, 1993)

This model, along with the medical model, comes from a school of thought that sees the human frame as able to achieve perfection, and anything less as *incorrect*. This mainly western thought has been prevalent from ancient times until relatively recently. Lessing (1981) argues that most societies view the perfect person as physically fit, and:

> "Unencumbered by weakness, loss or pain; it is toward this distortion of perfection that we strive and with which we all identify." (Pg. 21, Lessing, 1981)

The IMD identifies the disabled person's disability as being the problem they face within society. It is the medical professionals, educationalists, social workers and psychologists who need to rehabilitate the disabled person to help them to get used to their condition within the community. The IMD identifies the individual as the basis for this approach by noting how their particular condition is contrary to the norm in society and finding how it does not fit in and causes problems (Begum, 1996). This model should not be mistaken for the MMD as it focuses on the individual through a range of measures centred on social intervention, whereas the MMD focuses on the physical state of the individual. The emphasis on social interaction is why social work professionals most often use this model to frame their work with individuals, and use it to help future casework.

These two models are important in understanding the situation of disabled people, yet when applied to the educational setting they are highly restrictive and further disabling. The

support systems in the educational setting attempt to develop self-reliance, encouraging dyslexic students to help themselves by learning strategies which lead to self-motivated and directed study, empowering students to guide their own study. The two models above make students reliant on 'professionals' in the educational setting. Power rests with the professionals, implying that students can only achieve academic success by accepting dependency on the professionals. This potentially leaves them exposed within the working world. If the students are to progress as individuals, they need to be self-reliant. This can be explained within the next two models.

Social Model of Disability SMD

After looking at the last two models I felt that within this study the Social Model of Disability was a more helpful way to understand the experiences of people with dyslexia. It seeks to identify a group of people who suffer the restrictions that society places on them.

History

The term 'Social Model of Disability' (SMD) was first used in the late 1960s by disabled people such as Hunt (1966) who started to question the controlling ways in which the social services and medical carers dictated the lives of disabled people. This was then taken up and developed in literature produced by disability groups such as the 'Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation' (1975).

By the end of the 1970s the social model of disability had gained a recognised and established status as a theory of disability. The most noted writer in this period was Finkelstein (1980) and later Oliver (1990).

The idea that a model of disability should be produced by disabled people to help other disabled people is extremely powerful, as it recognises that to truly understand that disabled people are discriminated against, one needs not just to sympathise, but empathise.

Theory

The fundamental theory is based around an understanding that disability is not created by medical or individualist understanding of disability, but that society itself causes the problems experienced by disabled people. Oliver (1996) claims that the structure of society fails to supply the necessary services and constructs to make sure that all disabled people's needs are met and are not seen as 'extra' to the norm. This idea shifts the focus from perceiving disabled individuals as being 'inconvenient' to the norm of society, to seeing the norms of society as being 'limited' by its perception of normality. This shifts the focus from viewing the disabled person as an individual within non-disabled society, to acknowledging that the disabled person is capable of working within the norms of society and of taking control of their own life decisions.

To look at the model closely we can see that the SMD provides a holistic approach to disabled people within society, which gives power to the disabled person and a right to their own 'normal' position in society. It provides an overall, yet not exclusive, identity for disabled people in a collective and political forum. Campbell and Oliver (1996) see the value

of this model in its emancipation of disabled people by viewing another way of conceptualising their disability issues by:

> "Liberate [ing], the direction of disabled people's personal energies turned outwards to building a force for changing society". (Pg.20, Campbell and Oliver, 1996).

This aspect of unity, to place all disabled people into one group, promotes their collective rights for equality within society. The model assists this disability group to highlight discrimination; by exposing these issues the model attempts to gain the same citizenship rights for people with disabilities as the non-disabled community.

Criticism and Refinement

The model has attracted criticism regarding its relevance in society today. This questioning, by disabled and non-disabled critics alike, is not surprising as the disability movement establishes itself within society and even newer models are developed. Criticisms also developed as disabled people refined and re-focused their cause within the wider society. The main criticism of the SMD is that is does not recognise that, although unity in numbers is a powerful forum, the individual person's experience is also important, not simply from a needs aspect, but from other aspects of their lives which effect their understanding of their disability, such as: gender (Morris, 1991), ethnic status (Stuart, 1993; Begum 1996), impairment (Crow 1992; French 1996), class (Shakespeare et.al, 1999), education (Riddick, 2001), and career (Sterling, 1997). Abberley (1987) suggested that the SMD should include a

theory of impairment to take account of the needs for individual experience within the larger model of social disability. Yet Finkelstein (1996) argued that accounting for personal experience would dilute the strong and united theory that is the true social model of disability.

The Social Model of Impairment: An Advance on the MMD?

Some disability researchers see the Social Model of Impairment (SMI) as an advance on the Social Model of Disability in the interpretation of the situation of disabled people (Crow, 1996).

History

This model has come into being because disabled people and disability commentators have viewed the Social Model of Disability as ignoring the impairment aspect of disability. This particular criticism looks at the SMD as denying the body and its restrictions, highlighting a view that shows physical differences and restrictions as being created by society. For example, Morris (1991) argues:

> "While environmental barriers and social attitudes are a crucial part of our experience of disability – and do indeed disable us – to suggest that this is all there is to it, is to deny the personal experience of physical or intellectual restrictions."
>
> (Pg.10, Morris, 1991)

Theory

The Impairment Model shifts the emphasis away from the corporate idea of community, into the individual idea of the body, thus respecting the disabled person's understanding of their own impairment. This focus on the individual body shows that, even when the social barriers are removed, there are still some impairments that will bar disabled people from certain social activities. This is best summed up by French (1993):

> "Viewing a mobility problem as caused by the presence of steps rather than by the inability to walk is easy to comprehend ... However, various profound social problems that I encounter as a visually impaired person which impinge upon my life far more than indecipherable notices or the lack of bleeper crossings, are more difficult to regard as entirely socially produced." (Pg.16, French, 1996)

It is the job of the SMI to provide a working model in which disabled people can locate their physical experience of disability. By giving the disabled community the forum to locate these experiences, it hopes to provide the widest possible support for disabled people. (Barnes et al, 1999).

Criticism

This model is not without its critics, and Barnes et al (1999) identifies various criticisms which have been posed against it. It puts forward an argument that the SMI is hazy about the boundary between disability and impairment by putting too much emphasis on the body as opposed to the social barriers within society. This problem could make vague the real source of the disability and thus make the targets for political change indistinct (Oliver, 1996; Finkelstein, 1996). Another criticism comes from Shakespeare (1992; 1996) who claimed

that the model could be seen as another interpretation of the MMD, he felt that to look at the body as a biological phenomena or to:

> "admit [to] pain, to confront our impairments, has been to risk the oppressors seizing on evidence that disability is really about physical limitation." (Pg.40, Shakespeare, 1992)

As a society, we do not like to hear of pain and our reaction is to seek its relief. If pain and discomfort is used as an example of impairment, this gives cause to move away from individualistic models of society in which the medical or social professionals exercise control over the disabled community. This takes us to the general theory that disabled people are marginalised within society.

Can the SMD help to expose barriers in Education?

Turning back to my favoured model, the SMD has been used to support the view that the educational setting is oppressive to dyslexic people. This can be seen in the work of Snowling (1987) and Reid (1994), and is located within the argument that the educational system has been too prescriptive in its teaching methods, and has not taken dyslexic people's learning needs into account within the classroom. Reid (1994) supports this by saying that the curriculum is too focused on one style of teaching delivery and the teaching system needs to be less corporate, and more individualistic, matching the curriculum to the pupils' needs irrespective of the difficulties displayed. This would bring the dyslexic person within

the scope of normal individual differences, thus possibly helping the dyslexic person overcome difficulties from earlier negative educational experience.

Russell (1992) and Dodds (1993) allude to a way to help dyslexic pupils in the educational system. They see the curriculum as too fixed; the curriculum needs to be taught in a variety of ways. This means that a fixed number of curriculum subjects should be taught, but not in one specific manner. The teaching method should be tailored to the individual, and not to the class as a whole. This means that each child, dyslexic or not, can understand the educational concepts being described, and not feel that their teacher is making a special effort for them alone. Disability is born through a dyslexic person not fitting into the educational system, and thus having the opportunity to perform to that level of expectation within that environment. This rather utopian ideal is probably impractical in classes of 30+, yet it can be argued that different styles of delivery within one classroom setting can assist in improving provision for a class containing dyslexic and non-dyslexic pupils.

The SMD can help to throw light on the experience of the dyslexic person because society requires the written word as part of its necessary form of communication. This is an explicit requirement in institutions such as schools and universities. It is also reinforced by the necessity for qualifications, awarded by examination of written work. We live in a society that requires these qualifications for entry to well paid employment, and as a mark of recognition and success as an individual person. If a dyslexic person cannot achieve these goals because they communicate in a different way, a way that does not suit society, then this group is placed at a disadvantage as they are not able to converse with their non-dyslexic peers.

The Disability Discrimination Act of 1995 (which was in force during my data collection period) regards dyslexia as a recognised disability and in giving rights to disabled people, such as dyslexics, it recognises that society's structures make people with dyslexia unable to access various benefits that others enjoy.

The Social Model: Higher Education

After exploring how dyslexia is seen as a disability and thus fits within the Social Model of Disability, and how necessary education is within society, it is important to see how the model works within the HE environment. In using this particular model of disability I have assumed that the educational environment is potentially disabling for the dyslexic student. This disabling environment was one of the key reasons that the Tomlinson report was commissioned in the 1990s to look into the needs and provisions for people with:

> "Learning difficulties and/or disabilities and to say whether the new legal requirements of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 were being satisfied." (Pg.1, HEFC, 1996)

Tomlinson looked into the need for inclusion within post school education when linked to disability and concluded that it was the responsibility of the sector to meet the learning needs of dyslexics. This conclusion suggests that there are locatable educational barriers, within the sector. These need breaking down to make sure that students are able to reach their

potential and to encourage further students in the future. This requires a sector that is dyslexia aware, and does not place barriers in the way of possible academic success.

Grounded Theory as a way of analysing data within the overall framework of CSR

Critical Social Research and Grounded Theory

To fully appreciate the way in which Critical Social Research (CSR) and Grounded Theory (GTh) work in tandem to gather a detailed picture of the HE environment, it is important to give a brief overview of the research approach and method of analysis used in this study.

Critical Social Research

CSR is a research approach which seeks to critique present-day society's social order. This approach has been used in the work of Marxists and post-Marxists, amongst other social critics (Harvey, 1990). The approach is widely used and is flexible enough to investigate a vast range of social situations, such as the exposition of political manipulation, institutionalised mass population legislation and bureaucratisation (Mannheim, 1972).

CSR seeks to expose the social structures which oppress society; these structures can be seen in a series of ways, but this research sees them as many layered and interrelated:

> "elements which are interdependent and which can only be adequately conceived of in terms of the complete structure." (Pg. 25, Harvey, 1990)

These multi-layered, interrelated smaller elements of social structures, when put together, make a detailed picture of the site under investigation. An example from this study would be the provision of special support for dyslexic students whilst studying in the HE environment. CSR potentially sees the oppression that the dyslexic students face as being created by economic powers with a political agenda based on a specific ideology. CSR digs beneath the surface of the social structures to reveal what is actually going on, out of sight. It looks at the social phenomena, which are being investigated at a historic point in time; a few years later, it might no longer be relevant. In this study, the dyslexic experience is contextualised in the developments within the Higher Educational system between 2002-2003, when the field work was carried out.

To fully appreciate critical social research, in the context of the dyslexic student experience, the experience of the dyslexic person would need to be deconstructed and then reconstructed. This means taking the student's personal HE experiences and adding them to their outer-university social and experiential experiences. By taking this role in specific areas, critical social research is able to expose the position of dyslexic students in the HE setting.

CSR is a politically motivated approach which aims to reveal oppression in society and to challenge it to improve the situation of the group in question. In this case it is an argument for analysing the consequences of dyslexia within a social system by:

> "Delving beneath ostensive and dominant conceptual frames, in order to reveal the underlying practices, their historical specificity." (Pg. 4, Harvey, 1990)

By looking beneath the surface-level reality of the site under investigation, CSR aims to change the way in which society works by exposing hidden truths about how oppressed people attempt to operate.

Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory's research method has a different agenda to CSR when exploring social sites. It comes from the two research backgrounds of Glaser and Strauss (1967). The theory can be seen as a development of the work of W.I Thomas (1918) and the symbolic interactionist work of the Chicago School through fieldwork, stressing theory based on rigorous discipline, accepting that the site is evolving and thus changing people's worlds. This theory works by introducing the need for:

> "a systematic set of procedures for both coding and testing hypotheses generated."
>
> (Pg.25, Strauss and Corbin, 1990)

Glaser influenced grounded theory's development into a well respected scientific method for social research. Glaser also saw grounded theory as a means to use empirical research as part of the advancement of theory. This theory was to become popular with both professional and non-professional researchers and is now widely used within social work and education.

Grounded theory is made up of three distinct 'theories': Substantive, Formal and Cumulative. These work together to produce a full picture of the site under investigation based on the data from the study.

- Substantive theory looks at what data the researcher has gathered from the study.
- Formal Theory looks at the study in the wider world taking on board the substantive data. (Strauss, 1998).
- Cumulative Theory finally links the various substantive and Formal theories together to produce coherent links. (Layder, 1993)

Whilst theory is developed through substantive, formal, or cumulative procedures the role of extant data (Layder, 1998) must be respected. Data can:

> "Include anything and everything that can be brought to bear in an evidential sense on the forms of knowledge." (Pg.165, Layder, 1998)

Data comes from a wide range of sources including the television, newspapers, literature and films as well as academic texts. It comes from all sides of social life and is:

> "capable of representation in a form which allows it to be offered or referred to as evidence of social trends, customs, habits, types of work or recreation." (Pg.165, Layder, 1988)

Data helps the researcher to use the real and dynamic world to explain the investigation site, such as Higher Education. To accept the validity of extant data is to accept that the reality of the research is not just based on the explicit site being investigated.

Combining SMD and Grounded Theory to Expose Respondents' Experience

Social Model of Disability and Grounded Theory

After looking at the data analysis, it is important to see how Grounded Theory can complement Critical Social Research (CSR), and the Social Model of Disability (SMD).

Social Oppression

Powell (1998) recognises the social model of disability as interpreting disability as a type of social oppression. By using grounded theory, this oppression can be identified within the Higher Education environment. This theory is extremely helpful as it exposes the multifaceted nature of the educational site, illustrating how the students interact. It reveals practical examples of the oppressive barriers that disabled people faced within their academic surroundings, and examples of secondary barriers that are beyond the obvious walls of the educational site. This theory has been used by many professions, one of which was the nursing study of Corbin (1986), who argues that it allowed nurses to:

> "Capture the complexity of problems and the richness of everyday life." (Pg. 91, Corbin, 1986)

Intricate Data

Grounded theory is an appropriate method to use under these circumstances as it highlights the environment's intricacies which in turn help develop and refine the SMD (Artinian, 1986). This refinement adds to and strengthens the model as an explanation of disability.

Grounded theory thus helps to make the SMD even more pertinent to the individual's needs by showing the ever changing manner of interactions between the students and staff, from within the study, in their academic environment. This reveals the more complex and dynamic view of the oppression that disabled people come across whilst in HE which suggests that information cannot:

> "...stand still. It is a universe where fragmentation, splintering, and disappearance are the mirror images of appearance, emergence, coalescence." (Pg. 123, Strauss, 1978)

Grounded theory, with the contribution of the Social Model of Disability, has the ability to help people strive to gain the same opportunities on the field of play which their non-disabled peers enjoy. Knox (2000) advocates grounded theory as a pertinent method which can help the situation of disabled people as they live within the wider non-disabled world, through focussing on a partnership approach within disability research. Grounded theory has the ability to be a method which can help identify possibilities for inclusion as society changes.

CSR and the SMD, as a Methodology for Investigating the Experience of Mature Students with Dyslexia

Recognising that the SMD could assist in exposing various barriers for dyslexic student research in HE, I have decided to use a critical social research (CSR) approach in this study as a model that can frame the respondents' experience as dyslexic people entering the HE

community. CSR is an approach with high potential for a study such as this, as it challenges oppression within society. Carspecken (1996) echoes this by saying that this type of research finds society as:

> "unfair, unequal, and subtly and overtly oppressive for many people." (Pg. 7, Carspecken, 1996)

As CSR seeks to improve the situation of oppressed people within society, it can be used to identify the barriers in place that hinder disabled people. The approach is widely used within the disability research field and does not take the:

> "Social processes, or accepted history for granted... It asks how social systems really work, how ideology or history conceals the processes which oppress." (Pg. 6, Carspecken, 1996)

This research approach seeks to gain an insight into the community being studied. A CSR approach would, in this case, aim to identify what barriers have been built up in dyslexic respondents' lives through school and the workplace, and to identify the psychosocial effects these had upon the respondent. This in turn would inform and direct the identification of barriers within the HE system that could inhibit entry into that educational sector, whilst taking consideration of existing attempts to improve this entry path into education.

Knowledge

Gathering knowledge is a fundamental part of critical study in social research, and this approach views knowledge as formed by:

> "Existing social relations... These social structures are seen by critical researchers, in one way or another, as oppressive." (Pg. 2, Harvey, 1990)

In this research CSR recognises present day knowledge as grounded in relations between dyslexia, which is the phenomenon I am investigating, and the social structure I am investigating, which is Higher Education. Thus the knowledge of dyslexic people is founded on contemporary attitudes and opportunities available to this group. It is therefore important not only to take account of existing attempts to help dyslexic people into higher education such as the work of the Tomlinson Report (1996), but also to look for deeper difficulties, such as psychosocial issues, which may affect a dyslexic student as they enter higher education. A fuller understanding of past measures to improve the situation of the dyslexic adult's entry into higher education, enables researchers to use CSR to obtain the understanding and knowledge that in turn enables them to question the current social understanding.

By focusing more specifically on the difficulties that dyslexics face when they re-enter education this research methodology can thus draw on existing evidence to call into question the validity of present-day knowledge about the personal and social consequences of dyslexia and the barriers that students encounter within Higher Education. This can give rise to many questions such as: What makes dyslexic adults return to education after poor experiences of school education and of the workplace? Are there specific routes or

assessment techniques that would attract more dyslexics into HE? Is the university learning experience any different to school learning experience for students with dyslexia? Do dyslexic students have to worry about psychological and social adjustment as much as their academic study? When asking these questions in the context of my study, Critical Social Research was employed to investigate students' experiences at different institutions, operating different educational structures, to ascertain if current knowledge, or lack of it concerning dyslexia, is assisting or oppressing students within their particular university.

Changing Knowledge

If one accepts knowledge as being key to understanding and questioning the topic under investigation, it is also important to realise that this knowledge is an active phenomenon and subject to the very change that I am attempting to reveal. With this dynamic nature of knowledge and the ever changing social world, it is important to note that change is inevitable, and something that is considered a radical theory:

> "...at one moment may in a later context, appear to be superficial." (Pg. 6, Harvey, 1990).

So it is important to realise that any newly implemented legislation may make once radical and far-reaching ideas appear shallow and out-dated as the legislation takes affect. It is thus important to see that any critical social research is located within a social setting in time and place, and could change within a short time. My study investigates dyslexic students' experience in the context of understanding what hinders or assists adults back into education, taking into account psychosocial issues arising from previous educational failure.

It is important and helpful to base CSR on existing evidence as it helps moves research towards an:

> "understanding of the world and of the knowledge which structures our perceptions." (Pg. 6, Harvey, 1990)

To sum up: The role of CSR is to expose oppressive regimes, whatever form they may take, making it a good approach to reveal the experiences of dyslexic people. This is done by CSR helping to translate the Social Model of Disability into an even more robust theory by identifying the obstructions that disabled people face in everyday society. By identifying these obstructions within everyday life, my study aims to encourage educational rights by developing a greater understanding of academic and social barriers in some dyslexic students' path. In this study I am using CSR to expose and draw attention to the psychosocial obstructions that dyslexic people face when considering or/and entering HE. This study itself is not devised specifically as a response to bringing about change in people's lives, yet that is a hoped-for product of it.

Data Analysis

After briefly looking back at CSR and Gth and how they investigate the site in question, it is important to define the research approach and the method of analysis in this study.

In considering how CSR and Gth see the social site under investigation and develop clear realities, one notices that they have a different focus. CSR recognises the site from a historical perspective of reality. It sees the phenomena (such as the student experience) in a historical context through the investigation of relevant political and social features.

Grounded theory, however, looks at the critical realist's interpretation of the site (Annells, 1997) presenting a dependable picture of the investigation. Thus Gth seeks to ascertain the actuality of the substantive area being investigated; the generated Gth is all based in the data. (Glaser, 1992).

Accepting that CSR and Gth are very different in their approaches towards the site under investigations, they give similar pictures of what is happening at a societal level. CSR exposes the political and cultural context of the site in which the respondents act and how they react and interact with the structures that they live in. Gth attempts to show how the respondents react and interact in the social site. By doing this, the method seeks to show an accurate picture within the site's everyday reality. (Glaser et al 1967).

The epistemology of both Gth and CSR have different viewpoints for their perception of the world. CSR sees world knowledge as set within a framework which uses an:

> "epistemological perspective in which the knowledge and critique are intertwined."
> (Pg.3, Layder, 1993)

Knowledge, according to CSR, is seen as a dynamic resource as it provides information about how the world is perceived, and how it is formed. In contrast, grounded theory, sees

the world though the eyes of the respondent who gives the researcher an ability to look at social systems in a close and detailed way.

With this, grounded theory will give a close-up picture of the educational environment by showing how dyslexic students work within their educational world.

CSR sees knowledge as a way of providing critical information to enlighten the understanding of the site being investigated. This is different to grounded theory which uses knowledge to inform the reality of the substantive site, through the eyes of the respondent and their own personal perceptions. It thus could be said that there is a political motivation that separates CSR and Gth. This can be seen in that knowledge provision within CSR of the site under investigation aims specifically to create social change. In contrast, Gth views knowledge as a non-political ideal through giving insight into the social site.

Looking at CSR and Gth methodologies as a whole, they view the collection of knowledge about the social word in different ways. CSR does not need just one specific method of collecting the data about the social site but puts an emphasis on placing knowledge in a critical framework.

Gth emphasises systematic ways of gaining knowledge about the social world by a system of building up theory which is:

> "Grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed. Theory evolves during actual research." (Pg.158, Strauss and Corbin, 1998)

These two approaches are different to each other as CSR is value-based, while Gth is a systematic method. There could be a number of methods for analysing data. By using grounded theory in collecting and then analysing the data while producing data in a critical framework, I can show the position of dyslexics returning to education in the academic world.

Qualitative or Quantitative Information

There are no restrictions or preferences in the nature of the data collected within CSR. It can use qualitative and/or quantitative methods in data collection. It needs the experiential understandings of the respondents which are anything from anecdotal to statistical.

This approach is extremely flexible because it puts an emphasis on knowledge collected, from the respondents being situated in a critical context. Gth can be used with both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques when looking at the social site. These can blend together to make data of all types work together to give as great an understanding of the site as possible. For instance, this might be achieved by using:

> "qualitative data to illustrate or clarify quantitatively derived findings; or, one could quantify demographic findings." (Pg.18, Strauss and Corbin, 1990)

By using qualitative and quantitative information together Gth could give a clear and detailed picture of the site. Both CSR and Gth are extremely flexible in gathering data as they are both data hungry. By getting as much information as possible, they can build a detailed picture of the site being investigated.

Coding

Gth uses coding to gather data from the interviews:

> "[data is] broken [down], conceptualised, and put back together in new ways." (Pg. 57, Strauss and Corbin, 1990)

By coding the data, theories about the investigated site can be developed. The data is then put into categories by using a method called the constant comparative method which looks through the data for differences and similarities which help build the substantive, formal and cumulative theories, discussed earlier.

Gth can act as a facility to help towards social change (Keddy et al 1996). It is important for the researcher to look at the data and place it in a framework that will be critical and make it progress a stage further. By putting Gth data within a CSR approach, one could be building another form of theory with an even more critical edge. This is achieved by providing an explanation for the barriers that disabled people's experience within their social site, and also an explanation of their difficulties. Another outcome of Gth in a CSR approach is that it exposes the micro and macro scene of the site under investigation. This holistic method of combining research methods has the ability to see both general and individual oppressive

regimes that are presenting barriers to specific people within society, and thus gives researchers the ability to help identify aspects that may require change within society.

Conclusions: Overall Research Approach

In attempting to look at the site under investigation there are good reasons to use CSR as a tool to help show critical aspects of the data. Much use has been made of CSR in disability studies in an attempt to provide answers to covert and subtle social positions. To a non-disabled person these covert and subtle positions may not be apparent, yet with the help of the social model of disability, and the oppression-revealing nature of CSR, these barriers can be exposed.

Critics would comment that by employing CSR, the study is automatically assuming that there is oppression within the site being investigated. This criticism is founded on viewing CSR as only being effective within an oppressive regime, yet, if there is oppression within the site under investigation, then this needs exposing; if there is no oppression and in fact the site is clear of barriers, then CSR will accept that there is nothing to expose.

As stated above, much disability research has been investigated with the assistance of CSR, and it continues to be used today, suggesting the potential to continue using it. Another reason for CSR within this study is that previous research in the field of dyslexia has exposed barriers that prevent dyslexic students achieving in the HE setting. As this study is both concerned with HE and dyslexia, it can be argued that there could be significant aspects of oppression that are still in place, and thus CSR will assist in exposing these.

Critical Observations of Joint CSR and Gth

Critics could express concern about combining CSR and Gth in research studies. The fear is that CSR would restrict the analysis of data with Gth, because of its assumptions of oppression. This suggests that Gth could yield data showing oppression simply because CSR assumes there is oppression. This argument is founded on the false assumption that CSR is dominant over Gth and will lead the results away from the true picture.

The joint use of CSR and Gth means that there are two complementary, yet contrasting, approaches that can help to identify the most extensive possible pictures of the site under investigation and bring them together to give a detailed picture of the site. If one approach views one picture, and the other sees another picture, this adds weight to the argument that the study is looking at the site as widely as possible; making sure that it sees the whole research picture.

To summarise: The theoretical perspectives of this study are focused toward a clear and transparent exposition of the data examined. It is by employing the social model of disability, within the framework of a critical social research model, that grounded theory data can reveal a picture of the experience of mature dyslexic students in higher education. Utilising these research methods will help not simply to present the details of the HE site, but add a critical edge that exposes barriers, and challenges long held views for dyslexic people re-entering education.

Chapter 4: Research Tools and Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I will explain why in-depth interviews were used to address the research questions in this particular social setting and why it was necessary to interview the respondents over an academic year. This will lead to a description of the pilot study and how it influenced the sequence of eight interviews in the main study. Finally the process of selecting respondents is described. First, though, it is important to identify research questions arising from the literature review. There is a need to recognise various aspects of research that would, if developed, enhance knowledge in this field. In addition to this, there may be various areas that require further investigation or revisiting.

Several important questions arise from the literature review and have helped inform the direction of this study:

1. a. What are the motivating factors for dyslexic people to return to education after a period in the workplace, especially when they only become aware of their dyslexia *after* their entry into HE?

and

b. How have experience at school *and* in the workplace affected the dyslexic mature student in their first year of education at university?

These questions arise from the many studies that have looked at mature dyslexic students' return to HE or FE; those studies have not, however, directly addressed the issues arising in the workplace as a motivation to return to HE. Previous studies have mainly focused on the educational needs of the individual, usually in the form of past school experiences motivating the respondent to return to education. Although school could well be a major motivator, as studies such as Palfreman-Kay (2000) suggest, the present study also investigates the workplace's role as a motivator. The question of 'why mature and dyslexic students' in this study also needs attention. There are interesting studies on mature students (re-entry students) in HE (Michie, Glachan and Bray, 2001) that realise the place of the mature student next to the non-mature (direct entry) student in HE. The reason for this group of dyslexic learners in my study is based on:

(a) The government's often repeated commitment to increase the number of mature students and students from minority groups entering HE with such reports as *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (2004) and *The Future of Higher Education* report (2003).

(b) Students with physical disabilities have attracted a lot of attention, such as the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act's (DDA) rules to make it obligatory for college and university buildings to improve their access for students with mobility issues. However, dyslexia represents a different sort of challenge;

arguably it represents a greater challenge as the disability requires precisely the sort of skills that are central to success in HE.

These are the two reasons that this study focuses on dyslexic and mature students as its respondent group.

2. Do the many different 'types' of universities affect mature dyslexic students in different ways?

Work by Pollak (2003) and Riddick (1997) has shown that there is a need for the academic community to understand the specific experiential needs of mature dyslexic students. This has lead to greater understanding amongst members of the academe, yet in both studies the institutions were limited in the 'type' of university experience. Riddick interviewed students at two universities, and Pollak (2003) used four institutions – three of which seemed to be very similar to each other in age and potential outlook.

A broader spread of five universities might shed further light on the range of experiences that dyslexic mature students encounter. Two of these five institutions are pre-1992 and three are post-1992 universities. This represents the two largest groups of UK universities, each potentially offering a different experience of university life and learning, as they, broadly speaking, have different backgrounds of providing education to different groups of learners, traditionally the pre-1992 universities were focused on research and the post-1992 universities were technical teaching institutions. This different experience could well affect the dyslexic mature students in different ways.

3. Do all 'types' of universities provide the same nature of support to all mature dyslexic students?

During the period of data collection, the individual support services at the five different universities were independent of each other, with independent budgets and little or no oversight by the QAA. Four of the support services were connected to the work of the National Association of Disability Officers (NADO) which was attempting to formalise procedures for assisting dyslexic students. There were no readily available advertised statistics showing the effectiveness of an individual institution's support unit, other than a small listing of the number of dyslexic people enrolled at that particular university, the numbers of staff employed and their qualifications. In addition it appeared that there was no concrete evidence of support offered to dyslexic students, other than the unit's disability statement which might or might not have been accurate and comprehensive. Collection of systematic data about the effectiveness of support offered by different institutions was beyond the scope of the present study. Nevertheless, there was still an important question about how students at different universities perceived the support available to them.

4. a. How important are the first few weeks after returning to education for the mature dyslexic student?

and

b. How does the mature dyslexic student's perception of their academic progress change in the first year of their degree? In addition to this academic progress, how do the respondents perceive their own social and emotional development in the same period and how do these change over time?

Of previous HE studies into the experiences of dyslexic mature students, none focuses specifically on the very earliest period of entry into the HE environment. Work has been undertaken to investigate the respondent's early memories of returning to education, but this is often some months after it has happened, and the data may be not as raw as it could have been if the respondent had been asked early in the academic year (Riddick, 1996; Klein et al, 2002; Pollack, 2003). In this study the respondents were identified within the first month of the academic year. This meant that their earliest memories of return to education could be captured at that moment, in an attempt to provide rich data. In addition, previous studies have not monitored changes over the course of one year in students' academic progress, nor in their self-confidence and social (including family) relationships.

5. Are dyslexic mature students more receptive to discussing life experiences with another dyslexic mature student, or with a professional researcher?

At the time of planning the fieldwork, there was no HE study that was led by a dyslexic mature student who was doing independent research in this field. I wished to investigate the possibility that mature dyslexic students would feel at greater ease with another mature dyslexic student, rather than a researcher working at a university, who could be seen as a

'professional' and might be less able to fully empathise with their experience of returning to HE.

6. Do dyslexic mature students recognise oppressive barriers in their educational journey, at various stages in their lives?

In attempting to identify any oppressive regimes that might have existed within previous educational settings, I wished to build on past work revealing oppression to investigate whether the situation for this group had changed on entry to a university, or if there were still areas that held barriers for the dyslexic mature student.

7. Are mature dyslexic students aware of any differences in academic expectation, between different 'types' of universities?

With limited research on the variation in experience between different types of universities, there is a need to investigate the very contentious issue of respondent perceived academic standards between various institutions, and how that potentially affects dyslexic mature students. This could show itself in the minimum matriculation requirements for the same degree, but at different universities. If one university is advertising AAA to read for a specific degree, and the other is asking for CDD, then does this make the potential mature

dyslexic student feel that it would be academically less difficult to attend the CDD University, or do they look beyond that?

These questions underpin this study as they have been developed from past studies where these issues have not been addressed, or only partly addressed, or formed recommendations for further research. From these questions, a great deal of other material has been generated which will help to shed light on this particular area of dyslexia research.

The Pilot Study

Having identified research questions, it was important to conduct a pilot study. This aimed to gather initial information about the HE environment and data that would help in preparation of interview schedules for the main study.

During the planning stage of the pilot study, it was considered that there were sound reasons for utilising in-depth interviews as the best way to gain data to shed light on the research questions identified.

1. Past research in the field has almost exclusively used in-depth research interview techniques to gain rich data from their respondents. This has proven to be very successful and has assisted in showing the views and experiences of dyslexic people in the educational setting.
2. This study was attempting to collect highly qualitative information that would shed light on the dyslexic experience in the first year of returning to education. This qualitative data could have been drawn from questionnaires, but it was felt that this

approach would not yield the rich data that was needed to clearly expose the experiences that dyslexic mature students have encountered, currently encounter, and could encounter in the future. The rationale for this was that many dyslexic students might be reticent in filling in questionnaires and might simply not return a form, thus potentially diminishing the depth and quality of data.

3. The researcher, as a student himself, wished to build a relationship of trust amongst the respondents so that they would feel able to speak freely about their experiences, without worrying that personal data would be reported back to their tutors.
4. As the interviews were to be carried out over one academic year in an attempt to identify changes in the respondents' attitudes to their academic experience, in-depth interviews provided a highly vocal way of comparing and contrasting opinions.
5. The spoken word is an extremely powerful way of articulating potentially sensitive experiences. With such questions as: "What psychosocial difficulties do dyslexic mature students bring to the HE environment taking into account school and work experiences?" it was important that the respondents were able to elaborate on their experiences, as opposed to potentially answering yes or no in a questionnaire.

These reasons all come together to make a case for in-depth interviews of the respondents in an attempt to gain as rich a database as possible, remembering that dyslexic people do not always have the time or inclination to *write* such in-depth answers as they might *speak* in a recorded interview session. The procedure and type of interviews will be discussed later in the chapter.

The Pilot Stage

In the pilot study, the focus was on the study's formatting. This came about by performing a pilot study, as seen above, hoping to find a number of students who were both mature and dyslexic, and who were at an early stage in the Higher Education system. The remit was to explore their experience of being back in education, and how and why they were there, with a particular focus on their life journey within education and work to date. This small scale pilot study of five mature dyslexic students, at the end of the first year of their degree courses, utilised one unstructured interview in which the students were able to talk freely about their experience of education, both the academic aspect, and their own psychological development. These unstructured interviews lasted between one and two and a half hours and were conducted at two contrasting British universities, one university being a post-1992 institution and the other a pre-1992 redbrick establishment. Grounded theory analysis of these pilot interviews produced six key themes which were important to the students: Their school experience; post-school and workplace experience; their return into education; their own dyslexia; relationships with the staff; their own academic ability. These themes became the basic framework which informed the main interviews of the study.

To add to the general understanding, unstructured interviews were also organised with staff who came into contact with these mature students, such as lecturers, disability support staff and academic support tutors. These interviews lasted for between one and two hours each and were very helpful in placing the students' interviews in context. From these staff interviews and field notes, the data collected was used to help formulate the second (main) stage of the study. These interviews were extremely helpful: as leverage into the university environment, as practice in research techniques, for the richness of generated data, and most

importantly as confirmation that the methodology was appropriate for the research questions and the respondents' expectations of the study.

Using Pilot Study Data in Planning the Main Study

As this study investigates experience of dyslexic mature students entering the academic environment, it was decided that the interviews should be undertaken from the start of the academic year, until the end of that same year. This would illustrate the potential changing experiences of the respondents over that long period. This academic year period also fitted in with the second year of the PhD requirements:

Year one: Literature review, academic methods and short pilot study

Year two: data collection and transcribing.

Year three and four: completion of data collection, transcriptions, analysis and write-up.

To start interviewing mature students at the beginning of their degrees would illuminate the *rawness* of their experience of transition from the workplace to full time education. It was also considered that it would highlight any school experiences that were fresh in the mind of the respondent, before the HE environment could possibly cloud their memories. These interviewing ideas were based on the pilot study's outcomes when three respondents, interviewed at the end of their academic year, claimed that they had changed so much within their first year of returning to education that they could not clearly remember the beginning of that year:

"…'cause I've been at [university] now for like seven months, I can't really remember the beginning [of the course]. You know, there's so much to remember then, and I couldn't honestly say exactly how I felt. I know I's bitter, but my life's changed loads." (Female Respondent)

This was echoed by another respondent in the pilot study who felt she had changed a great deal in her first year at university, so much so that she could not exactly verbalise her emotions at entering the HE environment:

> "…you'd asked me at the time, well I'd of been spitting [angry]. I remember that, but I'm more laid back now, and I know I'd to go through that to get where I'm now." (Female Respondent)

This feeling, of having to go through such a change, was echoed by another respondent who felt that asking about his initial views upon re-entering education was, by then, too late:

> "If I could turn back time now, now I'm finished this year, well I know I was touchy and stuff. I used to say really bad things about the staff, 'cause they didn't understand what I's going through. It's [a] big [thing] me coming here, but now it's different, like I can't really remember what it was like then [beginning of the academic year] 'cause it's all really changed for my life… you need to ask people[their views] when they start at uni ." (Male Respondent)

These three respondents all felt that to get the most information out of the respondents about their transition from the working world to the educational world, they would have to be interviewed at the beginning of their degrees.

The decision to conduct eight interviews over the course of one whole year was also based on the pilot study as respondents said that they felt a great deal more relaxed about their educational experience at the end of their first year, than at the beginning:

> "If you'd of asked me a question about me and how I feel [about being] here at the beginning of the year, and then asked me in the middle [of the academic year], and then asked me now, well you'd of got three different answers 'cause it's like life changing here, and you're changing all the time… I suppose some mature students are different to each other, but I just can't see how this uni. experience can't affect you differently somehow every week. I know I've just changed and changed all the time." (Female Respondent)

This was also echoed by another respondent who described having gone through phases of change:

> "…I know at the beginning of the year I wanted to run out, and then that changed and I really got on with the work, then I tried to leave 'cause it'as too much and I thought everyone hated me, but then I got help and now I'm finished... It's been a real ride…" (Male Respondent)

He went on to suggest that:

> "I think you'd be best interviewing dyslexics lots of times in a year, not once or anything…" (Male Respondent)

The pilot study data suggested that a number of interviews spread out over the whole academic year would be better than interviews closely spaced together. This would give a wider picture of the dyslexic student's experience. Not only this, but a year's span of interviews fitted in well within the academic planning of a Ph.D as the second year is an obvious time for interviews in the field and transcribing. These two important elements were the reasons for deciding that one academic year would be suitable for interviewing the respondents about their experience of starting back in education after time away.

Sequence of Interviews and Design of the Research

After discussing the need for a whole year's worth of interviews, it is important to give a detailed over-view of the design of the research, looking at the various stages and the problems encountered while researching dyslexic people in the hope of finding:

> "…new factors of relevance to an explanation of that area, rather than restricting the scope of the research to whether a hypothesis is based on existing theories." (Pg. 216, Denscombe, 1998)

When looking at the data generated from this research, the principles of grounded theory were used to help direct the research process, as explained in chapter three.

Constructing interviews of the main study

At the start of the main study, a semi-structured interview schedule was devised for the ten respondents based on the pilot interviews. The first of the eight interviews was a conversation with a purpose, aiming to help the respondents feel more released about being interviewed, build up trust with both the research and the researcher, and to gain a general understanding about their particular educational life journey, looking specifically at their understanding of dyslexic and its significance in their lives. The formation of this first schedule was largely founded on the unstructured interviews of the pilot study which generated six key themes which were important to the respondents:

1 School experience of the education system: Mixed memories.

2 Post-school, workplace and work related courses experience: Glass ceilings.

3 The returning to education experience: Fear of change.

4 Being a mature student, dyslexic and learning: Am I capable?

5 Lecturers, support staff and fitting in: Relating to teachers.

6 Academic rigor for the mature dyslexic student: What can I expect?

These six themes were investigated in the first interview. The data gathered, along with the findings from the first pilot interviews, and personal field notes, helped me to develop the next seven in-depth interviews with the respondents; each focusing on one of the above themes. In addition to these seven interviews, a final interview was undertaken to clarify

various areas that were not fully developed within the six main themes. These included areas that required further investigation, or any issues that appeared to have been contradictory in the earlier research. In addition to these, it gave me the opportunity to speak to the respondents about any questions they might have about the past seven interviews. A copy of these schedules can be located in the appendix.

Venues and Protocols

The interviews were all carried out in the same venue, mainly at the respondents' own universities, in a quiet room of their choice where no one could listen in and disturb the interview. Only one respondent chose to be interviewed at home, and, like the university interviews, all these interviews were carried out in the same room. Each interview lasted, on average, between three quarters and one and a half hours, averaging one hour each. They started by showing the respondent a copy of the interview schedule, and asking if it was a reflection of their experience as a mature dyslexic student under that particular theme. If they did not agree, the schedule would be adapted to take account of their wishes. This stage of the research was key in identifying what each of the respondents found to be important *for them* (in their educational journey) set in the frame of the theme being discussed.

After the interviews on each of the six themes, as noted above, a final interview was conducted which picked up on any areas of the six themes that were not felt to have been fully investigated. This final interview schedule was constructed from the previous six interviews, and helped tidy-up any areas that could have been confused, or required fuller explanation. In total there were almost 80 interviews lasting between three quarters and one

and a half hours each averaging out at one hour per interview. These were conducted and fully, or partially, transcribed. Some interviews were part transcribed in an effort to save time during the transcriptions process. The transcriptions were enormously time-consuming; one hour of interview data could take between 8 and 11 hours to transcribe, and thus a total of c.70% of the interviews were transcribed Inevitably, some data was of limited value, such as ice breakers and discussing the weather, and there was some repetition. After listening to each tape at least four times I was able to eliminate the redundant information, and concentrate on transcribing the rest. At the end of each interview, the students were thanked for their time.

Research Tools

Tools are very important when studying social life. These tools needed to align correctly with the research approach used in the study. By adopting a critical social research approach the study was not restricted to any one method, and thus there could be a raft of data collection methods employed. Harvey (1990) agrees with this. When commenting on any specific aspect of critical social research, the researcher may use various ethnographic processes such as:

> "...in-depth interviewing, semi-structured and unstructured interviewing." (Pg. 12, Harvey, 1990)

Thus there is a range of tools that can be used, to construct a critical framework for study of a specific site. In this particular study, the main tools were the semi-structured interviews,

and one very short questionnaire, that were used only to obtain basic factual data about each respondent. (Appendices Pg. 445)

Sampling

Sampling is an important area of psychosocial research. It enables researchers to collect a sample that *may* help them to:

> "...generalise about the population." (Pg. 82, Fulcher and Scott, 1999)

There are two aspects of sampling. Probability sampling (simple random or systematic random) enables a researcher to calculate the probabilities involved. In the present study it would require reliable data on the number of dyslexic mature students in the HE sector. Non-probability, or convenience sampling (convenience or snowball) is a *possibility* when the researcher is unable to select respondents from a total population such as the number of dyslexic mature students at university.

In order to find out if dyslexic people were enrolled on university courses, dyslexia support staff were contacted to ask if they would assist in locating dyslexic mature students to act as respondents for this study. These people were not only disability support staff but also university and departmental tutors with special responsibility for disabilities. To access these people, contact was made with five separate institutions using personal introductions and formal approaches. These members of staff would be highly aware of the sensitivity of this study, and would be in a position to contact mature dyslexic students. It soon became

obvious that not many dyslexic mature students were known to be enrolled on H.E. courses at the universities I contacted and that there might be a need to gather more respondents from outside the five universities. In dialogue with the support staff at the universities, various reasons were given as to why there were such low numbers of this specific group of students. The reasons ranged from high 'A' level entry requirements for mature students, to the damage that had been done at school to mature students' self-esteem. A further problem, of which support staff were well aware, was that by no means all students with dyslexia are known to the support services.

Bearing in mind that the numbers were not going to be high, purposive sampling was the method of non-probability sampling used in this study, in which a selection of:

> "...those to be surveyed is made according to a known characteristic." (Pg. 88, May, 1997)

This approach seeks to find a specific characteristic that is important to the research such as 'dyslexic mature student'. This method is useful to researchers who feel that they will have a low number of participants in their studies. (May, 1997).

Having shown how the method of sampling was selected to identify dyslexic mature students to take part in the research, it is important to show how the objective was realised from the start of the pilot study. An approach was made to the relevant university support staff, such as disability supporters and university disability tutors, to ask if they knew of any suitable participants who met the criteria.

Limited Numbers of Respondents

Whilst working on the pilot stage of the study, it became clear that there was a very limited number of mature dyslexic students known to be enrolled on degree courses, even though there were many 'mature non-dyslexic students' and many 'non-mature dyslexic students' studying at the institutions. Fortunately, a satisfactory number of students were available for the second stage of the research and thus there was no need to seek respondents from any further universities.

Having established links with the universities in the pilot stage of the study, I was able to re-contact the support staff and ask if they could tell me how many dyslexic mature students were known to be enrolled in their university during the academic year. All of the support staff kindly agreed to locate all the dyslexia mature students over the age of 22 who had been employed and were diagnosed as being dyslexic by either an educational psychologist or a trained dyslexia support specialist. From the different institutions, some 30 students made contact following this appeal, and after reading their responses, fourteen actually matched the criteria. This was further narrowed down to ten students when four opted out because they felt they couldn't afford the time for the interviews.

In order to further confirm that the criteria had been met by each respondent it was agreed that they would have to be confirmed dyslexic by a qualified educational psychologist at

some point during that academic year, and if it materialised that their dyslexia was not confirmed, their experiences would not be included within the study. In addition to this, examples of respondents' early un-edited essay work was independently analysed by a qualified psychologist to confirm that the respondents were indeed dyslexic and all met a similar academic standard upon entering university. All of the respondents were aware of these requests and obliged with both an educational psychologist's report and examples of their work.

The ten respondents agreed to take part in eight semi-structured interviews, each key topic of which had been identified by the earlier pilot unstructured one hour interviews. These people, from five separate HE institutions are listed below. To ensure anonymity the respondents only agreed to take part in the study if their names were not mentioned at all, including the use of a pseudonym. This is discussed further in the section on Research Ethics. They did, however accept a label of their sex and which university they attended. Two students were in the age range 24-29, six in the range 30-39 and two in the range 40-49.

1. Female, was at university B
2. Female, was at university A, but later moved to university B, and later left.
3. Female, was at university D
4. Female, was at university E
5. Male, was at university A,
6. Female, was at university A
7. Male, was at university A
8. Male, was at university A, and later left.

9. Female, was at university B

10. Female, was at university C

Each of these students came back to education with poor academic qualifications. No one respondent had achieved 'A' levels prior to university and the range of qualifications ranged from two 'O' levels (grade D and E) to no qualifications at all. Four of the respondents were reading for pre-degree courses and the other six were direct entry undergraduates. After intensive enquiry there was no evidence of significant difference between students on pre-degree and degree courses in terms of their prior qualifications. Examination of examples of their early essay work did not reveal any significant academic differences between them and all samples showed signs of severe dyslexia according to the candidate's supervisor, an experienced educational psychologist.

Another important factor that is shown in the spread of students was that five respondents were from university A, two from university B and the rest from one university each. This could suggest that university A was extremely good at attracting mature dyslexic students, or that it was a larger institute than the other four universities. In fact, this particular university was smaller than any of the other institutions, with a much smaller mature student population. However, its publicity was excellent and all mature students were informed about the support available to students with dyslexia within their first week. This led to a significant number of mature students being initially tested for dyslexia by a resident dyslexia tutor.

This early publicity was key to dyslexic mature students being identified at a very early stage in the academic year, and led to university A having more respondents than the other institutions which were not as proactive in their mature student presentations. This imbalance in members at each of the respondent's universities confirms that the sample is an opportunity sample.

As the interviews progressed one respondent withdrew from their course after 5 interviews, and another after 7 interviews, the former stating that she found the whole university experience too difficult, from both an academic and psychosocial perspective, the later leaving for personal reasons but expecting to complete studies at a later date. They asked that their reasons for leaving were not to be used in the study, but said that their earlier experiences might continue to be used.

In addition to the main interviews with student respondents, interviews with five support staff, one from each university, provided additional useful information. These interviews lasted no more than two hours and were unstructured. They took place at the support units for the five universities, and aimed to gather information about the nature of the university's support service, and its aims and objectives in supporting dyslexic people. They were also occasions for support tutors to discuss their experience of supporting mature students in the university environment, and helped to clarify or add weight to the various experiences of the respondents in that setting.

In addition to interviews with members of support staff, a member of academic staff from each university with an interest in dyslexia support was interviewed for their views on

teaching and supporting mature dyslexic students in their university. These five academics were identified through the university support units, as staff who were trained as departmental dyslexia specialists. These five academics were also identified as lecturers for seven of the respondents in this study. These interviews took place towards the end of the academic year, as the academics felt they would know their mature dyslexic students better and provide more in-depth information.

Having decided on purposive sampling for this study and having explained how it was used to recruit dyslexic students, it is important to show the strengths and weaknesses of this method. Its strengths were that:

1. It allowed the study to look for a specific phenomenon – in this case the dyslexic experience of returning to education.
2. It gave the opportunity to work in enormous detail with a small number of respondents.

The approach was appropriate for this study as it recognised that researchers can, at times, only generate small numbers. Some potential participants who met the criteria were unable to participate, as they were too busy to meet the time commitment. In addition others might not have come to the notice of the support services because they regarded disability as a physical problem and did not want their dyslexia to be labelled in this way. Working with only ten participants was not seen as too problematic as in the recent past other studies have adopted a similar methodology with similarly small numbers. Weiler's (1998) school study

used only seven teachers and three administrators, and Knox's (2001) study of six disabled people used a grounded theory to explain the process by which:

> "...informants manage their relationships within their personal communities..." (Pg. 49, Knox et al, 2001)

These two studies suggest that it is possible to produce rich data with a small set of respondents. It also has to be noted that there are weaknesses in purposive sampling. A major problem is that this sampling may not give a valid and representative picture of the dyslexic mature student as the sample is too small. This could be a valid criticism as a larger sample might yield a more complete picture. Yet there is a fine balance between the benefits of an in-depth study and the limitation of a small sample. Bearing in mind the weaknesses of purposive sampling, the non-probability sample in this investigation enabled the researcher to look in depth at the mature dyslexics' experiences, and gather a rich set of data that shows the breadth of their experience.

Interviewing Method

Within this study a number of methods were used to collect data to look into the student (and staff) experience in education. By far the main source of data was the interview, as it seeks to understand the environment from the respondent's viewpoint:

> "...to unfold the meaning of people's experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations...." (Pg. 1, Kvale, 1996)

This particular method was used as it is flexible in the way that it deals with a raft of subject material that has different detail and complexity (Bremmer et al, 1985). A small highly factual questionnaire was also used, but this was to gather largely factual information about each respondent such as their age, d.o.b, contact details, qualifications, school dates and past employment details; these were administered at the beginning of the series of interviews.

Semi Structured Interviews

The interviews themselves were conducted with both staff and students using semi-structured and unstructured interviewing techniques. The semi-structured interviews were used to gain an insight into the experiences of those being interviewed (Kvale, 1996). When using this interviewing technique, the interviewer was able to alter the sequence of the interview to probe the respondent for more in-depth information (Fielding, 1995). Semi-structured interviews enable researchers to provide more in-depth information than the:

> "...standardised interview permits, but still provide a greater structure for comparability." (Pg. 111, May, 1997)

This in turn allows the respondent to tell their story, and give their views on important aspects of the research. This freedom is useful in guiding the research from a bottom up approach as it gives the respondents an ability to help steer the research's development.

Validity and Reliability in Critical Research.

The topic of this research was investigated by using qualitative research methods. It is thus important to see if the research is actually representing the site and social phenomena.

It is important to assess how far the study reflects the experiences of the mature dyslexic student within the educational system. It is further important to establish how the critical research method understands the ideas of validity and reliability. Harvey sees this as data being theoretically meaningful with:

> "...reliability and validity [as] functions of the context and the epistemological presuppositions that the researcher brings to the enquiry. So, for critical social research, data is important in order to ground the enquiry." (Pg. 8, Harvey, 1990)

The social and historic context means that validity and reliability needs to locate the gathered data, from each of the dyslexic students, in the perspective of the British educational site during the period of this study. This comes from understanding the educational system through research into policy, and having an open mind to the realities of the system, and not the pre-conceived ideas that the researcher might bring to it.

Researcher Intervention and Respondents' Trust

Speaking in the first person, my pre-conceived beliefs about the educational system and the state of dyslexic people within the educational system, needed addressing to ensure that the study obtained valid information about the dyslexic experience within HE, and not data that I felt was in line with my own experience. By self-recognition of my epistemological

assumptions regarding the educational system, I could attempt to counter my original motivation for undertaking this study: that dyslexic people face psychosocial problems within the educational environment and that research could improve the position of these people.

My preconceived ideas were likely to be based on the fact that I am a dyslexic man and thus am interested in understanding the respondents' issues. I feel that my openness in revealing my own disability encouraged the respondents to offer themselves to help in the study.

The respondents commented that they felt that I could empathise with their experience and this gave them the freedom to speak easily about their problems, even though some of their experiences of the educational world had been extremely difficult and they found it upsetting to articulate them.

My openness about my own educational disability has, in part, given the study a greater insight into the lives of the respondents by giving them the confidence that only a fellow dyslexic person may offer.

There were potential risks that my own dyslexia could have influenced my choice of questions and the interpretation of the data by only interviewing respondents who had similar educational needs to my own. In addition to this, the interpretation of the data could have been influenced by aspects of dyslexia experience that I also personally recognise, and thus I might be biased in my data analysis and presentation.

In attempting to address the issues above, as discussed later in this chapter, I sought to recognise my own assumptions by discussing my views with other researchers. This was an attempt to clarify my own pre-conceived ideas, and to ground them in the educational site prior to the start of the data collection, thus helping me to become more impartial. This was further helped by attending research seminars to train researchers to become passive observers, rather than instigators of a specific set of preconceived academic values. Building on these seminar sessions I was careful not to project my own experience of the educational site on to each of the respondents by directing questions, nor to react in one specific way to glean the data that would match my own experience or take the data in one specific direction. In respect of the interpretation of the data, I made great efforts to let the respondents guide the research process by consulting them at various stages to assist in making the outcomes as bias-free as possible.

Representative Examples of Research

Another aspect of the need for 'validity and reliability' in critical research is to ascertain if the research is a representative example of the British educational site. This requirement can be seen to work well in this study as the experience of dyslexic students, set within the wider adult educational field, is clearly consistent with material reported in the literature review. For example, in the main part of the study one respondent talked about teachers' attitude to her work:

"...if you've got teachers always putting you down, and your family are putting you down, it makes you not want to do it anyway. I think, in the end, they all won and I'm thick, I'm stupid, but I keep trying... The teachers would say I was being bloody-

minded and being awkward. It wasn't that I was being awkward, it was that I would read something and I would read it again and I wouldn't understand what I was reading..." (Female Respondent)

This is consistent with the comments of a member of Riddick's (1997) sample:

> "I did become singled out at school because he took to reading things I had written and he used to red ring them, and he kept on saying, 'you're so stupid, you should be neater...that wounded my self-esteem appallingly..." (Pg. 41, Riddick, 1997)

It is also consistent with the memory of one of McFadden's (1995) respondents:

> "...I was told that I would never get anywhere ... and I mean, that's still affecting me now, you know what I mean? And it takes a time for you to realise that it's only a stupid teacher." (Pg. 49, McFadden, 1995)

These three examples, reporting similar experiences, show that there is a link between this study and the wider literature: they show a shared experience in all three samples when talking about their negative school experiences, before they returned to education.

Highlighting these comparisons suggests that one reason that dyslexic adults come back to education is as a reaction to their earlier negative experiences in the school environment. Providing more of these examples, to highlight the mature dyslexic experience and its link to

the British educational system, suggests that this investigation in to the dyslexic students' world is both valid and reliable.

Alternative Ways of Researching

Having identified how I have influenced the study it is important to see if this study could have been carried out in a different way, if the opportunity had been available. This consideration is based around the question of access to the educational environment by using an alternative method and research approach in addition to data collection and presentation.

Starting at the beginning of the study it is important to consider if there could have been an alternative way to have gained entry into the educational site. Key to the earliest part of the study was the support staffs' help in allowing me into their universities. These support coordinators and lecturers were crucial in their support of the study and if it had not been for them granting me access to their students, there would not have been an opportunity to interview the respondents. Another approach could have been to speak to outside organizations, such as dyslexia support groups, and self-help groups about their membership and how they experienced education, but it was felt that these groups were, on the whole, not focussed in HE and would not have had a broad enough spread of people studying at different universities throughout the UK. This assumption was confirmed when approaching the Dyslexia Institute who commented that their membership would not satisfactorily fit within the remit of this study. This study relied on the assistance of each

university's disability support staff, and their subsequent help in finding students. Without their help this study could not have been carried out.

Accepting that the support staff at each institution were key in the location of respondents, it is important to consider if the investigation could have been carried out using a different method and research approach, with a different data collection tool. As mentioned above, critical social research is dedicated to giving knowledge:

> "...which engages the prevailing social structures. Critical researchers, in one way or another, see these social structures as oppressive social structures." (Pg. 2, Harvey, 1990)

Alternative Research Approaches

As this study aims to identify the true social structures within its social sites and critical social research is committed to helping un-earth these structures, the use of critical social research seems appropriate. Other research approaches, for example symbolic interactionism, do not have the same commitment as this study's use of Critical Social Research. Symbolic interactionism focuses on investigating the dynamic social interactions which occur between individual people. By looking closely at the:

> "...interaction itself as the unit of study, the symbolic interactionist creates a more active image of the human being and rejects the image of the passive, determined

organism. Individuals interact; societies are made up of interacting individuals. " (Pg. 23, Charon, 1979)

Symbolic interactionism emphasises the interaction and perspectives that are behaviour traits of human beings. Symbolic interactionism could have been useful in this study by showing how the individual respondents interact as dyslexic people within their changing educational environment. It would not, however, have been committed to uncovering the potential oppression that the dyslexic student community faces in this specific educational environment.

As this study aims to reveal sources of oppression within the educational site and to expose the various psychosocial effects that these oppressions bring, the problem with using other research approaches is the lack of commitment to revealing the oppression that dyslexic mature students face in their educational site. If this oppression had not been identified, by using a research approach with less commitment to uncovering oppression, the data would not have been nearly as rich.

Alternative Data Collection

Looking at data collection and the dyslexic learner's experience of education, it is important to consider whether another method could have been more appropriate. As this research aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the educational site and the position of the respondents within that site, the acquisition of that information had to come through the voices of the students themselves with unstructured and semi-structured interview

techniques, which added to the rich data from the other documents and sources. Questionnaires and structured interviews were seen as too formal and restrictive, as all of the students were dyslexic and it was felt that they would not be happy filling in long questionnaires; also they needed to feel comfortable to talk freely about their own personal experiences, without the need for the formality that structured interviews would have imposed. In addition to this, the formality of structured interviews, and questionnaires, might have restricted the respondents in helping to guide the research process.

The flexibility of semi-structured interviews helped to provide rich data while exploring the students' experience. These interviewing techniques were used to increase the chance of respondents feeling that they could talk openly about their experiences of education and influence the research process. This flexibility can be seen in the main part of the study, when the series of interviews started by asking what was important to the respondents as dyslexic students at their university. To further give the respondents the notion of flexibility, they were offered the opportunity to read the interview schedule before the interview started. This gave them control of the schedule contents for that session, as they could alter any of the items if they found that various questions were not consistent with the key theme of that session. There were only two occasions where students offered an opinion, and the schedule was altered there and then. These alterations were noted in field notes before the interview started and the reasons for the alterations were incorporated in the write-up of the study.

When using interviews for research in this manner, there needs to be consideration of a potentially "powerful experimenter" effect (Goffman, 1967). The syndrome, in this case, relates to the respondent giving answers to the questions that he or she feels that the

interviewer would expect to hear, and not a true picture of their own experience. This need not imply that respondents might have been "lying", but rather that the researcher could have influenced their replies in a variety of subtle ways. However, it is possible to guard against this possibility. A key factor that suggests that the respondents were giving valid replies is that they recalled similar experiences to each other in their separate educational journeys. This was further reinforced by the consistency of each individual's experiences throughout the interview sessions. At the data analysis stage many much smaller and more covert similarities became evident, such how school teachers and university lecturers view the nature of dyslexia. Also there were gender similarities, for instance the female respondents spoke quite differently to the male respondents about their perception of classroom shame in comparison to lecture hall shame. Overall, the data suggest that, on the whole, the respondents gave a truthful and accurate portrait of their experience of the educational site under investigation.

Assisting Dyslexic People

In addition to looking at the accuracy of the respondents' experiences, it was important to critically reflect on how the research process itself might actually help dyslexic people. This is a very subjective question but one that could be answered in several stages:

1. The students commented that the interviews had caused them to reflect on their own position and gain more understanding of their own disability.

2. The students who took part in the study were also helped, at a personal level, by the researcher's ability to answer their questions on specific matters, such as help with various software issues.

3. Helping the students come to terms with their dyslexia was not an intentional aim, but turned out to be an important aspect of the study. This was borne out when the students said at the end of the interview sessions, that they were feeling more confident about their position within the university and could show a more positive picture of their dyslexia to their lecturers, and also back at home to their family and friends. This outcome is significant as it challenges the negativity that can often surround dyslexic people in education. The students were then able to pass on their knowledge about dyslexia to other people, both within the academe and in the community, hopefully helping to reduce barriers by challenging pre-conceived ideas, and helping create inclusivity within the community.

4. It is also important to consider how this study could have affected each university's provision for this group of people. There was no data on how, and if, the study affected policy in any sense. Nevertheless the staff interviews could well have caused introspection, and thus created a forum for development. This would be difficult to confirm, but the research may have heightened awareness among some lecturing staff of their mature dyslexic students by showing the staff that there was a concern for this group of their students.

Validity and Reliability in Grounded Theory

Moving on from looking at how reliability and validity is tackled by critical ethnography through a process of critical reflection, it is now important to see how Grounded Theory deals with this situation.

Validity is an issue that is dealt with by getting the researcher to develop theory to make a commonsense fit, with a relevance to its participants and audience. This relevance has to be accessible to the people within the study:

> "...in the sense that it describes some aspects of their everyday experience which they recognise." (Pg. 65, Layder, 1993)

Respondent Led Validity

If Grounded Theory's outcomes are to be valid, then they need to be recognisable to those taking part in the research. Respondents must not only recognise their own experience in the data, but understand and see the similarities with other respondents' experiences. It is thus important that the respondents agree with the grounded theories developed, as it needs to reflect their understanding of the educational scene and their place and experience within it. To validate these grounded theory findings, I was able to speak to the respondents at various stages in the research, to ascertain their opinion of the findings; these findings were largely considered to be valid explanations.

Grounded Theory approach was used throughout the data analysis period by a mixture of becoming extremely familiar with the transcriptions and the recordings of the respondents,

and by generating codes which, when brought together, made up categories and sub-categories that helped illuminate the students' experience. An example of this was the category of *Negative Self Responses to Dyslexia.* This category looked at any non-academic responses to feeling academically unable as school pupils. This category led to two sub categories which were: *Physical Abuse,* and *Depressive Abuse.* These identified areas such as self abuse cutting, bullying, depression, truancy and vandalism amongst other issues.

By utilising this process, various theories emerged which, over time, became more and more refined. As a way of making sure that these theories were valid, the students were asked to comment on the theories, in relation to their experience. Reassuringly these theories and explanations received positive feedback.

Turning away from Grounded Theory and its relationship with validity, it is important to look at Grounded Theory and its commitment to reliability. One interesting suggestion for dealing with reliability was to replicate the study. This would mean asking another dyslexic person to research the same group of dyslexic mature students in Higher Education. This would, naturally, be difficult. Research can never be replicated with complete accuracy (Chentiz and Swanson, 1986), even with Grounded Theory, as each study requires the researcher's analysis:

> "...which includes the researcher's skill, creativity, time, resources, and analytic ability." (Pg. 13, Chentiz and Swanson, 1986.)

So when looking at grounded theory and reliability, one should understand that the theories generated from this study should be available for use in a similar study, and help other researchers to understand and interpret the mature dyslexic experience of education (Chentiz, 1986). So if this study were to be used by other researchers in the future, they would be able to take the results and use them in other similar situations such as the experiences of dyslexic adults moving on to postgraduate education. As there may not be another study to test the robustness of this study's investigation of the educational site, it is important to make sure that this study is confident that the theories generated are reliable. This has been achieved by comparing the findings from this study to the findings from previous research, seen in the literature review. These do, on the whole, confirm that many findings from this study provide a reliable insight on the educational world of the mature dyslexic student. Others, however, seem to be original, as will be discussed in the results.

Transcription and Reliability

After looking at the reliability of the methods, it is important to consider how the transcriptions played a part in influencing the study. Many of the interviews were transcribed, both in the first and second stages. This was a mammoth task, often taking between 8 and 11 hours to transcribe each interview, depending on length of time and quality of recording. This huge amount of time was both tiresome and demoralising, especially as for a dyslexic man such tasks were extremely difficult. It was decided that some transcription help should be provided; this was arranged in the main study.

Transcription by the researcher is seen as the best way to fully understand the data, as the researcher is fully immersed in the voices of the respondents. Critics could argue that taking

this responsibility away from the researcher will limit their contact with the detail, and that there was a potential for the transcriptions to be inaccurate. These problems were dealt with by the researcher becoming extremely familiar with the texts from all ten respondents, and reinforcing the texts by reading and listening to the interviews simultaneously. This double reinforcement helped me to become immersed wholly in the interviews and, with the help of field notes, I was able to become very close to the data, gaining as good, if not a better understanding, than if they had been self-transcribed. Equally important, although the researcher had help with the transcriptions, he retained responsibility for the data analysis.

Another aspect of reliability was the quality of transcriptions from the recorded interviews. Due to the situation of the recordings (quiet rooms, undisturbed) and the high quality portable digital recorder, the interviews were, but for two recordings, all of extremely high clarity and quality. The two interviews that were not high quality recordings had to be glossed and corrected in various places. This action, in turn, created a situation where the reliability of the transcription, and thus data, could have been called into question as it could be seen to have been misleading or a misrepresentation of the students' words. There were only two incidents in this category, and the researcher asked the students concerned if they would read the transcription of the interview, to see if it was an accurate record of their views. In both cases the students were happy with the transcriptions and said that both interviews represented their experiences of the educational site.

Bearing in mind the methodological and theoretical checks on reliability and validity there is some confidence that this study provides a representative picture of dyslexic mature students within Higher Education.

Triangulation

Triangulation involves employing more than one method to expose multiple aspects of one empirical reality. By looking at an object from several standpoints, researchers are able to gain more knowledge regarding the site they are investigating. There are two main types of triangulation: Inter-method triangulation, and intra-method triangulation (Denzin, 1989. Inter-method uses two or more completely different types of research methods, and Intra-method uses different techniques, but from the same method. Triangulation is useful as it enhances the possibilities of researchers gaining a representative picture of the site. There are four advantageous reasons for using triangulation according to Saratakos (1998. p169).

1. To obtain a variety of information on the same issue
2. To use the strengths of each method to overcome the deficiencies of the other
3. To achieve a higher degree of validity and reliability
4. To overcome the deficiencies of single-method studies

This process is, therefore, designed to assist the researcher in gaining a fuller insight into the site under study.

Some researchers feel that triangulation has its negative points. These concerns include the lack of evidence:

"...that studies based on triangulation necessarily produce more valid results. Even if all diverse methods support each other's finding, all findings might be invalid." (Pg. 55, Sarantakos, 1998.)

This is further echoed by the work of Lamnek (1988) who claims that triangulation raises various methodological questions. These are based around the theory that some methods are more rigorous in specific situations than others, and may confuse the picture of the site under investigation.

In the study I have used triangulation as it is widely seen to be part of a thorough qualitative research process (Denzin et al, 1998). This is to build up as detailed a picture of the mature dyslexic student's reality as possible. I used an intra-method form of triangulation by repeating some questions at different points in the cycle of eight interviews. This technique helped to gradually build up a detailed picture of the site under investigation. This attention to triangulation aimed to give as much detail as was possible to demonstrate the reality of the mature dyslexic student's experience.

Ethical Considerations

Whilst undertaking such a study it was important to identify ethical issues that might arise. These issues needed to be identified for their intrinsic importance, but also to comply with various departmental and university ethics committee regulations.

Whilst preparing for the pilot study, I sought advice regarding the ethical implications of this study. This was to make sure that I put the needs of the respondents first, and that there was transparency in all aspects of the data collection. This involved making sure that the respondents were completely aware of their commitment to the study, bearing in mind that they were free to withdraw at any point, and of their role in providing data, much of which was extremely personal to them.

In order to identify any ethical considerations I completed a research form for approval by the University's Human Participants' Advisory Committee. This required a brief overview of the proposed study, examples of the types of respondents involved and any materials to be used, such as substances administered, samples taken and risks involved. None of these risks were involved in this particular study, but it was identified that there could be stress involved if respondents revealed intimate information about their personal lives. In an attempt to minimise this personal stress or distress, I identified several measures:

1. I carried details of the various counselling services available at each university, making sure that these counselling services were aware of my study, and that respondents might call upon their services if the research touched upon an area that caused them difficulties.
2. I made sure each respondent knew that they could talk confidentially to me outside of the interview session about any matter arising from the research.
3. All of the disability support services were aware of this study, and were briefed that various respondents might talk to them about any issues raised.

4. An independent dyslexia support tutor, with professional experience in counselling, could be called upon if a respondent wished talk about issues raised in the study. The independence of this counsellor meant that she could travel to any of the five universities, and talk in confidence with the respondents.

These measures to protect the respondents were not formally exercised by any of the respondents. They felt that they could seek help from within their own family and friendship structures, as can be seen later in the study.

Another ethical consideration was my own offer of advice to each respondent. As agreed, each respondent became involved in the study, and during the field work they would ask questions regarding their own dyslexia and how their responses compared with other respondents. This created an ethical difficulty as it could potentially cause a problem of identification, especially as five of the respondents were members of one university. In addition to this, at the period towards the end of their first years, three respondents recognised that they were receiving less support than other similar students at other universities. This caused more questions to be asked. In response I asked the respondents to take up any matter of support provision with their university support unit. This satisfied the respondents, and the support unit staff were also satisfied that I had acted in a correct manner.

Another request arising from my research was to help respondents with technical difficulties by way of their dyslexia specialist computer software:

"...I've just remembered, I don't know how you [to] start my [specialist software]. D'ya think you'd show me, after wards?" (Male Respondent)

This had the potential to be perceived as excessive help. I minimised my actions to simply helping them to understand various aspects of the software, and not to assist them in their academic work.

Anonymity

During negotiations for the pilot study, two respondents felt that they were not happy to be identified as taking part in the study. Neither were they happy to adopt a pseudonym as they felt that this could potentially be traced back to them, and their position in their university could be compromised. Accepting this, and recognising that they would only agree to give clear and personal information if they were to remain totally anonymous, it was agreed that along with the other pilot respondents, they would not be named, nor be linked to their particular university. By respecting this, they were happy to be interviewed. In the main study, the respondents were given the same option to remain completely anonymous; each of the respondents agreed:

"No, it's been best that, like, other people don't ever know my name." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I'd better not have my name or anything, people might know in your research...
>
> Best to leave my name or another name [pseudonym] alone." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "For fuck's sake, don't put my age down! I don't want them to know that, never mind knowing where I'm at uni., or anything they'd know it's me. I won't say anything if you do!" (Female Respondent)

All of the respondents were in agreement that they would be happy to provide data if they were to simply be named according to their sex, and be placed within a broad age range. They also agreed that their university would not be named, but they could be linked to a code which would identify them with other respondents at the same institution. Finally they were not happy with being attached to their city or town, as this might identify them to their place of work, which would not be identified. All of these wishes were respected in their interviews, and in the writing up of this study.

To confirm that these measures were met, a consent form was signed by each respondent. This form was based on the University of Durham's standard consent form, designed by the ethics committee. These forms were all signed and returned. An example of this form can be found in the appendix.

In addition to these ethical matters I needed to take into account the ethical considerations of disseminating data from the study. So far, this has involved dissemination at research

seminars, and eGroups, but conference presentations and publications are planned. Once this investigation has been completed I plan to disseminate the findings to local disability and educational organisations. The results will also be made available to the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities. This organisation helps disabled students in education. Another organisation is Disability Equality in Education, who may benefit from the findings as they plan their training workshops in the wider educational field. In addition to local and national organisations, a summary of my work may assist the LEA and the DfES.

Choice of Theory and Data Analysis and the Choice and Role of Theory

As noted in chapter 3 (Pg. 68) grounded theory was used in data analysis. Grounded theory aims to generate theory from any type of pertinent data. The theories that come from grounded theory are substantive, formal and cumulative theory. Greater detail will be given to these later in the chapter, but first we look at the role of theory within research. This can be summed up well by Giddens (1997) who claims that theory helps to:

> "...identify general properties which explain regularly observed events." (Pg. 586, Giddens, 1997)

Theory aims to give a clear interpretation which will help to build up an understanding of the ways that individuals or groups interact together.

The theory developed will give a clear interpretive understanding of the dyslexic student's experience within the study set against different backgrounds. It is worth remembering that the interpretation is primarily concerned with the research questions rather than questioning

the accuracy of the social site. Strauss (1994) claims that theory is provisional, as there is not only one way to interpret data. He says that various knowledge theories are time limited:

> "Researchers and theorists are not gods, but men [and women] and when living in certain eras, immersed in certain societies, subject to current ideas." (Pg. 279, Strauss and Corbin, 1994)

Interpretation is vitally important in theory, but bias is one aspect that should be removed if at all possible. This is very difficult as the researcher may not realise that he or she will be influencing the work under investigation and thus could create a bias, favouring one group rather than another. It is always worth remembering that someone else may have a different opinion and that any explanation is provisional and someone else may wish to develop any proposed theory.

If theory is subject to interpretation and bias it is open to differing interpretations that ask: 'why should one explore theories'. An explanation could be that as researchers there is an obligation to:

> "...social worlds toward which we have commitments. These commitments carry responsibilities to develop or use theory." (Pg. 174, Strauss and Corbin, 1998)

So looking closely at the data coming from this study, should help to establish a picture of the student experience. By exploring this, the study aimed to present this picture to a wider

audience, showing the barriers that dyslexic people have faced, and continue to face within the educational environment. With this approach, future researchers may be able to develop recommendations which may help to advance the situation of disabled students in higher education.

Grounded Theory – Substantive Theory

Whilst seeking an explanation for research events or occurrences through the use of Grounded Theory analysis there is a need to generate a substantive theory. This substantive theory is gained through using a comparative method which compares groupings of:

> "...both maximum and minimum similarity as the most powerful means of generating substantive and formal theory because of its coverage of many diverse properties. (Pg. 43, Strauss and Corbin, 1998)

This particular method helps the researcher to investigate various similarities and differences within the data which will assist in the explanation of the situations that the social group are located within.

Within the social site, substantive theory attempts to explain various areas that are important to the group under investigation. In this study substantive theory can help the reader to understand 'substantive areas' such as the respondent's understanding and experience of work before they returned to university. A full example of substantive theory in the compulsory setting could be that respondents experienced bad academic relationships with

various school teachers, because those teachers had no knowledge of dyslexia and its effects on the respondents' school experience.

Grounded Theory – Formal Theory

After Substantive Theory there follows the necessity to generate a formal theory. This is also created by using the comparative method. Formal Theory's main objective is to supply a general conceptual interpretation generated from the data which is founded on the substantive explanations. It refers to general and formal aspects of the research area such as organisation and their authority.

Within this study, formal theory shows ways in which the educational system may be able to assist the opportunities available to the dyslexic community. Substantive and Formal theories both need to be utilised within this study as they give both the micro and the macro account of the data. This is illustrated by Layder (1993) who uses the camera as an example of a tool that focuses on a limited visual field, but does not include the wider context:

> "This may lead to a distorted idea of what the photograph depicts. For example, a close-up of a group of people who are smiling and waving to the camera may veil the fact their surrounding circumstances may be grim." (Pg. 61, Layder, 1993)

This then means that it is paramount to look at the wider implications of the study, to see why members of the group react to various encounters in various ways. An example within this study could be a respondent who has a negative attitude towards education; this could

be attributed to the lack of dyslexia understanding in the wider world, which in turn affected the school environment for the respondent. This example shows how formal theory gives the study a setting within formal society and shows how important it is to have the ability to go beyond the:

> "...local setting of the research and to engage with general level formal ideas." (Pg. 141, Coffey and Atkinson, 1996)

By looking at the macro view to come from this study, formal theory can help provide a more general theory that *could* help look at disabled adults within various structures, like the H.E. sector, and possibly wider, to society as a whole.

Grounded Theory and Cumulative Theory

After developing the formal theory, it is important to link the various substantive and formal theories into a cumulative theory (Layder, 1993). This cumulative theory brings together the data pertaining to the respondents' experiences, and merges them with understandings of the site around them. By bringing these theories together, it becomes possible to generate an overarching theory based on a highly rigorous analysis. If this were not done, and all of the information were presented via smaller theories, they could be viewed as merely:

> "'...respected little islands' of (mainly substantive) knowledge." (Pg. 44, Layder, 1993)

It is of paramount importance to forge a link between substantive and formal theory. Without this link any recommendations coming from the data would be limited to that particular social site. Linking the two theories can show specific barriers that dyslexic students find within Higher Education, and these could be located within the wider society to widen the understanding of the position of dyslexic people. So it could be said that the category of 'Pre-HE experience', which Cumulative Theory developed from the respondents, suggests that there is restricted understanding of dyslexia throughout society. This means that Cumulative Theory can be used to show areas of society that require change.

Grounded Theory and the Educational World

Once substantive and formal theory have made way to create cumulative theory, it is important to forge a link with existing social theories of society (Layder, 1993). Making a link between this study and the wider social world, will put this study of dyslexic students returning to education within the wider social setting.

This study describes the respondents' experience within wider society. That involves comparing the respondents' experience with past literature on mature dyslexic students in education; this will be discussed later in the study. By placing the findings in the context of various policy developments in the education sector (e.g. Tomlinson Report, 1995) one can see if these policy developments are, or are not, helping disabled people, such as dyslexic mature students. Placing the dyslexic student's university experience in the current context of the educational system potentially gives insight into the position of dyslexic students. This action is undertaken by looking beneath the reality of the educational site, investigating

the respondents' experience and aligning it with developments to help mature dyslexic students. By undertaking this, the study aims to identify the various barriers that mature dyslexic people face both in considering a return to education, and within the educational field once they are there.

Coding of Data

Coding is a way of breaking down the data and afterwards putting it back together in a different way. Coding is the:

> "...central process by which theories are built." (Pg. 57, Strauss and Corbin, 1990)

Conceptualisation of data (coding) requires data to be broken down into smaller bites to make it more manageable, and then putting them into categories ready for analysis (Denscombe, 1998). This aspect of the process helps the researcher to find explanations for the data. An example could be that coding could help explain why some mature dyslexic people went to one specific HE institution, rather than another.

Labelling is an important aspect of the coding process, and this is necessary for the conceptualised data. This conceptualisation period requires the researcher to become immersed in the data in order to understand the various key aspects of the experiences that the respondents are telling us about. With this understanding the researcher needs to make informed decisions on how to give each category a specific name. There are three important ways in which this can be achieved:

1. Gather category names from the respondent's own words. This uses their words to make the study more inclusive and not only gives the respondents a voice within the study, but in the formal structure of its framework and presentation.
2. Simply make up a name for a category that seems to fit in with the nature of that category.
3. Find names that have been used before for that specific area of research. This can come from past studies, or technical professional words. (Strauss, 1996; Cofey et al 1996).

In this study, the words from the respondent's interviews provided most of the category labels. The reason for this was that the respondents were giving such rich data, that they were virtually speaking the category labels, which meant that the study became self-developing and thus there was little need to need to look elsewhere (Coffey et al, 1996). This approach was very useful in category naming, as it offered a bottom-up approach from the substantive area.

> "...when I came to [university] it was like: 'what am I doing now...." (Female Respondent)

This theme of 'where am I now' became one of the categories and is a heading used in chapter seven. By building-up codes in this way, it became possible to develop higher-level codes, such as investigating beyond 'what am I doing now' to further examine 'am I studying the right degree' which came from:

"Once all the work started I thought about the other students' work and thought: 'Am I studying the right degree?' " (Male Respondent)

As this study was grounded in the reality of the respondents' experiences of education, it was important to develop *in vivo* codes that gave the theories a real sense of being as objective a piece of research as possible.

Once the conceptualised data was labelled, Grounded Theory's next phase looked for themes and relationships in the data, looking at various patterns with data in common or data with differences.

By using the constant comparative method I was able to look for inter-connective themes that emerged between the categories and separate research units in the data (Denscombe, 1998). This stage of Grounded Theory methodology helps researchers to find anything that is similar or different in the data, through looking at the various themes and sub-categories and observing patterns.

To get a clearer idea of how Grounded Theory was used in this study it is important to show how this process was executed, and how useful it is in identifying the experience of dyslexic students at school, work and university.

The diagram below shows the various phases that the research data passed through to produce a research outcome. Phase one was mainly concerned with the preparation of the

data to be placed into categories, by in-depth familiarisation with the data. This meant a total immersion in the data by reading and listening to the interviews, which gave rise to the preparation for coding. This familiarity is important as the coding requires enormous concentration and a good memory for making future links between possible topics of interest. The second phase required breaking down and labelling. This started by identifying important core categories coming from the students' experiences. Having identified these core categories, it was crucial to locate respondents' thoughts on what was important in those core category areas, once they had read them through. An example of this is:

> "Getting into university was, I thought, the biggest problem, but when I got here, well, it's about remembering about school, wasted time at work, trying to write…"
> (Male Respondent)

The third phase was the move from substantive to the conceptual level. This involved looking for relationships within and between the data. See diagram on Pg. 137.

Computer Aids to Analysis

Much modern research has an element of computer aided analysis to assist in the production of data. Researchers use IT in qualitative studies as it assists in transcriptions and:

> "…memoing, for preparing files for coding and analysis." (Pg. 11, Weitzman and Miles, 1995)

There are various rewards in the use of this type of technology as it helps to complete a variety of routine work and gives the opportunity to develop highly structured theories based around the data. (Morrison et al 1998). This software has been criticised by Becker (1993) who states that software-led analysis can often give simplified or descriptive results. Seidel et al (1995) claim that software can potentially estrange the researcher from the data by reducing the process of analysis to a mechanical computerised process.

For Grounded theorists Atlas.ist or Nvivo are extremely popular packages. Morrison, (1998) views such packages as both beneficial and disadvantageous. The advantages were:

Diagram to show the various stages and steps of categorisation of data when executed using Grounded Theory.

First Phase:

Familiarisation with data

respondents.

First Stage:

i. *Listen to recordings of*

ii. *Read transcriptions.*

Second Phase:

Break down data and label

Second Stage:

i. *Identify core categories.*

Third Stage:

i. *Read text to find key aspects relevant to category under investigation.*

Fourth Stage:

i. *Identify data commonality.*

Fifth Stage:

i. *Arrange data into sub-categories.*

ii. *Give category a label.*

Third Phase:

Link associations

and themes between data.

Sixth Stage:

i. *Find associations between categories.*

ii. *Find associations between sub-categories.*

iii. *Find associations between sub-categories and categories.*

Seventh Stage:

i. *Write up.*

"collecting and archiving data in automatic (or semi-automatic) and unobtrusive ways; keeping any available information (e.g. the sender, recipient, subject, date and time of an electronic message) in different logical fields." (Pg. 4, Paccagnella, 1997)

Negatively he identified that this software package could not replace moments of:

> "...intuition when the relationships between concepts crystallise in the researcher's imagination." (Pg. 115, Morison and Moir, 1998)

Dey (1993) criticises such programmes as being restrictive and not allowing the researcher to be creative within the analysis process. This could lead to a mechanical approach to the data analysis within Grounded Theory.

In this particular study the researcher tried to appreciate the uses of Nvivo as a piece of dedicated software. However, as a dyslexic man he felt that the size of the programme, coupled with the lack of disability-friendly options, such as spell checking, made the data process extremely tiring and troublesome. After much deliberation it was decided that using a word processor would be more advantageous as the researcher was well versed in its application and the find, cut and paste facilities. This view is echoed by Stanley et al 1996 who claims that for many researchers:

> "The facilities provided in a good word processing package will be sufficient to the analysis required, or, if not, the researcher would be best advised to use a dedicated package." (Pg. 168, Stanley and Temple, 1996)

Carspecken, 1996 shows that good, fast and reliable word processing programmes are often more advantageous than dedicated software as the researcher needs to be completely immersed in the data's interactions.

In addition to the above, Coffey et al, 1996 says that researchers should use all types of word processing software before relying on more dedicated software.

Theory to Field Work

After discussing the background to the production of this study, it now offers the opportunity to present the results of the field work of the interviews. The next five chapters look at the experiences of the respondents and discusses them in their context. Chapter five starts with a retrospective look at the school period experiences of the ten respondents.

Chapter Five: School Experience: Creating Failures

"There's no other word – it [school] was just shit, shit, fucking shit. I really hated it. Everything's stacked against you [at school] and you can't do nothing to stop it. They [teachers] didn't care a fuck about you, and you could just rot for all they fucking cared… I'd burn the fucking place down, with them in it if I could of; bastards." (Male Respondent)

Introduction

This chapter describes the respondents' experiences at school, all of which were in the state-maintained sector, at both primary and secondary areas in ostensibly working-class areas. Specifically the focus is on peer relationships, teacher relationships and motivation in the school setting and on the academic support they received. There is special emphasis on potential achievement and success within the classroom as well as teachers' experience of dyslexia as perceived by the respondents.

Teachers' Lack of Understanding of Dyslexia

Looking at the students' experiences of their school teachers it is interesting to note that they did not believe that many of the teaching staff were aware of dyslexia. The respondents believed that teachers and teaching support staff had next to no knowledge at all. This can be clearly seen in this respondent's statement:

"I remember a tall, fat teacher telling me, in front of all of the other pupils, I's a waste of space. 'Why can't you do the simplest of things [respondent's name]?' He'd say, and 'are you stupid', and 'what's wrong with you'? He'd show the other pupils my work and [then] tear it out saying it's the work of a six year old." (Female Respondent)

Another respondent also remembers a similar incident:

> "[Teacher's Name] was her name, she was my maths teacher and she was a horrible woman, I still remember her to this day, used to single me out. She was my form tutor so I was always the target of her *insinuations* at times. 'Oh, this stupid person here doesn't know what she's doing. Would some person kindly explain to her?' "
> (Female Respondent)

This lack of knowledge about dyslexia and its effects meant that the respondents felt 'thick', and feeling that they were 'thick' made them feel unable to attain the academic success of their classmates:

> "She said I was thick so I knew I'd never be the same as the other kids in my class."
> (Female Respondent)

The interviews highlighted how the perceived negativity, and lack of positivity, displayed by the teaching staff made the dyslexic pupils feel that they were not part of the school environment, and thus were 'left out on a limb':

"I felt so bad, so different, I should of sat outside and only half listened to the lessons". (Female Respondent)

The outcome of this was that these dyslexic pupils became unwilling to ask their teachers for assistance because they expected to be scorned:

> " 'I haven't time for you, you're slowing everyone back', she'd say." (Female Respondent)

The interviews also showed that the respondents went on to resent time spent in the classroom, and disliked their teacher. As dyslexic pupils, they felt that they were used as a yard stick for a lack of academic ability in the classroom setting:

> " 'You don't want to be as slow as him do you, children?' Is another one, sort of like a song." (Female Respondent)

Identification of Dyslexia

It is worth noting that the respondents did not seem to think that their teachers knew about dyslexia and its effects. It could be that the teachers themselves did know and understand about dyslexia but did not recognise it in the respondents, or that they taught at a time when dyslexia was not widely known about in the classroom setting. If so, then why might this have been? One explanation could be a lack of instruction during their training course:

> "I assume my teachers were never taught about dyslexia when they were at university?" (Male Respondent)

Another view displayed was that their teachers were not receptive to learning about new developments in teaching practice:

> "They just didn't care about learning anything new, I think they just did the same thing year after year, and didn't want to learn new stuff like dyslexia… They'd been teaching for years, and they knew best." (Female Respondent)

These two responses suggest that the respondents' thought their teachers were not aware of dyslexia at all, and thus the teachers labelled them as educationally unable.

Dyslexia as a Term of Abuse

Looking further at the respondents' explanations, there is a clear sign that some teaching staff did have a little knowledge of dyslexia:

> "I was set to fail everything [exams] and one teacher said, 'it's as if she's dyslexic or something.' " (Female Respondent)

Another respondent states that his contact with this disability was shrouded in negativity:

"I was called dyslexic in a derogatory way at school... [a teacher] used to say, 'Are you dyslexic or what?' in a derogatory way. I couldn't do things how he felt I should, or could do them." (Female Respondent)

Hence the term 'dyslexia' was used by some teachers, indicating that this disability was known about to a certain extent; yet the examples of this happening were very few against the numerous other examples of respondents perceiving teaching staff as having shown no awareness. Even though two teachers had heard of dyslexia, the terms in which the disability was used were not helpful (Riddick, 2001). As the pupils were singled out in a negative manner, this made them feel stigmatised, not only by the teaching staff, but by contemporaries:

> "Teacher and kids laying in to me as thicky... They'd no idea how I was hurting." (Female Respondent)

This in turn highlights that the teachers were perceived as having little understanding of how deeply dyslexia could affect pupils.

These experiences show that perceiving teachers as having little knowledge of dyslexia could lead individual pupils to feel stigmatised in the classroom; moreover incomplete knowledge about the disability could make the dyslexic pupil feel marginalised by feeling different to his or her fellow pupils.

Parents and their Children's Education

The respondents noted two distinct parental attitudes towards their education. First, some parents tried to encourage their child to achieve academic success as the key to a successful future, even though their child had a poor academic record. Second, some parents gave up on their child's education once it became clear that they had a poor academic record.

According to the respondents, some parents were very positive in encouraging their children. They saw education as a key to their children's future. A respondent said:

> "My mum never had a career and wanted me to not just be stuck looking after loads of children, like she did. I think she wanted to live her fantasy life through me. I's a real disappointment for her, being told I wasn't able to learn owt. But I did want her to be proud of me, so I kept on trying. My dad wasn't bothered: 'a women's place is in the kitchen!' " (Female Respondent)

Another respondent commented:

> "...she wanted to be a good mother, so she tried to do her best. She wasn't a wordy woman, and would of love me to've been a little more, you know, able, but was resigned to my standard, even though she thought it was her fault for not pushing me harder, even though she'd look at my work and listen to me talk about how rotten I thought the teachers were, but she'd never do anything about the teachers; I think she was frightened of them." (Female Respondent)

These respondents felt that their parents did not understand what they were going through, even though they may have had suspicions that their parent might also have suffered with dyslexia:

> "Dad's writing was really bad, and he'd get Bs the wrong way 'round and Ds an all." (Female Respondent)

Having said that, these respondents claimed that their parents were not aware of dyslexia as an educational disability. Parents and teachers appeared to be unaware of dyslexia and its support needs as there appeared to be a vacuum as this respondent states:

> "If mum didn't know, or dad, or any of my mates, or even the fucking teacher, who the hell would know how to help me?" (Male Respondent)

Negative Parental Attitudes

There was also a problem with some parents finding it difficult to accept that they had an underachieving child. This negativity was seen in three of the respondents:

> " 'You're so lazy, can't you just do the work?' is the sort of thing he'd say. I was so embarrassed telling him I didn't understand what it was all about." (Female Respondent)

and:

"He'd say stuff like 'I'm not keeping you after 16 [years old]'. He thought I's fit for the bins, and so did I." (Male Respondent)

These examples show a lack of understanding, brought about by not understanding their child's disability. One respondent claimed that she thought that, just because all of her parents' friends' children appeared to go to (FE) college, that she should have gone; yet this respondent seemed to think that her parents expected too much from her, as far as academic matters were concerned.

The idea of failing, in the eyes of parents, was a constant experience, and one which meant that parents simply 'gave up' on their children, making them feel that they were not capable under any circumstance. One respondent spoke very clearly about his father's attitude after being told that his son would never achieve academically:

> "He thought I wasn't trying hard enough. He could speak to me really well, but felt I's lazy. It was at about that time my dad started to resent me. He'd worked in a manual job all his life, and I think would of liked to have worked indoors in an office, but now I was set to work manually like him." (Male Respondent)

This attitude was also echoed:

" 'Why can't you be like your brother' is the sort of thing he'd say. 'He can do it; he's good at it [academic work] all'. It used to make me feel terrible. He used to tell our family I was stupid, and never get a job. It made me feel ashamed 'cause there's no way of making it right." (Female Respondent)

These experiences show a parental attitude that might have originated from the parents' own schooling. By holding on to this view, and not recognising that education had moved on, the parents caused a split within the family between parent and child, which had a knock-on effect on the other children:

> "My brothers soon started to call me 'thick', and my parents wouldn't stop them doing it. I asked them [parents] to tell them [brothers] to stop, but they [parents] said I *was* thick." (Female Respondent)

This negative attitude became reinforced throughout the family, and the parents, by default, gave permission to label the child as 'thick'. This reduced that child's ability to succeed academically, as they started to believe that the labels were true:

> "After a while I believed I wasn't bloody able to do anything; I thought everyone was right: teachers, parents, brothers and friends. I could kill the fucking teacher for telling my dad I's stupid." (Female Respondent)

This sense of resignation was also experienced by another respondent:

"My dad and teachers all seemed to gang up on me, and after a while I gave in; yes, perhaps I was flaming stupid, and would always fail..." (Male Respondent)

If parents rely on schools for reliable information on their child's academic progress, whatever a teacher tells a parent about their child is taken as fact; so if the teacher is not aware of dyslexia and its effects, parents will assume that the child is not capable of the school work, and thus will not succeed academically. This lack of ability is accepted by parents and, as shown above, can be used against their child in the home and beyond.

Positive Teacher and Parental Attitudes

As seen earlier, not all parents reacted negatively to their children's difficulties (Osmond, 1993). Some positive reactions by parents helped to give confidence to their children, and even with their academic difficulties, their child attempted to persevere with their work:

"My mum used to say: 'just try your best, I know it's difficult, but you can only do your best.' " (Female Respondent)

and:

"'You're like me you know?' she'd say, and stuff like: 'give it your best shot, I'm sorry I can't help.' " (Female Respondent)

When the pupil did carry on trying, they felt there was a greater chance of their difficulties being discovered:

> "I thought if I just carry on a bit harder, it might get easier." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "Teachers were always surprised when I really tried, but it was never good enough really, but they did say some encouraging stuff at times, just not much." (Female Respondent)

Negative reactions put pressure on the family relationship and possibly did not give the dyslexic child the opportunity or confidence to make the most of their education at school; thus the chances of their dyslexia being formally recognised were significantly reduced.

Coping Strategies: Confidence and Rebellion

Many respondents spoke clearly about their coping strategies in response to being treated negatively. Many of them felt 'hard done by' and were keen to exact their revenge on teachers, parents and fellow pupils. This took several forms: truancy, bullying, vandalism, disruptive behaviour and school ambivalence.

Bullying

One respondent spoke of her response to being castigated:

> "I'm not proud of it now, but I'd do [bully] it straight after lessons. The teacher'd praise a girl for good work, and then bloody show me up as being thick in comparison to her. I felt really bloody bad, but had to let my anger out, so at the end of the lesson I'd get the goodie two shoes bitch. I look back, and see it's all my fault, but I had to get even for the teachers bollocksing me." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I'as really angry all the time. I'as like a fucking bomb ready to explode. Teachers were fucking crap to me. My parents were fucking crap as well. No one listened to me, so I made them, every day with my crapping fist." (Male Respondent)

Truancy

Trying to escape from school grounds was also an issue for two respondents. They felt bad about being 'locked-in' to an academic prison in which they felt out-of-place.

> "I hated RS [Religious Studies]. It was dull, and we had to read out loud, so I used to skip the class, every week until the school told my mum. The teacher'd pick on

me to read out loud; perhaps she thought it'd be good for me, but it made me feel bad, and the other kids would snigger. So I got away from it." (Female Respondent)

and:

"I needed to go, so I bloody well did. No way could I stay there, it was like a nightmare. I used to go to the pub, I looked big." (Male Respondent)

Vandalism

Vandalism was another response. One respondent talked about getting even with one teacher:

"He made me feel like shit. He'd wind me up because I was thick. The whole class knew, and watched me do it to his car. All the tyres down, smashed windows: front and side, and no lights; bastard." (Male Respondent)

Disruption

One respondent used to disrupt the classes as a way of getting out of work:

"I'd throw stuff 'round when I didn't understand stuff. Bang my table legs on the floor, and walk 'round acting up. If I didn't understand, no one would." (Female Respondent)

Mute Silence

Another way of responding was to simply sit in the class and not answer the teacher as a way of covering up that they had not, or could not read the text correctly:

> "He'd start shouting at me 'can you hear me?', then I'd look away. The other kids'd get more and more frightened when he shouted more and stuff. 'Are you stupid, answer me?' he'd say. It's funny to see him get more and more angry. At times I'd smile a bit, and that would make him *really* angry... I just didn't want to say something and get shouted at again and look stupid, it was best to say nothing." (Female Respondent)

Depression

Other responses to negative treatment would reveal themselves more covertly for example as depression (Boetsch et al, 1996), being bullied and self-harming (Maughan, 1994). These more personal issues would leave the respondent feeling that they would rather die than be subjected to school and its system:

"I wouldn't get out of bed. I couldn't face the teachers anymore. I wanted to take pills, but I didn't have the nerve. My mum thought it was all her fault, but she didn't see how it was at school. I couldn't read proper[ly], you needed to read at school, I was getting done [in trouble] all the time, I felt so bad." (Female Respondent)

Being Bullied

As discussed, bullying was shown to be a problem in the respondents' lives. Teachers' negative comments to respondents reinforced the bullying as it seemed to justify the bullies' actions:

> "My teacher just watched as they called me names, the same names she'd [teacher] called me earlier in the lesson. She was a real bad teacher, she could see me getting upset and crying, but she turned a blind eye when they were knocking me about." (Female Respondent)

This respondent felt that she was a loner in school because of her dyslexia, yet she also identified an underlying social skill deficit (Fisher, Allen and Kose, 1996) that may have played a part in her inability to make friends:

"What with my dyslexia and my attitude to everything, well it made me really exposed to them [bullies]." (Female Respondent)

Self Harm

Self harm, in the form of cutting, was mentioned by two of the respondents. They felt that they were so stupid and unable to play any useful part at school that they needed to hurt themselves in some covert way. This cutting made them feel better with themselves because they felt that they deserved it:

> "This fucking teacher actually set light to my workbook in a science lesson in front of the class. He was a trainee teacher and a real bastard. He said I'd never amount to anything, so that night I was so angry I cut myself, I was so worthless and [didn't] care anymore." (Female Respondent)

One respondent looked back at that stage in her life as self bullying:

> "I'd cut to control myself. I needed to try and get control of something in my life. I'd let out just enough for the day's problems at school." (Female Respondent)

Social Relationships with Other Pupils

The respondents spoke clearly about the relationships with their fellow pupils in the context of their educational experience. Some respondents had happy relationships at school, forming close links with a group of their peers:

"I had some really good friends, friends that'd help me. They'd let me look at their work and help me lots. I think they helped me because my mum and their mums were friends." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "One friend was really helpful to me; she'd go through spelling and stuff with me, but at the end of my third year she left, and that's when I started to get problems with my work." (Female Respondent)

This respondent had a happy relationship with her friend, but when her friend left the area, various cracks started to show in her work, and by the end of her first year of 'O' levels, she had been moved on to CSEs. This could suggest that her friend was an academic and psychological crutch for her, which helped her get through the first three years of secondary school, but when the support had gone, she started to underachieve.

Friends with Dyslexia

Two examples show that children with dyslexia can work well together both academically and in social interaction. There are many possible reasons for this. One could be that some respondents had friends who may have been dyslexic:

"He'd make the same mistakes as me with spelling 'their', 'they're' and 'there' type of stuff, so we'd both work it out together. It took ages, but it was good for us both." (Male Respondent)

Or it could be that the teachers that these friends had in common, were not negative in their attitude, but supportive:

> "Why weren't the other teachers like her? She could see that both of us were trying, but there was something wrong, even after explaining it 100 different ways." (Male Respondent)

This type of support gave the pupils confidence that there was someone in a powerful position to help them achieve academic success.

Pupils Modelling a Teacher's Negative Comments

In contrast, there were many examples of pupils picking up on the negativity shown by teachers:

> "It was like they were talking to each other about me. They wouldn't give me a chance, they were all saying bad things about me. I couldn't do anything right. "Mr [teacher's name] has told me about your bad spelling, and Mrs [teacher's name] has said that you don't pay attention". It started to get me down, and then my old

> school friends started to turn against me, saying that *they'd* turn out like Mr [teacher's name] said I was. It's as if I was ill." (Male Respondent)

Another respondent remembered her classmates copying her teacher by saying that:

> "They just said I's thick. Don't be friends with her, you'll catch thickness, thick's disease. You're dumb. You sit on the dumb table. It got to the point where I would buy sweets and ask them if they would like some sweets and be my friend. They would push me around. They'd walk past me and clout me with their bag. 'Oh, I didn't see you there, you sit on the thick table don't you?' " (Female Respondent)

and:

> "...why did they [teachers] have to do it? They made me feel really small, and I couldn't get any friends. I tried to make friends with a new lad, but the others warned him to keep away from me – I was too stupid. I can remember my mum being told I was finding it difficult to make friends at school, what a laugh, it was all their [teachers'] faults." (Male Respondent)

Negative and Positive Labelling

Although labelling will be discussed later in the study, it is important to further explain how various respondents were labelled, and how this affected them:

Negative Labelling

Three respondents spoke about their teachers labelling them negatively before they were diagnosed with dyslexia (Low, 1996), by using specific names:

> "They gave me the bloody name: clever clogs. It stuck with me for years. I's Clever Clogs at secondary school just 'cause I's so thick. Everyone called me fucking Clever Clogs. It's a label I just couldn't shift, just 'cause they thought I's thick and wanted everyone else to know about me being thick." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I don't mind being labelled dyslexic now, 'cause that's true, but they called me 'Einstein'. There's nothing I could do, they called it me right from primary school 'till I left to [go to] work. I couldn't get away from it. Whenever I went to a new class, the teacher would know pretty soon I was 'Einstein' and it's obvious why." (Female Respondent)

This negative name-calling, however paradoxical, instantly tarnished the respondents with a negative profile from an early age (Riddick et al 2000). One respondent remembers how a teacher was influenced by this:

> "I started the third year at [junior] school, and Mrs [teacher's name] said to us all, she wasn't going to read the reports from our last teacher, that she'd written about us. We had to try and impress her. I tried really hard so I could impress her and I did some writing, really neatly, and she said to everyone she thought my writing was so

neat it could of been done on a typewriter. Half the kids were stunned and the other half started mumbling I's thick and I cheated 'cause I's Clever Clogs. It really hurt. I remember then I stopped trying. I couldn't keep it up forever, and she'd soon find out... She [teacher] started calling me Clever Clogs an all." (Female Respondent)

Although the diagnosis of dyslexia came later in life for these respondents, it could be that if the respondents had been diagnosed with dyslexia, they would still have been ridiculed by fellow pupils:

> "I suppose they'd of had a go at me, even if they'd found out [diagnosed] about my dyslexia back then. It was really bad then, but if they knew there was a reason, you know – dyslexia, the teachers might of been more understanding, and this would of rubbed off on the other children. We'll never know I suppose? Not worth thinking about, it only upsets me." (Female Respondent)

Although this respondent recognised that she could not turn back the clock, she did feel that if her school had diagnosed her dyslexia, she might not have been labelled so negatively. This labelling can also be seen in the work of Osmond (1993), Edwards (1994) and Quicke et. Al (1994).

Positive Labelling

One respondent, in contrast to the above, was labelled from an early age, but one part of the label seemed to help her with her teachers and fellow pupils:

"Sporty Thicky's what they called me. I's really interested in football and could, then, run really quickly. The sporty bit came from that bit, but the Thicky's from being dyslexic, but I just thought I's thick then. Getting the sporty bit in first really helped, 'cause when I got to the high school they just called me Sporty. The Thicky bit went, well not always, but most of the time. The kids were different to me there and I really think it's 'cause the Thicky label went." (Female Respondent)

This respondent felt that the shortened form of her nick name helped her social profile, and placed more emphasis on her sporting abilities. If negative personal names bear the marks of sticks and stones then these three respondents certainly never forgot them.

Systems for Support in School

Various support mechanisms were discussed during the student interviews. Most examples were of individual support from classroom teachers, and remedial classes.

Help with Spelling Test

Spelling is the most frequently reported symptom of dyslexia (Klein, 1993), and for most British children spelling tests seem to be part of the natural day-to-day life in primary schools:

> "I remember having to learn long lists of words. There were about 20 a week to learn, and it *was* difficult, but, I would pass the test, and then forgot about it all. The spelling would never stay in there. [memory]." (Male Respondent)

and:

> "I hated it [spelling], and having to learn times-tables. It's no good to me; it'd make me ever-so upset on the night before.... I'd get a bad mark every time, and everyone would mark everyone else's work, so other kids knew how bad I was." (Female Respondent)

These spelling tests were used in all of the respondents' schools and, alongside times-tables testing, were the only time the respondents remembered a classroom teacher going out of their way to help them, as well as other children.

> "We'd have to build-up words and spell them out loud, and there'd be a small group, always of all the same kids, 'round the teacher's table trying to learn these words." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "Learning sums was the worst, but trying to remember times tables, yuk! Loads of us had to stay behind at the end of a Tuesday I think it was, and learn them like a song with no tune." (Female Respondent)

Peer Tutoring

In contrast to the general picture from research (Topping, 1998) peer tutoring was not perceived favourably:

> "My spelling was so bad, I was sent to the headmistress's office for the 'half past twelve lazy readers group'. This was really bad for me; all of us slow kids had to read our books, out loud, to other kids from our class who were really good readers. That was awful, 'cause the good readers feel like teachers." (Female Respondent)

This example of early 1980s peer tutoring seemed to make the respondents feel that the good reader peer was in a powerful situation over a poor reader peer and made them feel demoralised and sub-standard, both academically and socially. This contradicts research that views peer-reading as a positive part of the school's reading strategy (Damon and Phelps, 1989a; Trapani and Getlinger 1989; Fowler, 1986).

The Backward Child

The reason for teachers feeling that there was no need for additional support (other than standard spelling and times-tables support) could be that they had no understanding of what it was to be dyslexic; the teacher would simply see the child as a 'backward' reader, if not a 'backward' child. If the teacher had been aware of dyslexia and its effects, they could have accessed the various support opportunities available to them. Naturally, the follow-up

question to this has to be 'were there any support opportunities at the school in the first place?'

SEN/Remedial Classes

Another reason for a lack of dyslexia understanding comes from the system of provision for special educational needs within compulsory education (Riddick et al, 1997). When some respondents were seen to have difficulties, they were placed in a special group, often without any attempt to find out why the child was displaying difficulties:

> "It happened ever-so-quickly. My mum said the teacher wanted it to happen as she [teacher] couldn't help me learn. So I left my friends behind for lots of lessons and went to the stupid remmies." (Female Respondent)

This type of support group was often seen as a dumping ground for children who could not be taught in other mainstream classes, be it for academic or social reasons:

> "They were just thick and didn't want to work, but create [trouble]. They were the poor kids, or the slightly retarded kids who spoke funnily, I really didn't fit in...I was head of the class in my work, which made them hate me." (Male Respondent)

SEN Pupils and Friends

Some of the respondents felt that they began to lose their friends when they entered the remedial class. The stigma of being in the dunce group was enough to weaken friendships. Also some respondents did not want to make new friends within the remedial group of children, most of whom had no wish to learn:

"I started the remmies and my old friends thought I'd become [physically] disabled somehow. They'd call me Spastic Girl and Rem Face. But when I looked at the remedial group, they were all *really* stupid and thick. I felt like the most clever person in the world in comparison. I couldn't be friends with that lot." (Female Respondent)

Minimal Workload

The respondents who had been in remedial groups felt that the material they were expected to learn did not help them with their difficulties. They felt that they were just doing the bare minimum to get by. This minimalist approach to work started to frustrate some of the respondents:

> "It was so thick. My little sister could of done the work. I did it in half the time of the others, and used to sit around being bored. I am sure the remmy teacher knew." (Female Respondent)

This respondent also felt this in her remedial group:

"I felt like a second class pupil. We did stupid work like planting trees and learning to cut grass. The other kids would mess around, but I wanted to learn about real things, like the other [mainstream] kids were doing." (Female Respondent)

This grouping with non-mainstream pupils did very little to help the dyslexic respondents with their work. They felt that they needed specific help with their academic work and not to be given extremely basic tasks as an alternative. These alternatives made the respondents both angry and frustrated, as they wanted to learn about the same things as their mainstream contemporaries, but needed specific help to do so.

Cognitive Responses to Dyslexia

In the respondents' account of their schooldays there was a wide understanding of the ways in which they tried to help themselves with their academic work. As many respondents felt that they did not receive any help from school or home, they explained how they had tried to overcome their dyslexia difficulties through a range of measures, some successful, some otherwise. These measures included everything from teaming up with other friends to simply copying others' work.

Pencil and Pens

One respondent spoke about a seminal moment when his dyslexia became a real problem for him as he identified a motor skill issue (Fawcet and Nicholson, 1994):

"I must have been ten [years old] and we were told to use biros, and not pencils. I thought this was really grown-up, but the biro couldn't hide my mistakes, I couldn't rub out in a biro. Every mistake I did could be seen by the teacher. My work looked a mess… I used to practice at home in my bed so no one could see and, after a while, my pen writing was much better." (Male Respondent)

Another respondent also remembers the same feeling:

"My teacher was very disappointed with me. She said you couldn't cross-out [in pen] and I just wrote light[ly] with my pencil so I could rub it out. I went through a bad patch with the pen, so my teacher made me use a pencil again. The other kids called me 'pencil baby', but that made me want to use the pen more, so I found you could get pens with rubbers – that was great!" (Female Respondent)

Copying From Other Pupils

Writing from the blackboard on to the page was another issue identified by respondents explaining that they were potentially experiencing visual difficulties (Stein, 1994):

"I's in the choir, and my teacher wrote the words of the songs on the board, and we had to copy it. It [blackboard] was so fast, it hurt my eyes. The board would move 'round and I was so slow, I couldn't read what was being lost as it went 'round. I found copying off my neighbour was the best way, and it worked!" (Female Respondent)

Teachers moving too fast (Hatcher, 2001) with the work created a problem for respondents and all they could do was to look over a shoulder to catch-up. This coping strategy was also used by others, but some took it very seriously:

> "I just used to copy this lad's work. I'd steal his work and copy the answers. I'd get good marks." (Male Respondent)

A more honest system of self-help came from a respondent who would work with a table neighbour in his streamed class. He, with the benefit of hindsight, thinks now that his neighbour was also a dyslexic person, as they were experiencing the same difficulties, but instead of the 'blind leading the blind', they made good progress by pooling their knowledge:

> "It got to the stage where I couldn't do any work without him; I couldn't think on my own and we motivated each other, and for a long time, it helped me lots." (Male Respondent)

Discussion

In attempting to understand the situation that these respondents found themselves in, it is important to question their perception of the school environment, and most importantly the teaching staff who, according to the respondents, appeared almost universally to have little

or no understanding of dyslexia. The negativity that surrounded all of the respondents' memories, could be based on the fact that they remembered the negative scenarios, which were linked to their dyslexia and education in general as can be seen in the work of Bracken (1992).

In attempting to understand the reality behind their comments and often long-held views, it is important to recognise that respondents genuinely accepted as reality the oppressive regimes they suffered at school, and felt that their lack of positive education was due almost entirely to their teachers' lack of awareness of dyslexia and its effects.

This lack of dyslexia understanding, as perceived by many of the respondents, made the teachers look for other reasons why the respondents could not complete their academic commitments, giving rise to some respondents being labelled as lazy, stupid and slow. These potentially mis-diagnosed responses gave way to the respondents feeling that they were being treated as second-class pupils, which in turn gave rise to other pupils treating the respondents as second-class, as the teachers reinforced these labels of lazy, slow and stupid. According to some respondents teaching staff told their respondents' parents that they lacked educational ability, which led to tension within the home, and within the wider family.

With respondents feeling alienated in their academic and social environment, they tried to create compensatory schemes in an attempt to cover the effects of their dyslexia, such as scruffy handwriting (Miles, 1983) and truancy, but in more extreme cases some respondents seem to have given way to anxiety and depression (Maughan, 1994), and in the most severe cases, self-harm.

The impact of these scenarios was that the pupils left the school environment at the earliest possible opportunity to escape the education system, often vowing to never return.

When understanding and discussing the data generated from these interviews it is important to recognise the negative qualities that these respondents believed teachers and parents attributed to them. To work with the theoretical framework of the methodology theoretical issues need to be discussed in order to make sense of the data collected. These are handled separately creating a critique of specific findings.

Teaching Staff and Dyslexia

The respondents' perceptions of the teaching staff were that they were not skilled in dealing with pupils with dyslexia; indeed most the staff were perceived as displaying no relevant knowledge at all; that in turn affected the pupils, giving respondents a negative view of school, both at the time, and when looking back on that period:

> "Perhaps they did know about dyslexia, but they never said anything to me. I's just thick… Why did they get it so wrong?" (Female Respondent)

School teachers are in a powerful position within the dyslexic pupils' lives. It is essential to recognise that they have the ability to influence the academic prospects of the pupils, and in turn, how the pupils are recognised as individuals by their family and peers. In the wider setting, teachers also influence how society sees dyslexia. This influence can be seen in the

way that the teaching staff impose a negative or positive educational identity on the dyslexic pupil:

> "She [teacher] told my mum and dad, who told my nan and gramps. They all thought I was stupid. If she [teacher] found I was dyslexic, all of my family would of seen me differently now." (Male Respondent)

From the respondents' comments, there could be a class issue here, with this respondent's working class parents simply accepting the teachers' views. This might not have been the case if middle class/educated parents had been in contact with the teachers as shown in the work of Riddick (1997) who recognised that educated parents could possibly recognise that there might be a mismatch between their child's reasoning and literacy skills.

At school, in line with the work of Pumphrey and Reason (1991), many of the respondents came into contact with teachers who appeared to label them negatively. This perception of teachers as incorrectly labelling a pupil was almost universally reported, with the implication that the term *dyslexia* might not have been recognised by staff. One respondent believed that:

> "...if they [teachers] knew I's dyslexic, they'd of liked me, and I'd of gone to uni. years ago..." (Female Respondent)

Although this statement is logical from the respondent's perspective, it is highly simplistic as other relevant factors are not taken into account such as classroom dynamics, pressures on teachers and school policy.

All but one of the respondents, left school by the early 1990s, and half had left by the mid 1980s. This was a period of transition in provision for SEN within the British school system. The 1981 Education Act introduced far reaching changes, but these could not be implemented overnight. Teachers may have been unsure about their role in the identification of dyslexia, possibly perceiving it as being the duty of someone else: if a child was *special*, they would require *special* teaching, which might not be the responsibility of the classroom teacher. As one respondent explained:

> "...she [teacher] said I needed to move down to the remmy class. They knew what to do with my sort there. I was too thick and stupid for her class; she said she didn't know how to cope with me or my work, so I's sent to the dump [SEN class]." (Male Respondent).

Another explanation could be that the 1981 Act's statementing procedure was perceived as a time consuming and costly process. The 1980 and 1986 education acts required extra paperwork, and some schools regarded the administrative work required for a statement under the 1981 act as unacceptable. With all the other administrative paperwork in the everyday world of the teacher, there was little time for having to prepare a case for a pupil statement. Below are two examples of this. The first is a quotation from a member of a university support service who commented that, whilst classroom teaching in the 1980s, she and numerous other teachers simply passed over various pupils in an effort to keep up with their own administration:

"It's one of the reasons I came a dyslexia tutor in the first place. We were [in the 1980s] getting lots of targets to fulfil, by the government at the time; there was talk of GCSEs and *very* little time to prepare for it... My LEA... was piloting new curriculum initiatives and we were now being told how to teach, even though we'd done it for years... It meant that certain things got put on the back burner, and we were told to forget about statements; they took too long, and you had to beg [the LEA] in the end, so, when I look back now, there were lots of children who *should* have been supported, but we just didn't have the time..." (Female HE Support Officer).

The second comment is by a departmental dyslexic tutor who, again, when teaching in a school in the 1980s found that he was compromised in talking about dyslexia:

"..our Head[master] at the time was old school [old fashioned]. He told us all there wasn't to be any time wasted with extra help for children who looked for excuses [*excuses meaning dyslexia*]. There was no such thing as dyslexia, and we were not to identify any child as possibly being a dyslexic, or to tell their parents. So I saw pupils leave school, who could have been helped, if only they'd had a little more expert time spent on them..." (Male HE Academic)

This could help explain why, for some pupils, there did not seem to be an acceptance of dyslexia, or any help given. In contrast, the same lecturer stated that later in his career he was at a school where although he was able to apply for extra funding for potentially dyslexic pupils, this could not always be provided:

"...when I did prepare the paperwork for a child, I was often refused any funding, 'cause there wasn't enough money in the funds for special cases... I never built up the hopes of the child..." (Male HE Academic)

This example sheds light on why recognition of dyslexia in the classroom setting was not simply a case of teachers not knowing or caring about pupils with SEN. Sometimes their hands were tied by policy, time-pressures, or a lack of funding. This finding adds weight to the research of Barga (1996) and Osmand (1993) who investigated the reasons for teachers not understanding dyslexia. This study has built upon that by adding the dynamic of teachers who were aware of the needs of some pupils in their care, but chose not to help, for a variety of reasons.

Nevertheless, there has been a gradual increase in support available in the school setting, from a lack of apparent acceptance of dyslexia to a greater awareness of the condition. This has lead to a greater 'knowledge of dyslexia' that has filtered through to Higher Education so that a person with dyslexia, who was negatively labelled at school, could proceed to HE with a realistic prospect of developing a more positive identity, and greater chance of progression through their educational journey:

"Now at uni. they know about dyslexia, but they didn't at school, so I now stand a chance." (Female Respondent).

The other side of this is that it is important for the dyslexic student, moving into HE, not to come into contact with staff who display a lack of dyslexia-awareness; if they do, there will be a risk of repeating their experiences at school, as is further discussed later in this study.

As shown in the data, school teachers are able to shape lives in another way, as they are the only people who can give a precise assessment of the pupil's academic abilities. This assessment is passed on to the parents of the pupil, and the impact of this can lead to a negative or positive relationship between child and parents. This at times can be quite devastating, as shown by some of the respondents and in the work of Osmond (1993) who suggests that some educated parents recognised potential dyslexia in their child, yet in contrast, un-educated parents did not recognise the difficulties in their child experienced. For one respondent this created a rift between himself and his parents. He had never felt part of his family, causing him to drift apart from the family and extended family. More positively, if the teachers discovered that a pupil had dyslexia, the parents and school could work together to create an environment that encouraged learning. Psychological support could greatly increase the chances for a pupil with dyslexia to make academic progress:

> "A friend's kid's just never worked at school. It turns out he's a dyslexic and now they let his mum in the school to work with him at stuff. She didn't really like him before, now they're great." (Female Respondent)

In the classroom, children respond to the attitudes of their teachers. If a teacher, or teachers, appear to label dyslexia in a negative or positive light, then the children follow this lead. This can have important ramifications. As seen in the data, respondents spoke about

classmates taking cues from teachers about how 'stupid' they were for not being able to achieve the most basic academic work:

> "They started copying her [teacher]." (Male Respondent)

These negative attitudes helped to make this respondent a very unhappy child and fear going into school. Not only did the teachers use him as a negative yard stick, but this yard stick was also used against him by his peers. This apparent negativity from a teacher was taken outside of the classroom by the other pupils into other areas of his life where he could not escape from it:

> "...had to leave football [coaching] in the end 'cause it got too much, you know the names [calling]." (Male Respondent)

This action suggests that one teacher's apparent negative attitude can be adopted by many pupils, who can transport this negativity, into the community and beyond, thus affecting every part of the child's life. This reinforces and builds on the work of Edwards (1994) who recognised that negative class experiences can influence all aspects of a dyslexic child's life.

Educators have a powerful tool at their disposal. They have the potential, to create an inclusive society or one that is divided and segmented. The latter is achieved by reinforcing potentially long-held attitudes towards dyslexia. In contrast, inclusive practice and class deficit models (Hearn and Stone, 1995) challenge the mis-concepts that may have built up

over the years. This change can make a great deal of difference to dyslexic pupils and to the disabled community.

Even though school provision for pupils with dyslexia is gradually changing, there are still adults who would like to return to education, but fear that they will repeat the negative experiences of school. This negativity was seen in the interviews when the respondents spoke about the inadequate support systems in their schools.

It is interesting to see that four respondents had been put into their school's SEN class:

> "They called the classroom 'the shit hole' where all the 'crap' went." (Male Respondent)

These classes were designed to help pupils who were struggling with their mainstream education. In theory, the classes attempted to help them with their difficulties so that they could eventually return to mainstream classes. These classes were, on paper, ideal places to catch up but the data suggests that they failed in this aim by removing pupils with dyslexia from the general mainstream educational environment. The remedial classes were also criticised for being a centre for 'getting rid' of troublesome pupils:

> "We were all there: thick, foreigners, travellers, smelly, single parent kids, the lot; just to keep us away from the nice children." (Male Respondent)

SEN classes were often perceived as barriers to progress, according to the data. There were several reasons for this. The existence of an SEN class suggests that other pupils were 'normal'. This could create a stark difference, keenly felt by dyslexic pupils. This was seen when one respondent spoke about her memories of remedial help. She remembered feeling set apart from her peers as she was somehow beneath them, in a class for the 'subnormal pupil'; she was in a class that was for children who could not aspire to be like 'normal' children, in anything they did. This separation can suggest to other children that the remedial class are 'thicks' or 'stupids' as they need extra help with their work:

> "You could hear the kids shouting 'spakkas' at us from down the corridor. There'd be fights and that." (Female Respondent)

This negative attitude can be later taken into the community with the assumption that dyslexic people cannot obtain employment without special help. Most jobs require some sort of reading skill and if people with dyslexia are perceived as being unable to execute these tasks, then they will not be seen as employable. This is further explored in the next chapter.

The other problem with the remedial system that respondents remembered at school was that the dyslexic pupil is placed in a group of *non-standard ability* pupils. This, in effect, made the group a 'dumping ground' for all sorts of non-mainstream pupils. Thus dyslexic pupils did not get support based on their specific needs because the needs of the whole group were far too wide. Some of the respondents wondered what the inappropriate support was actually doing to help them:

> "I was thick, but not like the other children in the class. They *really* needed help."
>
> (Male Respondent)

This could result in a sense of boredom and a loss of interest in the group's work and in the dyslexic pupil possibly creating trouble within the classroom. This inappropriate support thus created an atmosphere that meant that the individual dyslexic pupil was not able to achieve the academic success they were capable of, thus adding to their academic stress and compounding their learning problems (Gentile and McMillan, 1987). When the pupils did try to seek help with work from the teachers, they might be deemed to be disingenuous, and thus support was not forthcoming:

> "Even when I did try and get help [with the SEN classes], she'd not want to help me." (Female Respondent)

A university academic, who had been a school teacher in the 1970s explained:

> "We had sort of remedial classes in the 70's which were really just a place to keep the kids who didn't go off to the special schools. Doesn't sound very PC, but that's what it was like... You could see the frustration some of the children had with their writing. I know now that they'd dyslexia, but then, well, I supposed they were just *mentally handicapped slow readers*... It changed in the 80s; but they were ostensibly the same group of children, put in the classes for the same reason, they were put in to make the government targets look better. Handicapped kids dragged down the

> statistics, so if you got rid of the children who'd let you down... We needed our jobs." (University Academic)

This sobering statement could help explain the teacher's perspective on remedial classes. This academic went on to say that:

> "Dyslexia was mentioned at times, but, well, lots of the other teachers thought it was a sort of excuse for slow kids, but they were the times, and times have changed I suppose?" (University Academic)

The incomplete knowledge of dyslexia when the respondents were at school reflects society's limited understanding of dyslexia due to the hidden nature of this disability. It is difficult to identify dyslexia, except through prior experience at a personal or professional level, and this difficulty could help explain the limited knowledge of this disability in the past (Riddick, 1995). Society still sees disability as it did then, in its visible, tangible state and not its hidden covert nature. In turn this suggests that *chance* was the most common way of discovering dyslexia.

In this study most of the respondents reported that they had not had a positive school experience (Edwards, 1994). They felt that their teachers did not display dyslexia awareness, coupled with poor support facilities provided by their schools (Osmond, 1993). Regarding some of the older respondents, and in line with the work of Barga (1996), it must be said that the limited or inappropriate support they received was because they were at school

when the needs of disabled pupils were only just starting to become recognised within the mainstream system:

> "If I's at school now, not 25 years ago... I think it'd be different." (Male Respondent)

The negativity perceived by dyslexic pupils in these school situations culminated in the pupils not being able to achieve their full potential by leaving school early, or by simply giving up. As a consequence of these school experiences it was likely that respondents would not wish to take their education any further later in life as they would expect the same situations to repeat themselves. It was therefore inevitable that they would seek employment on leaving school. The next chapter reports their experiences in the workplace.

Chapter Six: Respondents' Experiences in the Workplace

"I couldn't do out at school. I wasn't so bad at factory. I could do the work, but I knew there's more to life than there. I'd be there for years, letting the years go by, wishing I could leave, but I couldn't do it. I's too afraid to go. So I stayed an said nowt... It's difficult when you're thick." (Female Respondent)

Introduction

This chapter reports the experiences of respondents in their workplace, after leaving school and before returning to education. Experience related to dyslexia in the workplace is compared with that of school, with particular reference to the various psychosocial difficulties in each period.

There is a small range of studies that explore people with dyslexia in the workplace, often identifying critical aspects of their dyslexia within the working world, but there are few examples of people who were not identified with dyslexia in the workplace, and most importantly, their move into HE. This chapter builds in their prior school experience being reinforced in the workplace, and their move out of work into HE, with no specialist dyslexia knowledge

Career and School Friends

Leaving School

All of the respondents had looked forward to leaving school, but had been concerned about getting a job where they would not stand-out as different because of their lack of academic skills:

> "The careers man said I wouldn't get much of a job, definitely not in an office. I was going to fail my exams and I ought to think about factory work. So I started looking". (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I wanted to work indoors, but that meant writing all the time, so got a job as a labourer on the YTS [youth training scheme]." (Male Respondent)

This wish for an office career was echoed by almost all the respondents with the exception of two who worked in the catering and supply industries which were not office based.

The constant worry of being asked to write or read important documents within manual jobs made these two respondents feel that manual work was the only way they could gain a salary, a phenomenon also identified in Klein et al (2000).

Respondents also experienced a feeling of rejection from previous friends at school who had gone on to sixth form and then university.

> "…he started to look down his nose at me. [He would say]"we went to this restaurant [with university friends]" and "we all met at this bar [with University friends]" I was working a twelve hour shift in a factory, and he said he was working hard on an essay; he didn't know the meaning of the word work." (Male Respondent)

This resentment showed itself in other similar ways with the lack of time to do anything other than work, eat and sleep:

> "…it's not how I thought my life would go: get up at six, walk to work, start at seven, back home for half-past [seven] get some tea, then I'd watch telly and go to bed ready to start again. Sunday was my only day off. My friends at uni were having an easy time doing nothing, and I was paying for them in my taxes from my crap wages – all 'cause I was bad at reading." (Male Respondent)

Further evidence of resentment of friends in H.E. came when a respondent visited her 19 year old friend at University:

"Her [university] friend asked me where I was at university, I said I worked, and she then said where was I doing a gap year? I said, I'm not, I worked at [factory] on the shop floor. Her friend didn't talk to me again. After that my friend wasn't as interested in me." (Female Respondent)

Pressures from Family and Friends

Finances played a large part in pressures the respondents experienced at work. As time moved on, opportunities arose for respondents to make more money at work by becoming a supervisor or line manager. These opportunities were not taken, as one respondent describes:

> "The manager said I should go for it. It was £50 extra a week. My boyfriend said I deserved the job, but I felt I wouldn't be strong enough to have authority over people. I just had no confidence in myself." (Female Respondent)

This respondent traced her lack of confidence back to her school days and her feeling that everything she did was wrong. Interestingly, she did get the job when it was advertised again two years later, which helped her to gain extra confidence in herself (Saunders, 1995).

Another respondent was worried about the form-filling required when applying for the supervisor's post:

"I'd seen the writing my old supervisor'd done, it looked to be lots. She was always carrying papers 'round. I couldn't see me doing that, what if I got it wrong? I was sure I would." (Female Respondent)

Again, this respondent was persuaded to go for the job, and after a false start, held the post for five years. She, like the previous respondent, gained a great deal of confidence from the position, and this was crucial for her return to education. Her lack of self-esteem initially stopped her looking for promotion but a pay increase was the motivation for applying for the position, even though she was worried about her educational difficulties.

Worry about Writing and Reading at Work

Even in the most manual-labour intensive work, there is a requirement for reading and quick and tidy writing. All of the respondents had experienced coming into contact with colleagues who noticed that there was something wrong with their academic skills.

> "We had to fill in a time sheet. Date, times and tasks completed. There wasn't much to write, but it made me worried the first few times. I was called into the office, and asked what I'd written for the days that week. I couldn't read it either." (Female Respondent)

Being called into the office – the place where reading and writing goes on all day – was a daunting problem for this respondent as she knew some of these women socially on a daily basis. They had not known her at school, but now they knew that she was bad at writing,

and the respondent felt that her poor skills had put her in an awkward position within this particular friendship circle. Another respondent commented on a similar experience, but with greater financial consequences:

> "I was a joiner's mate, and we're working on these new odd [ly designed] stairs. All I had to do was measuring from this cutting list. I was a bit worried, but I didn't let it show. I thought that the main joiner bloke would check it all out, but he didn't and well, it all went wrong, and I got it all wrong and the boss was really angry." (Male Respondent)

Getting measurements right, in this scenario, was very important indeed as it cost a great deal to put it right. The respondent felt very bad about the mistakes and noted that it put paid to him doing any major joinery work again; thus his career had been halted due to his inability to read correctly.

Report writing was another problem for two respondents. One of them commented about the first time she had to write a report for her boss:

> "I was in the office and he said "what do you call this"? I didn't know what to say, so he read it out, word for word, to all the girls around me. I was so embarrassed." (Female Respondent)

This experience of shame reminded the respondent of the shame she had felt at school when teachers would read aloud her work to the class, causing her to gain a reputation for bad academic work.

The respondents all said that they were subject to negative comments from their colleagues relating to the standard of their work. These negative comments amounted to a feeling of being 'left out' because they were somehow different and lacking in ability, in comparison to their colleagues. Some of the respondents felt that they were destined to always be producing poor work as they had done at school.

Hiding Dyslexic from Colleagues

Three of the respondents had attempted to hide their dyslexia in the workplace. These coping strategies were highly developed, and often led to lying to colleagues about a raft of matters:

> "I told the interview panel I could only type 'cause I'd suffered a hand injury at school, and holding a pen was difficult. They seemed okay with that, and I'd then use the basic spellchecker on the typewriters." (Female Respondent)

Bad handwriting was used as a way of covering-up bad spelling as this respondent experienced:

> "If I wrote in a sort of horizontal way, I could make out that it was scruffy handwriting, 'cause you couldn't even read it, it was so messy!" (Male Respondent)

Techniques for covering-up dyslexia were used by two respondents to great effect. They felt that they had to do this because they needed a job, but felt that they would not be able to achieve this without 'cheating' as one respondent named it (Bartlett and Moody, 2000).

Courses at Work

Some respondents had been invited to attend work-related courses. These courses were designed to improve the working practices of the respondents, yet they often required reading and writing skills. One respondent described how she avoided the course:

> "I knew I'd have to write things so I pretended to be ill on the day. I still got to stay at the hotel though!" (Female Respondent)

Another respondent told of her time at a bar staff training course:

"...we were told to make a presentation. I was worried 'cause we were asked to read out a section from the overhead projector. I looked at it when I was sitting there, and thought I'd be okay, and then they changed it so I had to try and read something I didn't know. I must of looked a retard." (Female Respondent)

Reading and writing in work related courses does not have the same academic challenge as an H.E. course, but may strengthen a negative view of education in the mind of the dyslexic employee. A bad experience as seen above, may reinforce the view derived from school that the employee is not capable of writing or reading outside the privacy of their home. However, this was not inevitable. Some respondents reported that it opened their eyes to the possibility of further or higher education:

> "I was asked to talk about my job to a group I was a member of. It had to last about 20 minutes and I was scared. I stood up, and simply read it all out. I'd not written so much since school, but it was great, and someone said I speak well. It made me feel good for once, about me as a person who can talk." (Female Respondent)

This respondent went on to give the same speech on two other occasions and gained a great deal of confidence:

> "I started to get a liking for talking out loud. A friend told me I should be a teacher or something, and for once I thought, yeah, perhaps I could. But then I remembered that I needed to go to university, and I couldn't do that." (Female Respondent).

It appears that work courses were both educationally liberating and oppressive. For some of the respondents they caused a great deal of stress, exposing their academic weaknesses and convincing them they should never attempt academic work again. In contrast, others found that this was an opportunity to overcome previous failings at school, by discovering that they were capable of academic success.

Work and School Compared

All of the respondents spoke clearly about comparison between school and work with reference to social interactions. They also raised issues of confidence, motivation and frustrations encountered in the classroom, and the workplace.

Social Relationships at Work

Some respondents spoke about relationships with their work colleagues, and their school friends, as being similar in many ways:

"This bloke reminded me of a kid at school. He wanted to help with my problems when I was trying to sort out invoices in one job. I couldn't get my head 'round it all, just the same as I found sorting stuff out at school difficult. This bloke was nice like that; just reminded me of my school friend Mark." (Male Respondent)

A negative experience was:

> "This guy knew me from school, and carried on bullying me just like he did there [school]. I hated it." (Male Respondent)

Some respondents took their reaction to school experiences with them into the workplace. This continued the feeling of not being able to move away from the school experience and the feeling of underachievement. Another explanation could be that respondents had personalities that attracted negative relationships.

Confidence, Frustration and Motivation

Three respondents commented on difference in their confidence at school and at work. They were mixed in their views:

> "Work was a real boost for me. I hated the work, but I was free from the teachers. Some work mates said that I was too good for school and my job and I should try and get myself a better life." (Male Respondent)

This boost in confidence was important as it gave the respondent the motivation to get on with his life. Colleagues were important figures in his life, encouraging him to think about leaving work. In contrast two of the respondents felt:

"...I was earning such little money that there was no way I could afford to get another job or [go] to college. I couldn't get time off work, even though I was meant to, as I felt that no meant no, and that was me for ever, thanks to not doing well at school." (Male Respondent)

and

"...I felt I couldn't say anything. I was only a woman and should be grateful for the work. I couldn't do anything else with my life. I couldn't read or write properly. I was a real mess, and totally stuck. I wished school had of been different." (Female Respondent)

These examples show how some respondents felt trapped in their workplace by their school experiences and felt unable to move forward. They were frustrated at being locked in one situation and had little confidence that they would be able to progress in life, giving them little motivation to try to move on.

Career change, what and when?

During the interviews, four of the respondents spoke about changing jobs before they started their H.E. career (McLoughlin, 2002). Some of the respondents felt they could not stay in one job for any length of time, as they hated it so much, and thus relied on the job centre or their training scheme to find them a job:

"I didn't know how to get a job. I wasn't confident enough. What if they asked me about school and qualifications? I had none. So they [YTS] got me the jobs. If I didn't like it, I'd not turn up." (Male Respondent)

The worry about interviews, or the paperwork in finding a job, could be a barrier as some respondents would have sooner stayed on the dole than attract negative feedback within an interview session:

> "...I didn't want to do that all again. I looked stupid enough at school. I just wanted a job, but I didn't want to look stupid to get one. I didn't want that again." (Male Respondent)

The fear of interviews and application forms made many of the respondents nervous. They had received enough ridicule at school and wanted to avoid any more if at all possible. As a result, some of the respondents found themselves in unfulfilling jobs for many years, as they feared moving into another job or career:

> "I just stayed there. Some jobs looked great, and I figured I could of done them, its just the risk of them finding out that I was bad at reading and stuff. I remember thinking perhaps if I'd tried harder at school, it'd be different now..." (Female Respondent)

One of the respondents had experienced positive interviews when circumstance forced her into re-applying for her own job.

"...I think it was a way of turfing some of us out. I sat in front of the big boss and he talked to me about my job and the company and the future. It was really interesting, and I got interested and just talked and talked. He said I was an interesting person and I was an asset to the company. That really boosted my confidence." (Female Respondent)

Another had applied for a supervisor's position:

"I was told to go and work for another part in the company. It's a big company in [town] and I had to get a dress suit and sit in front of these people with suits as well. I had to do a written test, no one told me about that, but I did it, and I passed. It was great. It helped me see perhaps I wasn't the thick child anymore." (Female Respondent)

To breaking away from the school's negative labelling required re-addressing long-held truths about the self, according to each of these respondents. If the work situation resembled school, then their school experience was going to live on in their minds. But it only took praise from higher-level staff within the company to help change that, by allowing the respondent to feel that they might have ability.

Regrets and Attempting to Leave Work.

Respondents spoke about their feelings of regret about their period of work. They all had similar things to say about this period:

"...How would I bloody support myself at university? I could hardly bloody manage from week to week, I'd really poor wages. Even if I wanted to go, I couldn't afford to go to the interviews." (Male Respondent)

and:

> "It seems like wasted time looking back. I could of gone to university at 18 [years old] if only some teacher had taken an interest in me. I didn't want to[go to] work, but those teachers made me [work] by not doing their jobs right. I was left to rot." (Male Respondent)

There is clear criticism of the teaching staff at schools for not recognising the respondents' dyslexia. This is seen in words such as 'left to rot' and '[teachers] not doing their jobs right'. Another point to emerge was that going to work at 16 years of age was seen by the respondents as a failure in life, as they had not have the option to enter H.E. or white collar work. This is seen in comments by three respondents:

> "There was no choice at 15, I was going to fail and that was that. I was a kid going into a factory with women who'd been there for 20 years. They were bitter people, they looked 20 years older than they were. They couldn't say anything good about their lives, and I thought I'd end up like them." (Female Respondent)

The other two respondents received negative comments after deciding that they were going into HE:

> "I didn't tell anyone. I hated it so much that I wanted to just leave, but they found out. 'who do you think you are professor?' is the sort of stuff they said. They thought I'd be back, and I worried they were right. Looking back, I wish I hadn't bothered listening." (Male Respondent)

and:

> "I had to write a resignation letter, which was difficult enough, but the boss just started shouting at me when he read it. He said I was wasting my time with poncy rich kids who'd never done a days work in their lives. This made me more worried, 'cause I worried about fitting in once I was there. I was stupid for being worried, what did he know." (Male Respondent)

This hindsight is useful, but each of the respondents remembered some form of negative response (Bartlett and Moody, 2000). One respondent remembered a positive experience once she told her colleagues that she wanted to be a lawyer:

> "She [colleague] said that she knew I could never stay. She said I was far too good for that place. She made me feel much better about going, now I look back." (Female Respondent)

Respondents spoke clearly about their last stages at work. They looked back with regret at their working life before education, and some felt that they had been failed by their school. Even though some had a very negative experience, it was their school experience that they would have changed and not necessarily the circumstances of their working situation. If they had received more appropriate support at school, they would not necessarily have had to enter the working world at such a young age, feeling that they had little future, other than low-level work.

Discussion

The interviews produced a rich set of data, showing the difficulties the respondents faced in their pre-university work life. Due to their low achievement at school, they found themselves stuck in a situation with low self-esteem, poor pay, and inability to think that they could achieve success with an academic career. Later they blamed their teachers and education system for halting them in their progress, by not understanding their learning difficulties.

This raises a large number of questions, but they can be encapsulated in three main questions: Were the respondents' experiences of school reinforced within the workplace? How did the respondents make the decision to apply to FE/HE, with special emphasis on those respondents who identified extremely negative experiences at work? And: at what stage did the respondents recognise their dyslexia, and when and how was that confirmed?

School Experiences Within the Workplace?

There appears to have been several examples of respondents identifying their choice of jobs being limited to the blue collar/labour intensive industries after feeling that they were not capable of a white collar office job. This is in line with the work of Graham and Scale (1996). Although not wholly exclusive, these respondents appeared to have left school with the thought that it would be prudent not to attempt to apply for anything that would involve too much reliance on reading and writing, yet these respondents identified various situations that made them stand out as making fundamental reading and writing mistakes, such as incorrectly reading a set of measurements.

Building on relatively low self-esteem from negative school experiences, these respondents claimed that their negativity was repeated in the working world, with colleagues who also labelled them as 'thick' and 'stupid' (Reiff et al 1993). If this is the case then why did these respondents tolerate these conditions for so long? If they were unhappy with their working place, then why did some of them stay for so long? For these particular respondents, the answer might lie in the old adage: "better the devil you know than the devil you don't." This was intimated by two respondents:

> "I wish I'd of left years ago, but all I knew was I's crap at school, and crap at work. I didn't want more [people] to think I's crap, so I stayed… I daren't move." (Female Respondent)

and:

"I don't know, I suppose I never could move. There was sort of a place for me there in a funny sort of way. They knew I's useless, someone else would of found out at another factory..." (Female Respondent)

This lack of self-ability made these two respondents feel that they were not capable of moving on, and they were stuck in their own rut, a rut they felt was created by their school experiences (Morgan and Klein, 2000). They felt bitter that they were in jobs with very little prospects for the future. Yet the data suggests that there were some opportunities presented to some of the respondents that made them feel that they could move away from their old jobs. This reinforces the work of Saunders (1995) who also found respondents hesitant to move away from the security of their job.

Work vs University

The loss of previous friends at university age, because the respondents were not in HE, is interesting to note. This could be due to intellectual snobbery:

> "He thought I was working-class crap." (Female Respondent)

Not to go to university was possibly seen as failing as gaining a degree from a university is viewed as a step towards a successful career. In this case, to work in a factory could be seen as beneath the undergraduate community.

"I must have been like, a sixth former with bad grades, so had to work instead".

(Male Respondent)

This feeling of failure reinforced the school experience in this case as it again showed the respondents to be different to, if not below, their contemporaries. The respondents evidently had the ability to achieve success in the HE environment, but because they did not receive effective support at school, they did not have the option of progression into HE; thus they had to work in jobs that were seen by their peers as low status.

The Decision to Apply to HE

The previous data in this chapter recognised that there were many reasons for respondents feeling academically inadequate in the workplace (McLoughlin et al 2002). They also found social and academic parallels with school and work, all of which appeared to make up a picture of individuals who could never entertain leaving work to re-enter education (Bartlet and Moody, 2000). Yet every respondent had made the decision to move into education, leaving behind not only security and routine, but also poor wages and a sense that they were never to re-enter education again. What was the final motivation for them to 'break' out of work and into HE?

The data so far has alluded to how one respondent started to feel confidence after presenting a spoken report, and another by having to handle greater paperwork thanks to promotion. Yet other routes were reported by respondents that could help shed light on to

the nature of the move to HE for this group of mature dyslexic undergraduates. One such route was that they felt that they were getting 'left behind':

> "People I met, just around, normal people, had been, or were at [University]. Some had kids, one girl had four and doing a part time degree there [University]. (Female Respondent)

This type of response was not unusual, as other respondents found they came into contact with people from all sorts of professions:

> "My social worker's got a degree. She's really down to earth, she said I could do one." (Female Respondent)

Thus, some respondents might have been inspired by seeing other people, who they identified with, having achieved an education. This sense of moving on from the negative experience of school appeared to have its genesis in seeing others achieving or having achieved academically. This was not always the case. Two respondents explained that they were locked into their work situation and could not escape even if they wanted to. Yet they did escape, with several key motivators prompting them to start thinking about a move away from work.

To categorise these motivators one by one might appear to belittle the enormity of the tasks for the individual respondent, but to put them in context helps to shed light on how the simplest experience could be a great motivator to an individual respondent.

Compliments

The most notable form of motivation came from respondents receiving a compliment on how they had worked through a work related task, showing a logical approach, which was picked up by a superior - or even someone they did not like – paying them a compliment. This is consistent with the work of Klein and Sunderland (1999):

> "It made me feel really good; I'd just worked out how to make the [operation] quicker and the boss said he was really pleased. I was "clever" he said, much more than the other girls." (Female Respondent)

These compliments from another person were held to be turning points in the respondents' lives. To be called *clever* was actually unusual in their lives, in which they felt they had very few compliments. It could be argued that they were not people who were used to receiving compliments, as they were working in jobs that they found dull and uninspiring, without opportunity for the kind of initiative that would warrant complimentary comments. But when compliments did come, they were prized:

> "That bastard's never said nice stuff to me; but [after he paid a compliment] I felt happy for like days and days." (Female Respondent)

These compliments, based on claiming the respondents were in some way *clever* or *bright* or *intelligent* gave the respondents a clearer feeling that perhaps they could achieve success, if they put their mind to it.

Example

Several respondents have identified meeting someone with a university education; some simply by speaking to their social worker, and some by speaking to their children's teachers. This contact with 'educated' people appeared to be most effective when the respondents felt that they were not being patronised:

> "I said to our [child's name] teacher I wished I'd of done better at school. She said I could go to college. She'd finished learning to become a teacher the year before, but she was my age." (Female Respondent)

Finding people from similar backgrounds appeared to inspire three respondents especially, who were stirred by other people's stories. This could be because they did not realise that they could go back to education later in life to achieve academic qualifications, as opposed to purely vocational training, and none of them had seen any HEI advertising.

Recognition of Dyslexia

Only two respondents were aware that they might be dyslexic, before they investigated a return to education. These two went through a period in which they were confused by the distinction between being thought of as "thick", which they had experienced for years, and the possibility that they were dyslexic:

"I thought if I was dyslexic, well, that explains lots." (Female Respondent)

We will look into the formal recognition of dyslexia later, but a key turning point in two of the respondents' lives was when they accepted that their reading and writing difficulties were perhaps not due to their own 'stupidity':

> "She [social worker] talked about [not] understand what was written, or reading it back, you know, nicely. I thought, I'm like that, and it's not my fault." (Female Respondent)

For these respondents there was gradual recognition that they might be dyslexic as McLoughlin, Fitzgibbon and Young (1994) state in their dyslexia compensation study. This could manifest itself variously but, as discussed later in this study, there were many ways in which a respondent could find themselves entertaining the idea of possibly being dyslexic. This can be through chance conversations with educators, such as teachers or social workers; or a chance conversation with a dyslexic person who understands their own SEN. (Riddick, 1996).

This incipient recognition of dyslexia, in part, acted as a motivator for the two respondents to apply to university, yet the support mechanisms were not widely or clearly advertised according to both respondents. As seen, only one respondent had received experiential information from her social worker regarding university dyslexia support (Barga, 1996). For the other respondent, she had to undertake her own initial investigations to obtain the support, mainly through internal university advertising, stating their SEN support provision.

The other respondents were not aware of their dyslexia, retaining their past conviction that they were academically incapable; they appear to have been attracted to apply to university by two main factors. First, the advertising campaigns for mature students, focusing on three universities' structure of mature students' assistance with academic work. Second, lower entry grades at the newer universities appear to have tempted some respondents into HE.

It is interesting to note that no employer attempted to recognise dyslexia amongst their employees. Not one responded to the government literacy plans for basic literacy. As one respondent claimed, his employers attempted to keep him on the factory floor, so he could not rise above his 'station' in life. Another reason could be that as most respondents did not need high literacy skills in their jobs, their literacy was not an important matter to their employer.

The next chapter will add much greater weight to the period of decision making in returning to HE by exploring the respondents' acceptance of these work-related influences in considering university as a step forward in their lives.

Chapter Seven. Re-entering the Educational Environment

"I kept on thinking "you're crackers [insane] you are you know [name]?" You can't survive in here [university]. You know nothing about nothing so why [are] you here? (Female Respondent).

Introduction

This chapter reports on respondents' experience when they finally decided to return to education. It covers such matters as choice of courses, choice of university and interviews with university staff. It covers the period when the respondents started their courses and includes the support they received (both academic and social) paying particular attention to the role of the family as motivators.

Deciding Factors

The respondents clearly articulated their reasons for finally returning to education. Some recognised that their own lack of education would be a stumbling block forever if they didn't do something about it. Others were forced into the situation through ill heath, or fear of unemployment.

Difficult to Leave Work

Two respondents said they had been very worried about leaving the security of work. One had hated his work, but he had known where he fitted in and regarded university as such a daunting prospect that he was only going to give himself a short trial period:

> "I knew I'd cock-it-up. I'd convinced myself from the beginning. I'd not get on with the teachers [lecturers] or the other students and they'd not like me 'cause I's thick and I'd be found out as a fraud, so what was the use of leaving work where they knew how thick I was?" (Male Respondent)

and:

> "It's safe to stay [at work] 'cause I'd just keep my head down and not rock the boat. They'd know I's a fraud at University 'cause they're all clever." (Female Respondent)

Word of Mouth

One respondent spoke about her return to education after hearing about another person, from a similar background to hers, succeeding in education:

> "I was in my late twenties then and heard about a friend's friend who'd gone to university in her forties. She'd got a master's degree and everything, but she'd been a printer since leaving school... She was really bad at reading and they helped her get over it... I thought 'that could be me.' " (Female Respondent)

Something Missing in Life

Another respondent was keen to finally go to University after feeling that there was something important missing in his life:

"I'd got a house and car and was married, but [partner] knew I really wanted to go to university when I read that people like me were getting degrees now. She [partner] believed in me, so I went to see the Foundation director, and she said I could start that year. We sold the car, and other bits, and I went to [University] …" (Male Respondent)

University as Recovery

Another respondent was recommended to go back into education after coming through an illness which meant that she could not go back to work:

> "I couldn't go to Uni. I was too thick, but they said yes [to attending university], as long as I was part-time. I'd live at home and still go to the campus in my car… I's so worried what the normal students'd think about me." (Female Respondent)

Self Belief and University

One respondent remembered that it had been a real self-struggle to convince herself that she could achieve if she put her mind to it:

"They'd 'support services' and 'tutors', she [friend] said. I'd be fine, I could talk well and look sort of normal, they'd help me get my writing sorted and show me what to do. I was worried it'd be like school, but she [friend] said it wouldn't." (Female Respondent)

This 'support service' suggests that the respondent was aware of dyslexia support, but this was not the case.

"No, just 'support', I didn't know about the dyslexia stuff." (Female Respondent)

Which University and Why?

The respondents noted four important reasons that they had to consider when applying to their institution: proximity to home, the finances needed to attend interviews, which course to follow and whether any study skills support was offered. These were important to all of the respondents even though they came from different backgrounds with different needs.

Proximity to Home

The respondents spoke about their choice of university:

"I needed to find an [FE] college that was close. My friend told me about [the] access [course] and it was what I needed. [FE College] did one, and I 'phoned up

and I went to see them. It was just up the road for me so that was okay." (Female Respondent)

and:

"I asked at the careers office at our local [FE] college, and they said about my university. I didn't need A' levels or anything, 'cause they'd sort it all in the three years." (Female Respondent)

These reasons however valid, are not at first glance directly linked to a mature students dyslexia experiences, yet in the context of the returning dyslexic mature student, these choices are critical as these respondents did not want to move very far away from home, because if things did go wrong, they were potentially able to slip back into their old routine:

"I's lucky to get somewhere (University) so close, 'cause If it went wrong like, I'd still be close to home." (Female Respondent)

Most of the respondents went to a university within an hour from their home. This was very convenient as it minimised costs such as childcare and travel. This helped the respondents and their families as it was only through self-finance and various state benefits that they were able to pursue their courses. It was important to keep finances under control as the respondents had given up a great deal of security to improve their career opportunities.

By letting their cash-flow get out-of-hand they ran the risk of failure at university and finding themselves in a worse situation than they had started with.

Which Course?

All of the respondents experienced personal difficulties in trying to find the right course for them. Some respondents were lucky enough to receive advice from friends, and some sought help from their local careers service which advertised locally. Two respondents saw a tutor at their local university, and one simply filled in a UCAS form after reading about UCAS in a newspaper article:

> "There was this foundation course at this local university campus. They let me on the course no problem. I was shitting myself before the interview. I'd made up lots a crap about myself for the form; it was really funny." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I couldn't afford to do one of these access courses, so they let me straight on a degree in [Degree Name]! I thought it was fucking funny, but they said they could help me. It's bloody difficult you know? I wonder if it'd have been easier anywhere else?" (Male Respondent)

There were many ways in which the respondents chose their course. Some of them openly admitted to looking for a course with lower grade entry requirements with the assumption that the course would be somehow easier, and some saw a subject they were interested in and applied to an institution that would enroll them. There was nothing in the interviews that suggested there was any difference in the respondent's approaches to entering an access, foundation or direct degree course, just that they needed to give it their *best shot*. The respondents who enrolled on an access or foundation course were not clear about what they were going to read at university but used the time and resources of the courses to test their leaning towards different academic disciplines.

Finance to Attend Interviews

An interesting finding was that several respondents, had difficulty getting time off work to attend interviews, and faced problems affording the transport to attend interviews:

> "I was earning next-to-nothing and didn't have anything [money] left for me. I look back now and think I should of got a better job for a year, just doing nothing much, but paid some more, but I'd no confidence to do that, and, well, I just couldn't, God it was so bad… So when I *finally* made the decision to go, I knew I'd to get a student loan that meant I'd to go to uni. and get straight on with a degree… I applied to five places, but they said I needed an interview for them all, which crapped me [warned me], but I needed to get there, and I'd no money for trains, so I borrowed some [money] off a mate, and thumbed a lift when I didn't [have money]. " (Male Respondent)

Low-earning respondents complained about having to pay for long trips to attend an interview for a place at university as they could not afford the fares for travelling:

> "It's a way of keeping the working-classes down, I'm sure. I had three interviews at other universities, but could only get to two 'cause I couldn't afford to get to fucking [opposite side of the country]. It was good I was at [University] in the end... How [are] you supposed the have the money to get to these places? I can see why you need to be posh to go to university." (Male Respondent)

Time off Work

Getting time off work was also cited as being a problem:

> "I worked a twelve hour shift pattern over six days a week. I wasn't supposed to, but they made you on the sly. I couldn't complain 'cause they'd sack me. I darn'st ask for time off, so what could I do?" (Male Respondent)

Respondents complained that their lack of self-esteem was aggravated by poor job flexibility, financial problems and lack of time off work; this had made it very difficult to get to interviews.

Getting Everything Wrong

Another respondent identified mixed feelings about going to University. He said that he had been concerned that he would get everything wrong and would have to go back into a manual job after sacrificing everything:

> "I sold the lot, car, house, all my stuff and got not much for it. If I'd got this wrong, I was going to lose everything... My friends thought I was stupid, but I'd heard they can help you nowadays, like, learning to write stuff..." (Male Respondent)

Self Image as Fraud

The idea of being a 'fraud' was mentioned by two respondents:

> "I imagined being there about two weeks and someone from the university would ask me to leave 'cause it'd been a big mistake and I was the wrong [respondent's name] and I could never get in 'cause I was too thick." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "One day the teacher would just say, 'what do you call this rubbish' and send me out of the classroom for being too thick and a fraud..." (Female Respondent)

This lack of self belief is highlighted in the work of Chamers et al (2001).

Old University

This idea of feeling and being a fraud was aggravated, according to the respondents, by not having followed the traditional route into education of 'O' Levels/ GCSEs and 'A' Levels. This was more noticeable in the respondents at the oldest pre-1992 university. One respondent from that University commented:

> "... I's much older than everyone else, they'd come from nice schools and were clever, *and* had real 'A' levels, not like me who'd nothing." (Female Respondent)

Yet, at the newest university the same applied, even though that particular university welcomed non-traditional academic qualifications as an entry route. The respondent still felt bad for being there under what she called 'false pretences':

> "I didn't have any school exams [qualifications] at all, but they let me on the course. The mirror test, one girl called it. They were so desperate to get bums on seats that if you made a mirror go misty, you were in... I'd failed everything at school, and they said the foundation course was for people like me... I's waiting for them to say I was thicker than they thought, and I'd have to go." (Female Respondent)

There was a range of reasons for the respondents returning to education, ranging from needing to recuperate after illness, to being shown a positive example by another mature student with dyslexia. The above examples show that there was not one specific route back into the educational world; yet even though there were deeply felt psychosocial issues linked

to education for each of the respondents, there were ways that these could be overcome. The first move was to try to get back into the educational environment, be it through family encouragement, the prospect of financial gain from better employment prospects or simply that there was part of the dyslexic person's life that felt empty and unfulfilled.

Anxiety About Starting University

Respondents' talked clearly about their worries when starting the first year of their courses. (Matthews et al, 2000) This nervousness could be seen in two of these respondents:

> "I still couldn't believe they'd let me on the course. I know it wasn't a degree yet, but it's a real university on a real campus. I'd passed it [university campus] loads of times, but I never thought I'd get in, me of all people!" (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I'd moved miles to get to this university to start the course. I's worried if I'd got it wrong, I'd have to go home and I'd look stupid." (Male Respondent)

Return to School

Two respondents spoke clearly concerning their worry about starting at university as it seemed that they were going back to school:

"It was like being at school: lining up to go in a classroom was like waiting to go in a lecture hall. Lockers, notices, clubs, cafeteria, teachers; they're all the same, and it looks the same as well. Spooky." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I loved being in Uni. I felt like I was going to finish my childhood… I know I's much older than everyone, but I wanted to make it work for me, and I was not going to let the look of the building remind me of school, even though it looked *exactly* the same." (Female Respondent)

Can I Perform Academically?

Respondents gave many reasons for feeling fearful at the start of their courses. The most noted reason was the lack of belief in their own academic ability:

> "I didn't quite trust the lecturer; when I say that I mean if she thought I could do it, then she can't have much idea about me. I was bound to get it wrong from the start and she'd notice and all the other students would notice and it'd be just like school." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "Until I walked through the door here I thought I could do it, but it just reminds me of school, and I'm starting to get worried about essays and stuff and I think its all a

bit too much for me, I need to remember who I am and what I can do." (Female Respondent)

The anxiety when starting at university seemed to emanate from a concern that they would again experience the same problems they had suffered at school. This negativity could cause lack of confidence in their current educational abilities, and potential educational abilities. So by re-entering education they feared that they would experience yet another example of this poor educational experience:

"I's just waiting for it [school experience] to all happen again, but now I don't think I could stand it." (Female Respondent)

For some respondents, their ability to cope with their course was aggravated by other pressures. For example, two respondents sold their houses and put their families into rented accommodation, just so they could go to university. Academic failure would mean that the respondents had not only failed themselves, but also their family, who had placed their trust in them to succeed academically:

"I think about my two [kids], and if it all goes wrong; what are they going to think about me, their Dad, a failure." (Male Respondent)

Possibly the biggest worry for the respondents was that if they did not succeed in this "second chance" at education, they might never have the opportunity to gain the educational success they would need for their future career:

"If I don't get this right, well, that's it. I'll never come back. I'd be done for ever."

(Female Respondent)

Not Like School

For some of the respondents their initial fear of starting university was quickly allayed as they started to settle into a routine, and started to see that university was not the same as school, as they had previously feared:

> "I's worried at the start about stuff like being in the right place at the right time, and would I be able to understand what they're all talking about, and hanging around kids all day long. But after about three or four weeks I got used to it, it was like I'd always been there. I wish school'd been like this." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I look back now and think 'why was I worried'? I didn't need to be 'cause everything is dead easy to get to and find... I used to get confused at school finding my way 'round to places, and changes and things like trying to avoid certain people who'd make my life difficult, but now I'm older I don't need to worry about that so much...although some of my lecturers do get angry with me..." (Female Respondent)

It appears that these two respondents had a better time at university once they'd been there for a few weeks because they had become used to the surroundings and seen that their past negative school problems were not all going to repeat themselves. This is not to say that they would not come into contact with similar negativity as will be seen later in the research.

Grown-ups at University

There were a number of reasons that some of the respondents started to feel at greater ease in their new educational environment; the predominant reason given was that they were no longer children and being grown-ups they were more in control of their relationships. At school they had been required to attend but on returning to education they were no longer a 'prisoner', as one respondent said, within the walls of the institution. They had the freedom to act independently, as opposed to being constricted by the teachers at school:

> "It's a different sort of school feeling. I'm not forced to be here. I can walk out of the door when I want to. But I want to be here, and that's the difference." (Female Respondent)

Another reason was that most of the lecturing and support staff treated the respondents as adults and there was a greater feeling of equality:

> "Some of the lecturers are like my age and I really like them. They're great to talk to, and they seem to like me an-all." (Female Respondent)

This was not universal; there were examples, as we will see later, of lecturers in a pre-1992 institution making it very clear to mature students that they were lucky to attend the university and that they didn't care about any extra-university commitments. This will be discussed later in the research.

Psychologically Moving on from School

All of the respondents clearly spoke about re-entering an educational environment as having had an impact on their feelings about experiences of school; they felt they were, at long last, moving on with their lives. Some of the respondents felt that their lives had been on hold whilst working and some felt that they had been released from the 'prison' of work.

The respondents identified three specific aspects of re-entering education that were important: academic work, social interaction and standing, and personal identity and change; these created a feeling of moving from the past to a new future.

Moving on Academically

All of the respondents had experienced negative encounters at school which had shaped their attitudes to future academic studies. Once they were back in education they identified various ways in which their attitudes had changed and were changing throughout their course.

Two respondents clearly spoke about their experiences of being back in the classroom/lecture hall environment:

> "[During] the induction week... we were hustled into a big hall... It was like being at school with all the teachers standing around. I felt 11 again and going to the comp [comprehensive]. It smelt like school, I hated the feeling, it made me feel all cold and stuff." (Male Respondent)

and:

> "We all lined up outside a classroom, just like at school, I didn't know where I was supposed to go for some of the lessons 'cause the instructions weren't clear... It reminded me of school and getting lost between the week one and two timetable." (Female Respondent)

These past school memories were relived in the university lecture hall. The respondents felt uneasy about being back in an educational environment as it kept reminding them of past failures. Some of the respondents were pleased to be back in an educational setting for precisely the same reasons as the experiences stated above:

> "It made me feel alive. I's at uni. and so proud. I just walked around getting lost, but I didn't care, I was just *so* free. It was like picking up from where I *should* of left off at school. It smelt and looked just right, just like I thought it would. I's so happy. This was the beginning of my life." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "This old lecturer man started shouting at us all to keep quiet down this corridor. We all said we felt like kids, but it didn't bother us, it was funny really. There was nothing he could do to me. I was paying *his* wages now." (Female Respondent)

The look and feel of their universities made all of these respondents feel that they could have been back at school, but although the two respondents quoted above were perturbed by their negative feelings, they were not completely fazed by their experience

Moving on Socially

The respondents felt difficulty knowing how to interpret their new status as dyslexic within the educational setting and within the wider community (Riddick et al, 1997). All of the respondents had seen themselves as 'thick' and 'stupid' for so many years. Coming back into the university setting, they were coming into contact with people who were successful academically.

This distinction between the "academically able", as one respondent termed her new friends, and the respondents, made for an awkward divide:

> "Some of the eighteen year olds were *so* confident. I was like a dummy when I was in class with them. They could talk for ages about stuff I'd didn't know about. I

didn't know what to say to them. They must of thought I was thick as shit [laughter]." (Female Respondent)

This respondent were adults and two had children of their own, but they felt unequal to their eighteen year old classmates at university because they felt they did not have the ability to learn as quickly as their class counterparts:

> "I'm a slow-coach when I look at these kids [in the class]." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I wish I's faster at learning about stuff. I'm even slower than I was at school, and that's bloody slow!" (Male Respondent)

Again, some of the respondents identified themselves with other mature students and quickly formed friendships that gave them greater confidence in their academic work as well as giving them greater motivation for their work:

> "[Friend] was great. She came from the same background as I... we really helped each other get on with our work. We're always together [laugh]!" (Female Respondent)

Two of the respondents found that they were not the only dyslexic mature students on their course:

> "As soon as we found out we were dyslexic then we always sat together and helped each other, our lecturer said we were the blind leading the blind – she was a cow." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "...she was a real help to me and it made the first few week bearable. She knew what I was going through, 'cause she was doing it as well. We'll be friends forever." (Female Respondent)

The commonality of educational issues seemed to help these respondents get on with other students. The mature dyslexic respondents formed friendships with students from many backgrounds including others with dyslexia:

> "Mature, dyslexic and sexy – that's what we are, and that's how we like 'em!" (Female Respondent)

Sharing a common cause and building on social support at university seemed to foster a sense of confidence, according to the respondents, and assist them to persevere with their academic work. This reinforces the work of Riddick (1997), who found that once dyslexia was identified there was greater confidence and comfort within their setting.

Moving on Personally

The respondents identified a change within their own self-image as the interviews progressed. They saw themselves as changing, both academically and socially. In turn this meant that being at university changed their self-image:

> "I remember the day I started to feel a bit different about myself... I got my first essay back where I got a good mark. I'd been producing rubbish 'till then, but I got a 'C' and that made me real happy. I felt for the first time ever I'd done some good work. If only those bloody [school] teachers could see me then." (Female Respondent)

The feeling of achievement made this respondent change the way in which she saw herself. She had been condemned to failure by her school teachers but now felt she could achieve better marks. In an interview six months later she stated:

> "I'm getting much better marks and really happy. It's changed the way I feel about myself. I've much greater confidence in everything I do, and everyone who knows me thinks I've changed so much." (Female Respondent)

Working Class Changes at University

One respondent felt that she had become a different person when she started at university. She saw her working-class roots as standing in the way of her education, and as her family was not very supportive of her education she'd always felt that she was overstepping her:

> " '...place in society' is what Dad said. He thought he wouldn't be able to talk to me 'cause we wouldn't have anything in common. The trouble is, as I make new mates, read more stuff, and listen to the news, I don't have anything to talk about he'd be interested in..." (Male Respondent)

This tension between gaining general interests from academic stimulation and keeping past relationships alive was one that other respondents spoke about:

> "My boyfriend says I'm getting too la-de-da with my posh university friends. I've only been going two months, but I'm getting to know so many people I've got things in common with. We talk about the news as well as what's on telly. I'm not interested in Bill's [boyfriend] crappy newspaper [the Sun]. It talks rubbish, I want to make up my own mind about stuff that's going on." (Female Respondent)

This was echoed by another respondent after she had completed the first term of her course:

> "My family've really dragged me down all these years. They do nothing with their lives well, apart from the pub and the TV... I want to learn about everything now, I can do it now, my university friends are the people I want to be with.... I can talk about interesting things with them. We all [family] move in different circles now.

> My mum said the other day I'm starting to get above myself, God we had a blazing row…" (Female Respondent)

This respondent felt that her family was dragging her back and she could not wait to move away. She had gained a great deal of confidence in her first year at university and could not wait to move. We will talk more about the important role of the family and its support in the next section.

Many of the respondents found that they had steadily increased in confidence over the period that they were being interviewed. Higher Education seemed to put their lives into context as they reflected on their negative school experience, which was reinforced by their experience of work. Going to university and meeting like-minded people who were also minded to open their lives to change, gave the respondents an opportunity to increase their general knowledge and gain a wider understanding of other ways of life, through meeting people from a much wider class, ethnic, educational, and financial background, opportunities that had perhaps not previously been available to the respondents' as their family, class values and limited experience of apparently parochial life had not afforded them such diversity:

> "None of my family knew about anything foreign, apart from Toremalenos… They were stuck in their ways, just like everyone else where I lived." (Male Respondent)

Encouragement from the Family

Many of the respondents cited the family either as their greatest supporters, or as their Achilles heal. However the family viewed the respondent's educational situation, the family was seen as being crucial in the early part of their educational journey. It is important to see both attitudes from families to understand how the respondents reacted.

Supportive Families

Many of the respondents identified positive reactions to their return to education from their families. Some of the support was late in coming as family members would only see the return to education as worthwhile if the respondent "stuck to the course" (respondent quote). Some of the family members "blew hot and cold" (respondent quote) throughout their courses in their praise of the respondents' educational exploits.

Positive Encouragement from Parents

At the start of the courses, some respondents received positive encouragement:

> "I needed their support as I's not going to have much cash so I needed their help…
>
> They'd believed the teachers at school, so going back now was my last chance saloon.
>
> They were worried for me, 'cause I'd given up work and stuff, but I needed them to be positive." (Male Respondent)

and:

"I was getting benefits anyway. I didn't need cash from anyone else, so when I told my dad, he thought it was just like trying to get a job, and I needed to go to university. That was it." (Male Respondent)

These two respondents were looking to identify parental support, and found that they were encouraging, if a little ambiguous about their true feelings.

Positive Encouragement from Partners

Support from partners and children, was much stronger:

> "My wife knew I needed to go back and finish my education or I'd be unfulfilled for years to come. She loves me so much that we sold loads of stuff, and some of her jewellery to help get me into university. I love her so much for supporting me. I hope I don't balls it up." (Male Respondent)

and:

> "I'd get depressed about my life and constantly talk about how teachers are crap and all that. My partner found out about the foundation course and she said *I have* to go to the university to see about it. I'm really pleased she told me about it, 'cause I needed that encouragement from her. She trusts me." (Male Respondent)

These comments show how important immediate family encouragement was for these two respondents as they entered the university environment. This encouragement gave each respondent the confidence to move from employment to higher education. This was seen as a springboard for a better career and financial future for their families. The research shows that all but one of the respondents were worried about the financial implication for themselves and for their families as they left work; this could help explain why the approval of family members was so very important for each of those respondents as they pursued their educational ambitions.

Changing Opinions from Family

Some respondents saw a change in their family's attitude as the course moved on:

> "It was about the fourth month into the foundation course and my sister asked if I was still going to uni? I said 'yes' and she seemed pleased. She'd been a cow to me at school and called me everything under the sun [sister failed all GCEs also], but seemed to be pleased it was going okay for me. I think she was sick of work and wanted to see if my course was good for her!" (Female Respondent)

Another respondent saw a real improvement in the attitude of her partner in the first few weeks:

> "He'd made it difficult for me to start with, saying I'd got commitments and all. But when I could juggle everything and go to access [course], he started to change. He'd

make me a cup of tea when I was working in the bedroom, and clear up the house a bit and things like that." (Female Respondent)

This respondent's partner started to see the financial potential of attending university:

"She thought I wouldn't stick with it. But when I said I wanted to be a doctor she thought I might be good at it. I'd been working for St. John [ambulance service] for years, and I wanted to be a real doctor." (Male Respondent)

It could be suggested that the change of attitude towards each of the respondents was because they started to see that education would lead to a better future, opening a much wider set of careers options with greater respect in society.

Qualifications as Career Boost

Two respondents identified a change in attitude, by parents and grandparents. This came from a realisation that times had changed and people needed academic qualification to get jobs, who twenty years ago would not have needed such qualifications. This made these family members change their attitude, understand the respondent's situation and provide them with the support they need:

"I think when my Granny realised I needed to go back to get the qualification - that things were different nowadays. If I wanted to be a solicitor I needed a degree, and

there was no way 'round it, she knew that was my only way to get a good job."

(Female Respondent)

The family was crucial in getting mature students back into education especially when they had suffered bad educational experiences in the past. When the family realised the importance of the return to education, then they supported the student through their studies with a positive attitude which helped lead to educational success.

Unsupportive Families

Unfortunately not all respondents received support form their families. For three respondents a key issue was the lack of support that their families offered. They were negative in their views of HE, and in some cases put a barrier between education and the respondent because they did not fully understand their motivation for attending university.

Negative Attitudes

As seen before, it was very important for the respondents to feel supported by their families and not to feel the pressure of negative views about education, due to their past experience. Negative attitudes by family members made this respondent feel that university was no different to his school experience:

"...'face it, you're never going to finish it' [his course]. That's what he said after I said I'd had a bad day in university... He said I wasn't clever at school and I'm still

not... He said there's no shame in being a practical person. He said us [family name] have never been good at school and that was that..." (Male Respondent)

Loss and Jealousy

Pressure from family to accept their 'lot in life' was quoted by three respondents. It made them angry as they wanted more. They felt that their family was frightened of losing them as they became more educated. Two respondents quoted siblings as making life difficult for them because they also would have liked to have been at university:

> "She would hide things from me, my university work. When I found it she said I was stupid for going to university with all the posh kids who'd think I was muck." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "My sister started a blazing row in front of the family. She said about me having kids and I should look after them and not fanny around with school kids [undergraduates]... I'as too old for school [university] and she'd been okay without school [university]. She [sister] was a thick bloody wife [women] with a drunk [partner], living in a shitey council flat with three wild kids from different blokes. She'd never [had] a job, and spent all bloody day on the internet talking on chat rooms, and she had all the bloody nerve to tell me what to do..." (Female Respondent)

Degree V's Apprenticeship

One respondent's father regarded returning to university to read for a degree as less desirable than a Government sponsored apprenticeship college release system. He thought that his daughter should get an apprenticeship and follow this system:

> "He said I'd get paid and get to go to college. He didn't see I wanted a degree, not some government training scheme college course... He didn't see that there's a difference. It just made me feel bad 'cause I wanted to be better than a YT course for drop-outs, I wanted a *real* qualification." (Female Respondent)

Some parents regarded an apprenticeship as an acceptable way to attend university: being paid and gaining a qualification. But the type of pre-degree and degree courses that all of the respondents were attending would not be attached to a job as they were intended as full-time in their own right. This father was trying to help the respondent consider an alternative route into university, but he missed the fact that the respondent wanted to go to university to study for a specific qualification:

> "He just doesn't know the difference between studying and getting paid to keep off the unemployment lists..." (Male Respondent)

The above quotations show how parental support could increase pressure on the respondent, as one put it:

"...even just a pat on the back once in a while to show they think I'm doing well."

(Male Respondent)

Support Offered at University

With a poor school experience, both academically and socially, behind them, four of the respondents were interested in the study support offered to them within the university learning environment.

Publicity for Pre-degree Support

The respondents reading for pre-degree courses, such as A to HE and F to HE, were offered study support as part of the programme, this point being extensively advertised.

> "As the information [prospectus] said the access course was for adults who'd not got the best from school, it was full of stuff about how the support people could help with better reading and writing and access funds for childcare and that. That was the thing that really helped me, you know, knowing there were people there that knew about people like me." (Female Respondent)

Degree Support Advertising

The direct entry to degree respondents did not find out until after their interview about study support:

> "I was at the interview, but was so desperate to get in that I didn't want to mention my bad spelling and messy handwriting and that." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I just didn't want to give them a reason to not let me in. If I started asking about help for reading and stuff, they'd start thinking I's thick, and they'd been right, but I just didn't want to ask in case." (Female Respondent)

The study support advertised in the pre-degree prospectus literature does seem to encourage dyslexic adults back into education, according to the respondents. Yet the direct-to-degree candidates wished that more had been made of it in the prospectuses they had read. Interestingly none of the pre-degree or undergraduate respondents commented that the support advertised dyslexia help.

Discussion

Courage in Applying to HE

The respondents clearly articulated their worries about finally making the decision to apply

to university. Much of the interview data from this section of the study comes from right at the beginning of the first interview and contains the early *rawness* that the students were feeling, just before starting in the new educational environment and in their first few weeks. They clearly remembered the courage that had been needed to finally motivate themselves to apply to university, only a few weeks earlier.

Each respondent had their own particular story about motivation in applying. Some had found it easier than others, but the question needs to be asked: why do some people with such heavily negative school experiences apply to HE, and what routes of entry were most appealing?

Restarting Life

It would be easy to believe that as the years passed, and negative school experiences disappeared into the background, there would be a greater chance that potential mature students feeling greater confidence about applying to HE institutions to assist them in their career. As they were no longer children and had greater control of their lives, they could feel that they would be more in control of their destiny, and if that destiny required a degree, then so be it. Yet, in the face of this logic, the data suggests that the mature dyslexic students never quite let go of their teachers' negative comments, and carried this around for, in some cases, many years (Gerber, Ginsberg and Reiff, 1992). This negativity appeared not only to remain latent in these respondents' subconscious, but also to have been actively rehearsed time and time again, so much so, it could possibly have reinforced their feelings of academic inability, as this learning support tutor intimates:

"Yes, I've seen lots of mature [dyslexic] students, who've told me how they've always been thinking about school, ever since they've left. They can't let it go…and they let experiences go round and round in their minds until they get almost paranoid."
(Support Tutor)

If this is so, as the data suggests, there needs to be a discovery of what actually drives the dyslexic mature student back into the learning environment. The surface data suggests that there were a multitude of reasons ranging from illness to a sense of unfulfilment with education as a road to recovery:

> "If I could only take my mind off the operations and not watch TV, then the doctors said I'd get better quicker and not depressed, so that's why I thought the teachers [lectures] would pity me and let me in[to university]…" (Female Respondent)

There was also the wish for a change of career, away from their manual job, to one that paid more, and was more comfortable:

> "I hated that factory, I wanted a better job, you know in an office." (Female Respondent)

Something Missing in Life

These reasons are valid and extremely compelling, yet there seemed to be a much more fundamental reason that almost all the respondents identified: they felt that their lives were not complete, and had not been satisfactory since they left school. This feeling, described by one respondent as *"emptiness"*, was one that I felt underpinned all of the other reasons for returning to higher education; as each of the respondents needed to gain sufficient confidence to make them feel that they could possibly give education a second chance. This is not to say that they would consider themselves as potentially successful, as the data abundantly demonstrates, but that they could, for the first time, entertain a return to the educational system, in order to better their life opportunities:

> "Once I felt I might go to university, I had to make sure everything was ready for me to go." (Male Respondent)

Once this acceptance was acknowledged, the respondents appeared to move quickly to attempt to gain their place at university. They identified the key issues that required attention, such as whether they should leave the stability of work, however much they hated it, or how they should approach their families for support. One thread that ran through all of the respondents was the need to seek family advice on this move into education. Friends were also important, but it appears that "*sounding out*" the family was more important. This family aspect will be further discussed in greater detail later. These findings share a commonality with the work of Gerber, Ginsberg and Reiff (1996) who interviewed successful mature students at the end of their degrees. Their respondents also felt that they

had a reason for returning to education, yet in contrast felt that they did not necessarily link their classroom experience to their HE experience.

Advertising of Support as Motivation

Another important issue was the advertising of support services at each university. This particular strategy appears to have helped respondents make the decisions to return to education as two respondents felt that they *might* have dyslexia, but needed to have the option of finding out through study skill support. At first, two of the respondents attempted to say that the support services were not key in their choice of university:

> "I never looked at the prospectus about support." (Male Respondent)

But four months later went on to say:

> "Yeah, there was this bit about helping study skills, and stuff about mature students and reading problems, and that really helped me with this place [university]." (Male Respondent)

Another respondent who changed her mind also found that the dyslexia literature had not helped her make a decision about attending her university:

> "I didn't know there was something about it in their [prospectus]?" (Female Respondent)

Five months afterwards she claimed that:

> "I needed to know that they [support service] would help me if I got stuck with my work. It's important to advertise it [study skill support] for mature students in the catalogue [prospectus]." (Female Respondent)

There could be a number of reasons for this change of mind regarding the respondents' decision to apply to university. One could be that they simply did not read the prospectuses carefully enough as they were not in the habit of reading very much at all, prior to university. Another could be that although they did not formally know that they were dyslexic, they did not want to entertain the idea that there might be something *wrong* with them as this respondent intimated:

> "Before I came [to university], I thought that if you's dyslexic you were either thick or you know, like a spastic." (Male Respondent)

This suggests that this particular respondent saw dyslexia as a physical illness and one that he apparently did not want to be associated with. If, as the data suggests, only two of the ten respondents had considered the possibility of dyslexic prior to returning to education, it is not surprising that the other eight respondents did not read the disability literature before entering university, as they thought it would not apply to them. It was only after entering the HE environment that they came into contact with dyslexia as a possible explanation for their academic difficulties.

Lower Entry Grades – Lower Academic Expectations

Although there were a number of reasons for choosing a particular institution, as seen above, there was one other important factor that was key in helping respondents choose an institution. This factor was that some universities had lower matriculation grades than others for much the same degree. As discussed in an earlier chapter, these mature students were not entering university with 'A' level grades, but with aspiration to start FE and HE courses, or direct entry degrees, yet they all looked at the general entrance grades as a guide to ascertain the academic pre-degree requirements. All but one of the respondents highlighted this as important. The remaining respondents feared the academic workload from an institution that was asking for higher admission grades. This suggests it is possible that mature dyslexic students will be more attracted to the institutions that offer lower grade entry as they feel that they will receive more help or that the academic workload will be less rigorous. This builds on the work of Gardner (1987) and Riddick (1996) who suggest that mature students' choice of courses is influenced by their academic self-perception.

This theory is, however, not universally valid, as five respondents attended a university which ordinarily required high 'A' level entry requirements. So why did they attend this particular university when they were very close to an institution with lower matriculation grades? There seemed to be two main reasons: First, the kudos of the university in question was sufficient to attract the respondents, even though they feared they would have to produce more work:

"It was worth telling people I's off to [University]... It really helped me make the decision you know, I knew I could go to a really decent place, not some crappy dump." (Female Respondent)

Second, this particular university actually had a good advertising scheme for making mature dyslexic students aware of their services. This helped attract one respondent who thought she might be dyslexic:

> "They [advertising] said they'd had years of experience of helping people like me, so I believed it." (Female Respondent)

Although this particular university was not always perceived as meeting its promises of dyslexia support, as can be seen later in the study, the advertising was sufficient to attract at least one respondent to leave work and attend university. Clearly, some advertising in the prospectuses can be a positive source of encouragement.

Family Support and Class – Betrayal of Background?

Families that were supportive gave great help. Some examples clearly show support for the respondent because they were aware that education was a way towards a better career:

"My Gran saw I needed this degree, so was great about it." (Female Respondent)

This support in HE builds on the work of Edwards (1994) and Riddick (1996) who found that if a dyslexic student had a member of their family or a close friend who believed in them, this helped them in their studies.

The opposite reaction came from families who strongly discouraged the respondent from attending university or completing their course. The reasons could vary according to individual circumstances, yet these respondents recognised that their family felt that they could not become educated. This was based on the past assessments of their school teachers and their parents' own limited understanding of disability which led them to simply accept the teachers' professional opinion that their child was educationally lacking in ability:

> "I'd been left school like ten years and these bloody teachers were still getting in my way, 'cause my parents *still* fucking believed them." (Male Respondent)

As the data showed, one of the respondents claimed that, even though she was hampered by her parents' attitude, she still ploughed on with her course, choosing not to listen as she knew she was doing the right thing by attending university and giving herself a better start for the future:

> "I try not to listen to them [family] nowadays; I've got to do this myself." (Female Respondent)

These responses shed light on the work of Gentile and McMillan (1987) who state that stress brought into the learning environment simply adds to the pressure of dyslexic issues in students' academic work, and their academic self-belief.

Class Issues

An interesting outcome of the data was the issue of social class and its influence within education. All but one of the respondents identified issues that can be traced to history of class, knowing one's place, and the betrayal of family values. These can be identified separately:

Notion of Class and HE

Two respondents identified themselves as working class, and saw education as not featuring heavily in their class background. This view caused them to feel that they were somehow barred from the higher educational environment as they were not the type of person who was "meant" to be studying. This bar appeared to generate two outcomes: fear that HE was geared towards middle and upper class values, and education as not being relevant to working class professions:

"When I was a kid, I thought only doctors and teachers went to university, no one from my street went to university, no one from my estate went to university…"

(Female Respondent)

This group of respondents contradicted the U.S findings of Greenbaum, Graham and Scale (1996) who found that their respondents were from predominantly middle class backgrounds.

With the expansion of higher education in the last ten-twenty years, more and more people from working class backgrounds have been able to gain a place at an HE institute to read for an increasingly wide range of HE programmes. Previously a working class student was only at university due to exceptional academic ability and a scholarship, or by being lucky enough to study at a workers college, such as Ruskin College. It is perhaps surprising to hear that there were still individuals who perceived the HE environment as not at all welcoming to people from every background:

> "I just thought they'd not want someone from a factory." (Female Respondent)

These respondents did find that their opinions changed over the period of the research and became more comfortable as they started to fit in with the systems of education; this is further investigated later in the study

Knowing One's Place

Building on the notion that two respondents identified university as not being structured to their class, the added psychological value of feeling born into a fixed background was identified by four respondents who were fearful of being negatively labelled by their family and friends for attempting to 'better themselves' by going to:

"...poncy university..." (Male Respondent)

This interesting dynamic of *knowing ones place* was made worse by a constant reinforcement of *knowing that you're thick* which when added together produced a:

> "...know your fucking place because you as thick as pig's shit, and'll never do anything with your life." (Female Respondent)

When these dyslexic mature students entertained the thought of returning to education, not only were they attempting to fight against their perception of their class, but they were also being reminded that they were 'thick' and could never improve themselves, as working class people were not educated:

> "You're like your old Dad you are, a bit thick, but we plod on, you and we don't need fancy universities." (Female Respondent)

Family Values

The last quotation leads from a notion of *knowing one's place* to the ideal of family values. With the ideal of *knowing one's place* comes *knowing where you stand in the local community*. Four respondents came from small industrial towns where generations of the same family had worked for the same company doing much the same work as each other. To break away from this trend was seen to be 'letting the side down'. As the respondents had followed

their parents into the same company after leaving school they were seen as rejecting their family and their way of life:

> " 'It was good enough for your mother and me, what makes you think your special', he'd say." (Female Respondent).

With these four respondents being the first generation to attend university, there was still a great deal of perceived anti-educational feeling as parents possibly feared an end to a way of life they knew; feared that their child would look down on them, or, interestingly, felt a sense of jealousy that their child could achieve academic success, where the parents had not had the opportunity.

All of the above shows how very important the role of the family was in these respondents' decision to return to education and builds on the work of Scott, Scherman and Philis (1992) who recognised that positive attitudes from parents were important to success in HE.

Practical Difficulties in Gaining a Place

There were other difficulties that needed to be overcome once the respondents had decided that they would return to education. One such issue was finance. This took two specific roles: leaving the security of work and, affording the travel expenses for a university interview.

Leaving Work

All but one of the respondents had been in some sort of paid employment before returning to education, and each of them, in addition to the academic pressures, was worried about leaving their position at work. Most of the respondents disliked their place of work, and were keen to leave, but there was the added worry that once they had left work they would not be able to survive with their student loans.

Some of the respondents had household loans that needed paying off, some had families, and others felt that they could not survive on such little money, after having a wage. Although the respondents chose not to talk about their personal financial situation, they did identify it as causing them worry in the decision process of choosing a university:

> "I could of gone to a university further away, but it's cheaper to live 'round [Home Town]." (Female Respondent)

With the burden of adult financial worries to contend with, there were various issues that would need addressing before starting a university course. With the worry about academic work on re-entering the educational environment, the extra worry about finances might have put some dyslexic respondents off attending university; indeed one respondent left her course after the first year to return to her old place of work to make some money to fund her further studies.

Another source of finance is part-time work. None of the respondents sought this. One explanation could be that they found their time was too full of studying, and there was not enough time to work and study, especially as they were attempting to study with the added effects of their dyslexia:

> "With my dyslexia and the homework, there's not much other [free] time." (Female Respondent)

This added burden of their dyslexia, especially in their initial year, could have been too much and could have compromised their academic work, again reinforcing the work of Gentile and McMillan (1987) who linked outside pressures to dyslexic academic attainment.

Affording the Interview Travel Fees

Another aspect of finances, that became a barrier for two respondents, was the financial expenses of travelling to interviews. One respondent clearly spoke about his poor wages at work and the train fares to interviews. He blamed his dyslexia seeing his poor wages as a direct reflection of his poor school experience, and his difficulties in getting a better paid job, thus halting his progress to HE:

> "It's like a conspiracy: you can't write or read, you can't get a good job, you can't afford owt, you stay down on the [shop] floor where they want you [to stay]." (Male Respondent)

If this respondent could have afforded the interviews to all of his choices of university, he might have been in a better situation to have chosen from a wider range of courses. His choices were compromised, because of his lack of finances, caused by his limited earning capacity.

Locating a Suitable Course of Study

The ways in which the respondents found out about their course were also many faceted. Some respondents were told of successful dyslexic mature students who had gone on to achieve well at university. Others simply went to their local FE college to find out about various courses and others visited their careers service. It was all very 'hit and miss' as one respondent described it. This is not unusual. Bond (1997) found that there was a difficulty with this type of discovery route as some people might not be fortunate enough to locate the course that was right for their needs.

With such chance encounters, as shown in this research, it is likely that other mature dyslexic students might not be on the course that was exactly right for them, perhaps because they had not researched the market enough, or simply that they had been looking for what they felt would be the easiest course they could find, with low entry requirements (Gardner, 1987; Riddick, 1996). This in turn could mean that there might be people who did not find out about a course, and thus did not get the opportunity to gain better career opportunities because they did not have access to the correct course information.

"I've just been thinking this: if there's a different course somewhere I'd really like, but never found. I've seen courses friends are doing. They look loads more better than my degree." (Female Respondent)

Being Reminded of School, Finding Social Support, and New Identity.

The other educational hurdles that faced each of the respondents were their past experience of education:

> "...school just won't go away, it's always there." (Female Respondent)

This problem was based on the respondents' fear of re-living their bad school experiences within the new university setting. In short, they worried that they would be seen as stupid or a fraud by the staff and students:

> "They [staff] must all think I'm as thick as shit – that's exactly what I thought." (Female Respondent)

Harter (1990) suggests that identity and self-esteem comes from the respondent and someone they respect, such as a member of the teaching staff. Past research shows that not only dyslexic people face thoughts of past failure when they return to education (Stephenson, 1989). Mature students may have to try and overcome various psychosocial issues, such as past bullying experiences, low self-esteem, shyness in the educational setting and various

negative home memories linked to their time in school as summed up by Riddick (1996, with the problems of :

> "psychological and emotional difficulties that almost inevitably accompany the dyslexic student in an academic career." (Pg.181, Riddick, 1996)

The added aspect of dyslexia comes into the educational picture once it is identified and only after that can a raft of academic support measures be put in place to help the individual gain educational success and come to terms with their learning disability. It appears that this may happen if the institution has good academic support services, and/or that there are good social support systems in place to give the dyslexia mature student a sense of belonging (Riddick, 1996). The main problem is making the potential students aware, in advance, that they should not experience the same negativity they did at school and that the institution is committed to giving them a positive educational experience as seen in the work of Hull (1998).

Universities that actively attempt to advertise their adult education policy are more likely to attract applicants, and those institutions that actively advertise their commitment to dyslexia in addition to mature students, are likely to gain even more people who have the potential to gain a better career:

> "I just wish the prospectus said more about what they did to help people like me, sort of like mature *and* dyslexic." (Female Respondent)

All of the respondents were keen to make a concerted effort to make their courses work for them, by being as committed as they were able (Richardson, 1995). Yet they expected their university's support units to help them as they progressed through the system. The next chapter shows that there were variations in support that was available.

Chapter Eight. Starting Academic Work and Accessing Support Services.

"I's just getting to know a couple of girls and BAM! writing a bloody essay. I thought – shite. How the fuck do I do that? I'd not written an essay since school, I was crap at that." (Female Respondent)

Introduction

This chapter reports issues related to respondents' academic work. These start at entry to university and include their first essay and the respondents' experiences of writing it.

Another important issue to emerge in this chapter is the use of computer software to assist the respondents with their educational experience. This software is designed to assist them in producing the level of work that is required for a degree and give them the opportunity to compete at the same level as their academic peers. Another important issue to arise is the academic support available to the respondents and how they view this.

These key features of the data are broken down further to look more closely at how they affected the respondents, not only from an academic standpoint, but also from a social and psychological perspective, taking on board their past educational experiences.

First, the respondents recalled how they felt on returning to the classroom after many years away from education. They spoke about their feelings as mature students, returning to education in a university setting that had seemed inconceivable when they were at school.

The Classroom Environment

The respondents were asked about their experience of returning to the classroom and how that made them feel both psychologically and academically. They gave remarkably similar answers when asked about this experience of their first four weeks. Six respondents gave almost identical answers when asked about first sitting in the classroom, their experience of lecturers, teachers, copying off the blackboard and overheads.

Negative Experiences in the Classroom

The respondents identified several powerfully negative experiences in the classroom setting. They spoke about their experience of feeling isolated from the traditional learners in their classes and how they initially found some of the lecturing staff unhelpful. This work is in line with the work of Gilroy and Miles (1996) and the departmental tutor recognition work of Moxley et al (2001). The respondents then went on to speak about how they had been surprised at the lack of difference between their teachers' style of teaching at school and the HE 'lecturer' style. This finally led on to their experiences of using lecture based LEA paid note-takers.

School and University Merge into One

To start with, the respondents were reminded of their school experiences within the university setting as soon as they started their courses:

> "I can honestly say I felt about 12 [years old]. I sat in this lecture room for the first time and closed me eyes and could of been back twenty years. There's no lecture or owt, 'cause we were having a talk about … you know getting started at uni., but I could hear people coming in and talking loudly and smelt the school sort of smell, you know damp and bodies and things and it was funny for me." (Female Respondent)

This respondent went on to explain that she had been frightened of being back in those surroundings for the very first time. She explained that school experiences had never quite left her and she would dream about school on a regular basis, reliving different scenarios and rehearsing how she would change her time if she could have it over again. Sitting in that room and closing her eyes felt, as she put it, like she was back in a 'dream world' where she would have to re-face her academic problems. (Cowen, 1988)

Isolation

Another development came from this respondent:

> "I saw someone I recognised walk in and I thought I wasn't [going to have to sit] on my own, but she went and sat with someone else. It just all reminded me of how I

felt at school. It'd been the second lesson [lecture] and I felt on my own... I told my [partner] about it and he said I was being like a kid, but it started to remind me of senior school, and being frozen out 'cause I was so thick, and no-one wanted to know me." (Female Respondent)

In later interviews, this respondent stated that she had been so worried that she would not make friends once she was in the classroom, because she would stand out as being stupid and drag the others back. This respondent had suffered a great deal of bullying at school and needed to gain friends at university to help her through the course. This one small incident caused her a great deal of harm psychologically, and she referred to it on a number of occasions during the interview sessions. Another respondent worried about her seating place in the classroom, as she did not want to sit on his own, yet, paradoxically, was worried about sitting with people:

> "I sat at the back. I needed to be at the front so I'd hear and see best, but I was worried if the tutor [lecturer] asked questions, I'd not know the answer, and look thick in front of the class. I always tried to sit at the back at school, but the teacher would move me to the front to 'keep an eye on me'. I really hated that and I really wanted to stay at the back where no one could see I was on my own." (Female Respondent)

This fear of isolation was seen, by the respondents, as a direct consequence of their learning difficulties. They would find it difficult to keep friends as they had been frequently ridiculed by their school teachers, and this had distanced them from their peers.

Ridicule by Unsupportive Lecturers

The worry that their past experiences would be repeated was paramount in three respondents and at times was justified:

> "I just didn't have a clue what they were talking about and the lecturer asked me a question. He might as well of been talking jibberish, 'cause I didn't know what it meant. I thought I'd be honest and said that I didn't understand. He started shouting and screaming at the seminar group saying that we were wasting his time and that we were all stupid for coming unprepared to a seminar. He walked off, and we were all speechless. I took it personally as I set him off. My fault again, just like when I was a kid." (Female Respondent)

Another respondent commented that:

> " 'Dyslexia, what has that to do with the price of bread?' He's a prick and not a good advert for the uni; I was only there two weeks. I don't think he likes people with [educational] problems in his group, so tries to belittle them. There's a girl who's just had a baby and he's been making her life difficult." (Female Respondent)

The experience of this respondent showed that she understood that the lecturer was wrong and needed to mend his ways. Although she was upset by the negative reaction, she knew

she should ignore the comment. The respondent decided not to report the comment to the disability service because:

> "They'd do nothing anyhow. They're useless and 'ould back up the lecturer. I remember a teacher at school going mad with me and hitting me 'cause I couldn't read something quickly enough, and when I told another teacher who told the headmaster, he [headmaster] went mad and told me I was evil for telling lies... You can see why it's difficult for me to come back here [into education]." (Male Respondent)

This painful memory of isolation was not the only one:

> "I said I needed some extra time for the overheads to be left up. I'as nice about it, but he said there's a lot to get through and dyslexic or not, I wasn't a child and should learn to write faster in the lecture. I told my tutor who said I was best to say nothing about it and try and get someone else's notes. I thought they were supposed to help me, not leave me to muddle through by myself?... I'd only been there a month or so." (Female Respondent)

These attitudes from the members of staff made the life of this respondent very difficult indeed, as she continued to struggle with that particular lecturer for the rest of the series of lectures. The lecturer appears to have felt that to accommodate dyslexia by making any reasonable adjustment for that particular student, could threaten the academic standards within HE (Gilroy, 1995).

Unchanged Teaching Styles

Another important early aspect of returning to the classroom situation was that the learning facilities had not changed:

> "They still had blackboards like at school! I thought they'd of changed those years ago, but I hated them, when the lights are on you can't see properly, and I have Irlen lenses now so the text moves around. That really surprised me – Blackboards!" (Female Respondent)

She went on to comment on the teaching styles:

> "I thought they'd use computers and TVs and things like that, but they just stood up there and talked at you for the whole time. We had to write stuff down from the board and do dictation. I couldn't do that, it's too fast and when I asked to borrow his notes, he said no, they were just for him! How the hell was I to get it all down? It's a good job I got a note-taker, but she wasn't always there." (Female Respondent)

Note-takers

DSA funded note-takers can give dyslexic students valuable help with their note taking and provide a reliability check between the recorded lecture and the students' own notes. As

noted above, the note-taker needs to provide clear and concise notes and most importantly needs to attend the lectures:

> "He's a fantastic guy, and his notes are great, but he's a habit of not turning up, so I don't get the notes, and I fall behind. I think I need two of them." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "Her writing's like typewriting, and she writes them out a second time for me to make them even clearer, she says it helps her, but it can take a while and by the time I get them, it sort of like three weeks later, and I've forgotten about it all!" (Female Respondent)

Respondents identified a good note-taker as the key to understanding a lecture, especially when the lecture could be repeated with a good tape recording. One respondent found difficulty with using a note-taker:

> "The lecturer said I was cheating. Just because I'd a note-taker and used their notes. He said it was okay to do it if I was away, but using other people's work wasn't good practise. I soon put him right. Prat. It's that sort of thing that really puts you off going to uni." (Female Respondent)

All these experiences played a part in showing why the initial classroom experience was not entirely conducive to the needs of returning mature students with dyslexia. They illustrate bad practice and suggest a lack of dyslexia awareness.

Positive Experiences in the Classroom

Respondents identified a small number of important issues that made them feel good about starting their courses and re-entering the classroom setting. Two main issues were identified: The first was a feeling of being free from work and attempting to address past negative issues from school; the second was the idea that the respondents were being elevated from their old status, whatever that might have been. This gave some of the respondents a feeling that they were leaving their old life behind and moving into a more elite community where they could start a new life.

Re-starting Life

Two respondents spoke clearly about their experiences in the classroom as they entered HE:

> "As soon as I stepped into that classroom I felt alive again. Oh it was great. It was like I was going to re-start my life." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "All those years of work started to melt away. I was where I *really* wanted to be, back in education so I'd get a better future, it was as simple as that." (Female Respondent)

This particular respondent had worked on the shop floor of a company and had always wished that she could have worked in the offices where it is was warm and they had 'civilised' conversation. She felt that the educational environment was similar to the office and instantly had a sense of achieving promotion.

Personal Promotion and Elitism

The feeling of promotion on entering university was felt by another respondent:

> "When I walked into that lecture hall I remember thinking that University was for the posh kids at my school, and work or the dole was for the likes of me, but now I'm here and it's really interesting. Sure there's lots of posh toffs, but already I've found some who're working class like me and we think we're all dead posh for coming here, we've been promoted to royalty!" (Male Respondent)

This feeling of being part of an elite was also spoken about by another respondent:

> "There I was, my first proper lecture, and apart from the fright of writing quickly and understanding what they were talking about, I felt good and at home. I was finally going to be in the top percentage of society who've gone to university." (Male Respondent)

The positive responses all seemed to point to a feeling of comfort within the classroom setting. The respondents realised they had entered a new community, one that, in the past they would never have experienced, but now they had the opportunity to enjoy.

Writing Essays

The respondents spoke clearly about their biggest fear when returning to the educational arena: Academic writing and, more specifically, essay and report writing (Hatcher, 2001). The respondents spoke about the experiences of their first essays and how they approached them:

> "I was really enjoying going to uni. and just being free and not being at work, and then they set us some work to do, oh God, it really made me sick... I knew it'as gonna happen but I *really* didn't realise how bad I'd be about it." (Male Respondent)

and:

> "Essays really bugger-up enjoying yourself in university. I remember the lecturer setting the work, and me writing in my diary; I remember doing the same at school. I went home and cried. This is where it'as going to go all wrong for me, going to university was fine, writing essays was all different, believe me." (Female Respondent)

The emotion of having to write a first piece of academic work was one that two other respondents spoke about:

"I heard her [lecturer] say we needed to get some essays done by the end of the term. I froze 'cause I thought we'd just do stuff in university time, not take stuff home. That's the sort of stuff kids do at school... I hated homework 'cause I never did it at school... I went home and cried and cried. I just didn't know where to start."
(Female Respondent)

also:

"I just stared at the title: 'Compare and contrast the nature of evil in Macbeth'. I remember it now, oh shit, I didn't know what contrast meant, I thought it was the knob on the telly." (Female Respondent)

Support or Not in Early Stages

The feeling of isolation was paramount in the mind of three respondents as they prepared to start their essays. They felt that they were not capable of starting the essay, never mind finishing it. The problem the respondents identified was that there was not enough support available at the beginning of their courses; this reinforces the work of Brunseden et al (2000) claiming support is important at the beginning of a course. This lack of support could be due to a number of reasons. One could be that as the respondents entered university without realising they had dyslexia they might simply not have realised that there was specific one-to-one support available; thus they would not have accessed the support that could have been crucial to them. Another reason stated by two respondents was that they wanted to see

if they could do the work with no help, other than the use of a computer. This independence was short-lived for the respondents: It soon became obvious that they could not cope on their own, and they soon sought support:

> "I's writing bollocks; it just made no sense. I'd got two extensions and then owned up to the [support officer]. She's really good, and helped me get it all sorted." (Male Respondent)

The feeling of owning-up to not being able to cope with the academic element was spoken about by others:

> "I thought: I can't go to the support centre and ask for help; they'd report me for not being able to do the course... I had to go in the end 'cause I was getting in a real mess with the writing and that, the other students seemed to know exactly what to do." (Female Respondent)

Plagiarism and Copying

Five respondents felt they were somehow 'lying' by being on their courses. This was picked up in an earlier chapter. Faced with their first essay they felt that their lie was to be 'found out'. This feeling of being on borrowed time, before they came to terms with writing essays, was made worse by the feeling that the other students knew what they were doing, academically, in the essays:

"I asked this girl how she was going to do the essay, she started going on about stuff I'd never heard of, stuff she'd read in books I'd not heard of. It made me feel stupid, as stupid as sitting in the class at school and feeling that the teacher was talking another language at us all, and I was the only one who'd not spoken it." (Female Respondent)

and:

"I borrowed this girl's essay. She's nice and ever-so-clever. I took it home thinking I'd copy the ideas, but when I looked at it, it looked so difficult I couldn't understand it... I decided at that moment I'd leave [university], if I couldn't do the first essay, well, I wasn't going to get to the end of a degree." (Female Respondent)

Borrowing other students' work was cited by two other respondents, each of them saying that it made them feel worse about their own lack of education:

"It was full of long words and typed out really nicely on computer with no spelling mistakes... Mine looked like it was written by one of my dogs." (Male Respondent)

and:

"I thought I'd copy it [another student's essay] but with different words in bits, but it never sounded right, and I know it's nowhere near the real [original essay] one... I

needed help and that's when I decided to get it from the dyslexia people." (Female Respondent)

It appears that the plagiarism of various other students' essays resulted in the respondents feeling worse about themselves or alternatively giving them the confidence to ask for help, realising that they could not yet write to the standard of their academic peers.

Internet Plagiarism

Another form of assistance was identified by one respondent:

> "I thought I'd look on the internet and find an essay or two that looked like the title of the essay; I found three that looked sort of right, so I cut and pasted them together… The teacher [lecturer] said she knew it wasn't my work 'cause the *style of writing* was wrong in the bits or something. I was so embarrassed. But the good thing about it was she'd spoken to the learning support person and asked her to talk to me to get some help… that really changed me." (Female Respondent)

According to the respondents, their first essay was the first time in their new academic career when they started to panic about their time at university. The initial tension, resulting from comparison with school, was compounded by the feeling of difficulty when the essays were set and the respondents experienced anxiety about completing their essay obligations.

Educational Support Equipment

The respondents identified their electronic software and hardware as crucial assistance in their educational progress once they had sought support.

Computers and their Software

Reinforcing the work of Riddick et al (1997), all of the respondents spoke clearly about their need for computers in their academic writing.

Spellcheckers

Of special note were spellcheckers and how that one feature helped give them far greater confidence to write:

> "It's a Godsend. I couldn't do the course without it. I just press f7 and everything's checked for me. It's better than a lecturer! I do work at home and it's like there's a dictionary that does it all for me, and the word changer thing [Thesaurus] is great too." (Male Respondent)

That respondent saw the spellchecker as being crucial to his course. He also went on to say how it could have helped him at school, if only the technology had been available:

> "I really could of done with a computer at school. I'd been able to do the work instead of not knowing what to write, and been frightened to start anything, 'cause I

know it'ould been crap… Just think how my life would of been different now if they had spellcheckers then. I know it'ould be different, just thanks to one thing [spellchecker]." (Male Respondent)

Voice Recognition

Two other respondents used their computer's speaking software to talk their essays on to the page:

> "I really hate typing; I'm so slow. I saw someone talking into this headset and it came out on the screen, it was great. I knew there and then that that [software] would change my life, and it did. It takes ages to set up, and it's slow, but I hardly need to touch the keyboard. I show other people and they're dead jealous… I only use this to write nowadays and it's great. I could've done with this at school. The teachers would've got homework from me and stopped complaining… I wonder if dyslexic kids use it in school?" (Male Respondent)

and:

> "I did the teaching bit for the computer and it started to learn my voice straight away. It's saved me, and helped me completely with my university work. I love it. I hardly ever type 'cause I can use it on eMails. I've got my kids using it, 'cause I really could of done with this at school." (Female Respondent)

This voice recognition software is extremely powerful. Both of these respondents claimed that it was crucial for their academic work and wished that they had had use of it when they were at school, as it would have helped them produce work that they felt was beyond them at the time. The danger with relying on speech software is that, according to the support staff, the respondent simply does not write in the traditional manner. It is all very well to use electronic support technology in the university setting, yet in industry there might not be the facilities to use them, such as in a busy office where the speech software does not work nearly as well as in a silent room. These are important considerations as they will clearly affect the way in which the respondents are able to work after leaving university.

Optical Character Recognition

Another piece of software that respondents identified as key to their educational success was optical character recognition. This is a scanning device that enables text to be scanned and to appear on the screen in a 'Microsoft Word' format:

> "I use so many quotes in my essays now I know about this software. It's great; I can go into greater depth like all the *normal* students… My teachers at school said I'd never did stuff in detail, but now it's all detail." (Male Respondent)

and:

"I scan in a book and it reads it back to me from the screen. Sure, it takes time to do, but I can see it on the screen and hear it talked to me, so I learn it twice. It really helps me understand what the book is *actually* saying. I was always bad at reading instructions at work. It always stopped me from doing stuff like becoming the supervisor, but with this reading programme, I can understand. It's really changed my life!" (Female Respondent)

OCR software had helped these two respondents enormously and they, like the other respondents before, felt it had changed the way they studied. To scan in a book and hear it read by a computer reinforced the learning process and helped to lock in the information as there were two mediums to present information. The last respondent used the OCR for all sorts of reading, including night-time stories to her daughter:

"She thinks I've got two voices…One's me and the other's Stephen Hawking!" (Male Respondent)

The support staff at the various universities identified this software as extremely helpful, with the reservation that students relied on it too much with their work:

"It gives them a false sense of security in my view." (Support Tutor)

and:

"Students just don't want to take written notes, as they feel they can only speak."

(Support Tutor)

Again it was recognised that in the workplace this type of software was not always available, even though many companies wished to assist their disabled employees:

"When our students leave [university] they think they can cope with typing on normal computers. We had a girl come back last year to do a Master's [after starting work]. She got a degree, but had to leave the company simply because she was too slow at typing. It is a worry for us." (Support Tutor)

Dictaphone

Another important tool was an audio recording machine. Some respondents initially spoke about problems in recording quality, but soon found that digital machines were far superior and thus much clearer and more user-friendly. Their main problem was that they found some of the lecturing staff were not happy with the respondents recording lectures and seminars:

"He's a pompous old shit. He pointed at my dictaphone and said 'what is that monstrosity?' Stupid pillock… he said he'd never needed one as an undergraduate and neither should I, and they're a waste of time... It started to sound a bit like school." (Male Respondent)

This respondent was not alone in getting a negative response to her recording of lectures:

> "I asked first and he said no. I said I was dyslexic and he said that was nothing to do with it, I should be able to take notes down myself… He said that what he said was not for recording. I couldn't believe he'd been so negative." (Female Respondent)

This respondent went to see her learning support tutor who said that she would speak to the lecturer on her behalf:

> "She [support tutor] was very sympathetic, but when I went into the next lecture with the recorder he totally blanked me and told the other students he was being monitored by the disability people. I was so angry; what a prick. I decided to say nothing about it… I'm sure he's marked me down [in essays], you know?" (Female Respondent)

This student felt that she had been singled out through being 'shown up' by this lecturer. She was seen to be different to her fellow students and although there were no serious repercussions from her academic peers, she was made to feel different, just as she had been at school. It appeared that the lecturer had not taken account of any *reasonable adjustments* that were potentially necessary for these students.

Three respondents spoke about positive ways in which recording lectures had helped them:

"I'd have someone write me copies of their notes of the lecture, and then I'd listen to it again. It'd be good 'cause I hear it twice and if I'd missed bits, I'd get it again. It helped me lots. I'd thought about transcribing the lectures, but – OH NO WAY! It was far too much work and would've made me feel bad for being so slow."

(Female Respondent)

This respondent was clear about her process of studying with her recordings. Even though it did not help her to write an essay, it was useful for her to hear the main aspects of the lecture again and to find out how she could get further reading. This helped each of the three respondents and apart from feeling exposed by having a dictaphone, they were happy using it.

There was value in giving IT support to the respondents as they were pleased to use the technology available. This meant that they felt that they were able to compete with their academic peers on a more equal footing and were able to achieve academic success. The respondents felt that, on the whole, the technology gave them a greater feeling of confidence in their academic work and thus a chance to gain a much improved academic experience, challenging the poor experiences from earlier in their lives.

Support Sessions: Positive Experiences

The respondents were asked about their experience of receiving support whilst studying. This met with various negative and positive responses, based on the university that the respondents were attending:

This respondent spoke about positive experiences at post 1992 universities where the staff enabled the respondent, giving them confidence and a new way of working (Sterling et al, 1998):

> "I have one-to-one sessions, it's so good for me; I never had this sort of help at school. I can talk about grammar and spelling and organisation of work, writing essays and stuff like that. One-to-one helps me so much, [support tutor] seems to know just what my problem is and how to help me." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "There's nothing she's not seen before. She knows how to make me feel better when I've done bad work. I always think I've done loads worse than I have and she makes it all better. I wish she'd teach me everything and no-one else!" (Female Respondent)

Another two respondents clearly articulated their disappointment in their pre-1992 university support service:

> "They just don't help. I've given up asking and asking. They just aren't interested." (Female Respondent)

and:

"Just fucking useless from the start. I don't know what they bloody do all day long – it's not helping students, that's for fucking sure." (Female Respondent)

Overstretched Support System

One respondent spoke about how she thought the support service was too overstretched:

> "It's really hard because there's only one dyslexic tutor and she's really inundated with work, so you've really got to try and squeeze it in. When I'm on placement I can't see her because I'm working nine 'til five, five days a week. So I haven't seen her. But she's really good, I love [support tutor], I think she's fantastic, because she really is very helpful. You can say, "I'm having issues with this" and she'll say to try this, this and this. Then the next week you'll say that they didn't work and you'll work together to try and find a way. So she's fantastic. We need more people like her up there at [support service]. (Female Respondent)

This one-to-one aspect of support was greeted by all of the respondents who accessed it as a major step forward, not only for their academic progress, but also for their self confidence. They found it reassuring that they could, in confidence, speak to an 'educated' person about their work and receive help. Matters such as grammar, spelling and punctuation were dealt with during these sessions, using methods that were specifically useful for people with dyslexia.

Learning Techniques

Various other techniques were taught in one-to-one sessions:

> "Mind mapping was the really useful thing in one-to-one [support]. I'd have these different coloured pens, and I was surprised how much I knew already, so I'd just write it down." (Male Respondent)

and:

> "Planning my day was helpful. I never had a diary, ever, so when I got one from [support tutor], it was great 'cause I could plan the work in small stages. I had to write presentations and seminar stuff and a couple of essays during a semester, so planned it all. I sort of stuck to it as well!" (Female Respondent)

These coping strategies reinforce the work of Pelton et al (1990) and Lefly et al (1991) who recognized that support strategies help mature dyslexic students as a recovery to past, negative, experiences.

Group Sessions

Group work was another important aspect of support, but was only used in the newer universities:

"There were about three of us, and we had to learn punctuation. I thought it useful but there was this girl there who didn't get it. She kept on asking loads of questions about obvious stuff and I felt I got left behind. I could go much, much, much faster than her, but I did enjoy the sessions though." (Female Respondent)

Getting Left Behind

Two respondents spoke about getting left behind in their group sessions saying that they simply could not understand what was being said:

> "What the fuck is a nominative pronoun? Why do I need to know anyway?" (Male Respondent)

and:

> "It made me feel a bit stupid really. But I feel I got some help, I think." (Female Respondent)

These group sessions show the respondents being taught HE academic standards, which Pollak (2001) and Riddick (2001) dispute as they recognise that dyslexia challenges the traditional view of high HE literacy. These examples suggest that support was available to the respondents. One point of interest is that the respondents commented that the support system was not brought to their attention automatically, apart from one university where all mature students were targeted at their freshers' week. These other respondents all said that they had to find the support department and ask for support, usually after their first essay.

In addition, not one of the respondents ever mentioned the institution's disability statement, throughout the interviews. Only two of the respondents, when pressed, had ever heard of the statement and they could not recall any aspect of its wording. This interesting section of the data suggests that there was no effective advertising in four of the universities concerning the dyslexia support service, even though it has its basis in the statement. Most disability statements claim to give the disabled person the clearest information about support in that particular institution. As nobody voluntarily referred to it, and only two respondents had even vaguely heard of it, one could conclude that greater advertising of this statement was necessary, as it could have encourage people with undiagnosed dyslexia to seek help.

Negative Experience

There was a multitude of negative experiences regarding support within various institutions. These focused on various issues such as personalities, attitude of staff and facilities:

Expectation vs. Reality

One respondent spoke about what she was expecting from the support service at her institution:

"If you asked for something, that they'd bend over backwards to try and give it to you, because you're paying to be there. They are there for you, so if you say you need something they should help provide it." (Female Respondent)

She went on to explain what she had found:

> "They twiddled their thumbs and sat on their bums and got paid to do it… It's annoying. I'm going to be twelve grand in debt and they're doing fuck all to help me. They're there to help me, to help anyone with a disability and they're sitting on their bums not doing anything, so they should all be shot, every single one of them." (Female Respondent)

This heated reply is symptomatic of several respondents from an institution where they were unhappy with the support offered:

> "They were useless. I didn't know what to expect, and I wasn't disappointed… They'd do nothing unless you'd beg them. But I didn't know what I wanted really, I thought they could suggest stuff, but they didn't. It wasn't until a friend from [another university] showed me what she was getting; it made me really angry." (Male Respondent)

These examples made the respondents feel belittled and bitter about ever going to the support service:

> "I'm just not going back [to the support service]. Everyone feels the same what I've spoken to and it makes me feel really bad about myself. I thought they're supposed to help? They've done more to make me feel like leaving [university] than any of the homework stuff." (Male Respondent)

and:

> "It's like going to school again, being told off by the teacher. I feel stupid when I walk in to [support service's offices] and worse when I walk out again. It's like I'm having to watch what I'm saying all the time 'cause they're waiting to take offence. They all seem to hate each other, especially [support tutor], so I get in their way." (Female Respondent)

This hostility seemed to come from a sense that the respondents were not treated as individuals. They felt that they required flexible help from the support service, but the reality was that they felt patronised and marginalised, by what they saw as an understaffed service. As the respondents were not clear about their needs, they looked to the service to help them, yet they felt that the service was not only not listening to them, but actively encouraging them to go away and support themselves. Nevertheless this particular service did receive a small number of positive responses:

> "[support tutor] was great to talk to. She sits with me and talks through periods when I don't feel like working, times when I think the workload's too much. That's the best type of support for me." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I sat with her and we went through the essay, piece by piece. By the end I felt so much better. It's like a weight'd been lifted off my shoulders." (Female Respondent)

Poor Proof-Reading

Another problem identified in the interviews was that proof-reading was not thorough enough:

> "I sent the essay to [support tutor] as an [e-mail] attachment, and he read it, made some corrections and sent it back. I handed it in, and got a third. The essay was full of mistakes and the lecturer pointed it all out in big red pen, just like at school. I e-mailed the head of the [support] service and she wrote back that I should have re-checked it myself! I've never asked for help again. It makes me feel I'm all on my own again." (Female Respondent).

This feeling of being on one's own was felt by another respondent who asked for proof-reading help:

> "I was late with giving the essay to [support tutor]. I needed it the following day to hand in at twelve. He said he didn't have time and I's on my own now, but he'd agreed [proof-reading] before, and that was that." (Female Respondent)

The academic proof-reading support from the specialist support staff was initially intended to increase the confidence in their students eventually to work on their own, enabling them to utilise coping strategies which they could build on during their time at university. In these cases the respondents had been unable quickly to access this support (Gilroy and Miles, 1996)

and felt that they were somehow lesser individuals because they were seen as an inconvenience rather than students who required support.

Discussion

Early Experiences at University were Reminiscent of School.

There were mixed responses from the respondents starting their new academic careers. Some were in awe of their new environment, and others in awe of their new identity within and outside the academic community. This feeling of newness and change was identified in many different ways as they experienced different levels of acceptance by fellow undergraduates and academics alike. The most important question to be asked was: How did these respondents experience the environment after a largely negative time at school and work? Many respondents felt that they were both reliving their school experience, and were also finding that they were re-starting their life:

> "Away from work, I felt like I could start my life again, you know like, like becoming young again." (Female Respondent)

This idea of a second chance to achieve is one that is revealing as three other respondents used exactly the same term '*becoming young again*'. Other phrases such as '*where I left off from school*' were used by four respondents. This terminology suggests that the respondents were perhaps expecting to find a utopian educational setting, free from their negative experience

at school, yet they soon became aware of examples of past school memories being repeated. These negative experiences seemed to stall the respondents as their idea of a utopian environment was challenged. (Bernstein, 1975; Halsey et al.,1977; Zeitlyn, 1988)

It also needs to be asked: Why did some of these respondents feel that the university environment would be different to the school environment? They could have been influenced by the university advertising. (Palfreman-Kay, 2000). The prospectus of a post-1992 university showed bright images of people, many who were not stereotypical 18 year olds, smiling and appearing to enjoy their university experience. There were remarkably few images of people working in the library, in lecture halls or sitting at computers. This advertising strategy seemed to give a false sense of security, as indicated by a support tutor at a post-1992 university:

> "...we've had a couple of younger mature students think it's a big party here. The prospectus makes them feel they're coming to have fun and pick up a degree at the end of it... It's not like that, and that's when they start to drop out..." (Support Tutor)

The idea that there would be tough academic work to be undertaken was lost on some respondents, with one respondent not realising that reading and essay writing would have to be undertaken away from the classroom setting.

Negative initial classroom experience could also be caused by academics being insensitive to the needs of mature dyslexic students, especially those who were not fresh from school, and

had thus experienced the 'outside world'. This problem was not uncommon, especially in the pre-1992 universities, as this support tutor states:

> "There are some staff who've been here some time... who think that undergraduates, not from traditional routes [school/FE college/ aged 18-22], are too much work [trouble]... we've had lots of complaints from two departments especially..."
> (Support Tutor)

These respondents had negative experiences reminiscent of school, enough to feel that they were being victimised, yet they carried on with their course, regardless of the lecturer's attitude. Why was this? It could be that they could rely on a strong academic support system. It could be that the fear of leaving university at such an early stage in the academic year would be shameful in the face of their family and friends. Another reason could simply be that they knew that they would be perceived as a failure, especially as some respondents has not been supported by previous work colleagues.

Variability in Quantity and in Perceived Quality of Support Services.

Looking at the students' experience of the support systems in place within their various universities, it appears that the post-1992 universities gave greater dyslexia related academic support to their dyslexic undergraduate students, while the older institutions did not offer nearly as much academic help, confirming that not all universities offer the same level of support (Singleton and Aisbitt, 2001). For example:

> "I get dyslexia support here at [University] about twice a week on average." (Female Respondent)

but in contrast:

> "They're useless, and I tried twice and got nowhere, so, no, I never get any help from [support service]." (Male Respondent)

If this was the case, as seen in the data, then why did the respondents at the older universities not drop out when the going got tough? One explanation is that the older universities only accepted students with higher 'A' level grades, which many dyslexic students did not attain. This could have meant that the support service was not used to helping students with lower entry grades, and possibly lower academic ability as intimated by these two respondents:

> "All of the normal students [eighteen year old undergraduates] all had real 'A' Levels that were As and Bs and I thought I best not tell them about my background." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I didn't know *any* dyslexic [mature] students with really good 'A' levels like the youngsters have. Most of them [eighteen year old undergraduates] had top marks

and the mature students were just in on experience or, I don't know, accident?"

(Female Respondent)

All of the respondents in this study came from a similar state-maintained educational background achieving low school qualifications, ranging from no qualifications to two 'O' level passes at grade D and E. In effect, all of the respondents were at the same academic level when they entered university, yet their views on the support services ranged from extremely positive, at the post-1992 universities, to disdain at the pre-1992 universities.

Another reason for this inconsistency in support could be that one pre-1992 university had a better system of general non-academic support that was independent of the everyday university world of academic study. These support networks, such as clubs or societies, tutors or mentors, could have provided the actual support that some of the respondents most needed, rather than simply gaining help with their reading and writing. These non-academic support mechanisms could well have been the basis for the respondents developing a strong sense of community and personal confidence as they were in surroundings where they felt a sense of belonging, as opposed to their previous problems at school where they were seen as a hindrance and failures:

"I really felt at home, for the first time ever, I really felt at home." (Female Respondent)

We will investigate this matter in greater detail in chapter 9.

Dependence on Academic Dyslexia Support

An important aspect of academic support highlighted in the research was the new universities' commitment to giving regular and reliable dyslexia support to assist the respondents with their *academic* work. This was seen, by the respondents, as extremely helpful and gave them a feeling that they were able to do well alongside their non-dyslexic counterparts. Indeed, it appeared that they had greatly benefited from this, as their end of year classifications showed; yet, some of the respondents covertly identified a sense of dependency on these support services, and felt that they could not complete their courses without help from the staff.

> "I now *need* to get help they give me. I always have loads of questions to ask at the [support] centre. I can't write an essay without talking to [support tutor] about it first." (Female Respondent)

This dependency could foster a generation of dyslexic students, from some universities, who may not have specific coping strategies to assist them in the workplace. Their dependence on support could restrict them in their work, and limit them in their choice of jobs as this support tutor claimed:

> "It's great helping students, but some just come back time and time again with the same problem expecting us to do it [solve it] for them." (Support Tutor)

This experience highlights an over-dependency on various support systems, either from a support tutor or a technology. Interestingly these dependencies were evenly noted between pre-degree and undergraduate students at one post-1992 university.

Academic Support Systems

Looking in greater detail at the experience of the respondents it becomes clearer that the computer, alongside one-to-one support, was a key tool in assisting them with their written work and reading. Various respondents commented that they would have been lost without the spellchecker and the cut and paste facility. These generally available Microsoft Word applications can be found in most graduate office workplaces and would be available to the students in places other than their universities.

Dependency on Specialist Computer Software

Specialist software could provide invaluable assistance to students in every aspect of their written work. However it could also lead to a problem. Speech Recognition software and Optical Character Recognition software can assist dyslexic students in their work, and, when used for academic study, can make a real and positive difference to their progress. Yet some of the respondents commented that they were expecting to use this software throughout their academic career, and beyond. Some respondents recognised that they had started to become reliant on their computers, and could not pick up a small text book without scanning it into the reading software. This could have negative repercussions as they would need to be able to assimilate a great deal of information when they entered the working world as graduates, and employers might not be so sympathetic to a member of staff who

could not even read a text without spending time scanning it into their computers, or send an e-mail without having to talk it into the computer first, as can be seen in this example:

> "I spent a day trying to do computer work at the CAB [Citizen's Advice Bureau] just typing stuff into the computer. They didn't have my dictation software, or the scanning stuff I use. I told them I's disabled, but they said they needed someone to put the data in the computer quickly, and I was too slow for what they needed. They were nice about it, but I couldn't help that I never normally typed." (Female Respondent)

The reliance on this type of software can be seen in action when looking at other dyslexic students who were right at the end of their degrees. This type of reliance openly worries some support services, with tutors claiming their students will not be skilled with the necessary proficiencies to move into graduate employment, without having constantly to refer to their computer.

Dependency on Other Technologies

This dependency on technology can also be seen in other technologies like the dictaphone. The dictaphone is a very useful piece of hardware, and the advent of the small digital recorder has given far greater flexibility and clarity than the magnetic tape used previously. They are smaller and do not attract the same level of attention as older machines and can be connected to other technologies to help reinforce learning. Students in this study recognised

the benefits that it brought, by being organised with the recordings, and not letting themselves get behind with listening to past lectures:

> "I can use this small machine [digital], but the old ones I saw are loads bigger and the sound's crap. I can hide this one and [later] listen to it through the computer." (Male Respondent)

However there was a possibility that some students might record their lectures, but fall behind in re-listening to them and that a large pile of disks could build up, making the student feel that they could not cope with the mountain of backlog.

> "Cor, I've got loads of bloody tapes from old lectures. I'll never listen to those buggers [tapes]!" (Female Respondent)

Dependency on Amanuensis

Another problem that could arise with recordings involved an amanuensis. With a culture of recording each lecture, and having an amanuensis taking notes, a respondent could feel that they did not necessarily have to take their own notes or, in certain situations, listen to the live lecture at all:

> "Oh yes, I've fallen right off to sleep in lectures. Especially when it's hot, or at the end of the day. I'm never worried though. I just listen to it again, and if there's a tricky spelling, I just look at the note-taker's notes, and it's often there." (Male Respondent)

Over-reliance on Academic Support Mentors

The respondents realised the importance of the dyslexia support services in helping them to achieve at the same level as their non-dyslexic peers. Much of the support offered was seen to be helpful, with the exception of one university at which there was almost constant negativity.

Academic support services generally offered group workshops and technical support, but it was the one-to-one support that was seen as the most helpful. This was because it enabled the students to feel that they had a mentor who was not an academic, who could work alongside them. Again, on the whole this was seen as helpful, but in two cases it became clear that the respondents were becoming reliant on their one-to-one mentor. This could be seen in such actions as telephoning the support mentor for spelling advice, when they could have first tried independent means to access the correct spelling. This reliance fostered a feeling of dependence on the academic support service and made the respondents worry that they would lose this support-crutch once they had left university. Thus it was not preparing them for the graduate workplace.

> "I really worry if they closed down the support centre, what I'd do, and after university, I just don't stand a chance." (Female Respondent)

If this respondent had viewed her support as being one that would enable her to achieve within her own abilities, then she would have developed a set of coping strategies which

could have helped her manage her dyslexia, as opposed to relying on someone else to solve difficulties caused by her dyslexia.

Consequences of Lack of Academic Support

The data identified five respondents who received no academic support or only limited support, as they felt the support service was not approachable or helpful. The key question is: How did they achieve academic success with no academic support?

Developed Systems of Community

These particular respondents were all at a pre-1992 university where there was a strong system of academic and non-academic support. Each of the respondents had a tutor who was able to help them with their academic work, as well as offer advice with various personal problems:

> "My tutor's a really nice guy who teaches in my department, and knows the sort of work I need help with… He can't help me with my dyslexia though." (Female Respondent)

Also this particular university had an exceptionally strong system of student bodies that were able to offer corporate membership, friendship and individual support, both from an academic and non-academic stance; these covered everything from team sports to union debating:

"We've a discussion group with different lecturers who talks about how he or she thinks the essays should be written. It's really helped me, 'cause if you're not a member of the club, then you don't get this privilege." (Female Respondent)

The university 'groups' could be seen as the 'glue' that helped give the respondents a sense of identity within their academic community and thus this feeling of ownership gave them a sense of empowerment to help them achieve within the academic community, spurring them on to complete their work alongside their non-dyslexic peers, even though they did not receive any dyslexia support.

> "At times I feel my mates from [group] are the reason I want to stay here. I couldn't imagine life anywhere else. They're the reason I work so hard at trying to get better with my essays." (Male Respondent)

This particular finding is further investigated in the next chapter.

Clubs at post-1992 Universities

Two respondents from new universities commented that they did not join any university societies as they did not think they were welcoming to mature students, and more importantly did not add anything to their academic studies:

> "Nah, there's no school [departmental] clubs. No one wants to do more work [studying] than they need to..." (Female Respondent)

It was noticeable that the post-1992 universities did not have nearly as many clubs or societies dedicated to academic subjects as the oldest two universities. The clubs they did have were dedicated to non academic subjects like:

> "...being gay, or sun tanning, or football or like going to the pictures..." (Female Respondent)

There was a noticeable difference between the newer and older universities in their provision of student-led academic study clubs. This could help explain why the older universities were better placed to help the mature dyslexic student community with support mechanisms, as opposed to the newer universities who appeared simply to expect students to attend lectures and later go away to their own social life within the community.

Finding Support Through Belonging

If the above argument is valid, it suggests that there could be an added dimension to the debate about support for students with a disability. If there is little, or no, academic support offered to the dyslexic student, perhaps the students find another form of support to assist them with their studies. By becoming part of a group that makes them feel accepted, by gaining a sense of community that increases self-confidence, they are helped to feel that they can gain both social support and academic support. This could also foster a sense of friendly competition that spurs on the dyslexic student to gain academic results so they can stay at the university and remain a member of their specific communities:

"I know I'm not as clever as he [academic peer] is, but I really do try and get a better mark than he does. It never happens, but one day it'll happen." (Male Respondent)

If, as suggested, these social support mechanisms are, in effect, assisting the respondents with their academic studies, then it could go some way to showing that academic support is not necessarily the only form of support needed to help dyslexic students achieve within the academic world. It could well be that by feeling part of a community of learners, both dyslexic and non-dyslexic, social inclusion could be as important as obtaining direct academic support to assist with studying towards a degree. Yet it should be remembered that good, clear and structured academic support should not foster dependency, but enhance the student's experience on re-entering the academic environment, and help put them on the same academic footing as their non-dyslexic peers, thus helping them to achieve beyond university.

Chapter Nine. Entering Higher Education: Changes in Psychosocial Adjustment.

'I'm loads happier now I've passed the year now. I've not done brilliantly; I'm not that good, but, well, its load better than this time last year, loads bloody better. Those bastards at 'factory' 'd never believe what I can do now." (Male Respondent)

Introduction

In the final interview, which was close to the end of the academic year, respondents commented on their experience of the year and how they looked back on their time in the university academically, psychologically, and socially. Every respondent was clear that they had changed, some more than others. Some respondents had changed their career aspirations and others saw their academic work leading beyond an undergraduate degree. Many could not believe that they had changed so much in such a short period of time and wondered how they would change further in the future.

Reflecting on the Past: What Sort of Person Was I Then?

The respondents looked back at the beginning of their courses to try to explain how they saw themselves then, through the eyes of someone who had changed so much in the last nine/ten months. All but one respondent spontaneously said they found this a useful

exercise as it helped them realise where they had come from and how different they were now.

Coming to University

Looking back at the period described in Chapter Seven, when the respondents talked about the early days of their return to education, it is interesting to see how their view of themselves had changed:

> "God, I was *so* weak. I had no confidence at all. I remember crying at the drop of a hat I was so frightened at getting things wrong." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I remember total apprehension when I first walked through the door [into university]. It was different coming to the interview 'cause I never really thought I'd get in, so I wasn't paying too much attention, but when I came as a real student, well that was different. I was just waiting for stuff to go wrong and be kicked out. It's funny really 'cause I don't feel like that now." (Male Respondent)

These two respondents had been extremely worried about their initial entry into education. They had been concerned that they would only last a few weeks and then have to leave. They looked back and found it difficult to believe that they had felt like that, now they had found that they could cope successfully with academic work:

"It seems like it's a different person when I look back. It's like I know about that person, but they're not me. I really felt I couldn't do any better than working on the factory floor with all of those pillocks, but that's so wrong, I can do *so* much more now." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "It's like a film I've watched with me playing a sad down-trodden housewife with a part-time job that pays nothing and work with no-ones for no reason. I really feel like, now, I've become the *real* me and left all of that behind." (Female Respondent)

Could never go back

The feeling of leaving the past in the past was one that three other respondents spoke about:

> "I'm never going to go back to see them. Even when I'm vice-chancellor of [University Name] Uni. They'll [past work colleagues] just rot there, just as I could of done, but I broke away from it all and now I'm free of it forever. No manual job for me again." (Male Respondent)

and:

"I was 100 times different to what I am now. Even if I went to see them now, I'd not know what to say, 'cause my life's so different to theirs. I've got new friends now." (Female Respondent)

Their feeling that they had changed so much in such a small space of time was one that the respondents were very happy with. They felt that they were different people in their workplace in comparison to university and they had changed even from their initial starting period in university:

Academic Progress

"I'd sit in the lectures writing what they were saying, but not really understanding it until I got home and listened to it again [on a recording]. I can't believe I 's so slow then. I must of been really bad at writing, well in fact, I know I was. I wonder what other people thought of me?" (Female Respondent)

The realisation that she had not been a good student at the beginning of her course made this respondent reflect on how she must have seemed to others around her. This was also spoken about by two other respondents:

"I can remember the lecturer saying she didn't understand what I'd written in an essay, and I was so upset... I saw the essay the other day; it's only from about ten months ago, but it looks as if a child wrote it. It looks nothing like what I write now.

I still see that lecturer and she must think I'm bloody stupid… I wish she could see my work now!" (Female Respondent)

and:

"She [past lecturer] doesn't know about my work now. It's so different to when I first came here. I used to write rubbish, but now I get really good marks. [Dyslexia tutor] says I'm coming on so much…"(Female Respondent)

Self Development

Respondents spoke about their own confidence in themselves and how it had increased over the period of study. They spoke about why *they* thought they had increased in confidence and what they attributed that to. Role models were identified as important, as was recognising that the lecturers were there to help them, as opposed to catch them out. Respondents started by looking at why *they* thought they were the way they were when they entered university:

"I suppose I was that way because I'd not been a confident person since school days. I think a lot about school now 'cause I wonder about how things could of been different if I had the help then…If I'd been more confident at school and had help with my dyslexia I could of done loads of academic things and not had to go through this all now… [but] I ended up in the factory with lots of other girls who failed at school and that made it worse I suppose; it makes you feel low, not having any

respect in our community and no cash... No wonder I felt low when I came to uni... When you think about it, my old school has a lot to answer for..." (Female Respondent)

This lack of confidence, due to a lack of support at school, compounded by having to take a job with few prospects, meant that this respondent had a very low image of herself:

> "It feels funny thinking about it now, but I didn't really like myself. I thought I was a waste really, and the teachers at school were right about me. I thought they're right for all those years, and it's only recently I realise they're wrong about me. I'm worth something. It wasn't my fault I couldn't read what was in the books, and nobody cared about it; they all thought I was thick, and it's only after 15 years that I can see that they're wrong... I am good at reading and writing and I can prove it now, and I'm loads better than they were." (Female Respondent)

This bitter memory reminded her that it was the return to education which had made her realise she was not worthless as her teachers had told her. This realisation, that the respondents had changed from the beginning of their course, was expressed in a similar way by another respondent:

"Yes my essay work is tons better than right at the beginning of the course and it's thanks to having to do lots of it, and deadlines and feeling I could do it... I'd no respect for myself when I came [to university] back then and I wanted to better myself but never thought I could. My partner calls me Rita [after Willy Russell's

> Screenplay: Educating Rita] and he's right 'cause I wanted to be better in everything, not just essays and university, but getting money to get me out of my old job." (Female Respondent)

She went on to talk about feeling depressed:

> "When you've been told you're thick and stupid all the time at school, you go into uni. thinking the same, and you're making a big mistake, because everyone who knows you're stupid tells you [that] you are. So, when you start to get it right and you're not stupid and the teachers [university lecturers] here say you're not stupid, and that the [school] teachers were wrong, then you start to think perhaps my [school] teachers were wrong and that's when you get angry… It's like you've wasted years of your life working in a dead end job with pricks who made you feel worse, and then you worry about going to uni. and it turns out you can do it, well it makes you fucking mad." (Female Respondent)

These two respondents were not unusual in their reaction to realising that they were not academically incompetent. It was at this point that they reflected back on their school experiences and how their lives could have been quite different. Not all respondents wished they'd progressed from school to university. Two respondents saw things differently:

> "I did start to think about my school time when I was in uni. because I realise my life could of been really different if things had been different at school. When I was starting to get reasonable marks in university I thought about suing my school for a

load of money as one girl had done, I read in the papers; but in the end I just accepted it. My life was what it was and no getting angry about it will bring it back… I've just got to be happy that I've got here now before I get any older." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I'm from a working-class background and wouldn't of been allowed to go to university whilst I still lived at home. My dad was really against it, which I now realise made me angry against it as well. I know I couldn't of gone then 'cause it was different then. That's that and coming to uni. has made me realise that…" (Male Respondent)

These two respondents, although upset that they had not had the option of attending HE when they were younger, recognised that their school had let them down, but accepted that it was no use getting angry about a past that they might not have ever enjoyed and, for their own reasons, seemed to have come to terms with their situation, and were happy to be in HE at this point in their lives:

> "I'm not sure I'd enjoy uni. as much as I have now if I'd of gone when I was eighteen. Starting [my course] last year's really opened my eyes to me and what I could do with my life now if I wanted to. The only thing is I wish I'd had the option

of going to uni. when I was 18 and not have been working for two years already…"

(Female Respondent)

Some respondents felt very bitter about missing out on their teenage HE experience and angry about being stuck in jobs that made them feel isolated and fostered low self-esteem. However, it is important to note that there were respondents who felt that they had passed through that period and come out feeling that there was nothing they could do to make up for the years of unfulfilling work they had had to endure. It could be said that the educational experience is dynamic and the respondents passed through different stages of reflecting back on their school life. Having achieved success within an HE course, they were able to work through their educational difficulties and recognise that their late entry into HE had given them an experience of university that they could not have enjoyed when they were eighteen. This might have been because they realised that as mature students, this was their *last chance* to succeed.

Social Development

The respondents found that along with the increase in their academic self-confidence as their course progressed, they were able to improve in their social skills, not only in meeting and keeping friends, but in arguing with them about academic matters on which they disagreed, yet still keeping the friendship. Another interesting observation was that five of the respondents spoke about how their old friends fell away as their course progressed because they felt that they did not have so much in common with them and their lives:

Losing Old Friends

> "It sounds like I'm a snob or something, but I just didn't have anything to talk to them about." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "Well I'm not totally to blame, I need to spend loads of time [working] on the essays that I can't go out go out with my old friends… yea, I have been in the [Bar] a lot lately." (Female Respondent)

Five respondents spoke about how they started to drift away from their pre-university friends. Various reasons were given for this: lack of time, money, inclination, having little in common. Three of the respondents identified themselves as being the culprit in these friendship splits:

> "It was my fault really, I just spent so much time with my new friends that I forgot about Jane [old friend] and the others. I feel I should of done more with them, but I thought I had so much in common with the people on my course…" (Female Respondent)

and:

"Well, I called them less and less, and when they rang me, I'd make an excuse or not pick up the 'phone. They didn't know about my life now. I didn't want to drink in the town; I wanted to drink at the union with the people from my course." (Female Respondent)

Other respondents attempted to 'pass the buck' by putting some of the blame on their old friends:

> "They weren't interested when I told them about uni. they'd just call me professor and brains, and I just didn't want to listen to that crap." (Male Respondent)

and:

> "I tried telling them about the essay I was writing about, I thought it was dead interesting, but they just wanted to talk about really stupid things like their latest conquest [relationship]." (Male Respondent)

This feeling of moving on from their past friends was echoed with the distancing of two respondents' relationship with their family:

"I'd just get on with the [academic] work I had to do in my bedroom. I stopped sitting round the telly with them, watching game shows and East Enders I didn't have time for it and I wasn't interested like before. I ran out of things to say to them..." (Female Respondent)

This respondent went on to say that her time at University started to expose the cracks in her relationship with her family:

> "I saw we'd nothing to talk about if we weren't watching TV every evening. We'd just sit there and criticise what they were doing, even if it [the TV show] was good. We'd got so negative about everything, and now I can see it... Since going to University and learning about learning, I see that that TV stuff is just trash and wastes so much of my life and keeps my family together... I'm glad I don't want it now." (Female Respondent)

This respondent later explained that she moved out of her family home during her course and moved in with her new partner who was also reading for the same degree at her University. She was happy that she'd left the family home, and although there was no animosity between herself and the family members, she felt that she'd started to outgrow her family, from an intellectual point of view:

> "My dad said: You and I move in different circles now... He said: You're not the girl I knew last year, this university lark is changing you, sort of thing." (Female Respondent)

This respondent went on to say that she was very happy living with her new partner and that coming to university and making new friends was the best thing she'd ever done, and she didn't regret a moment of it, she was so happy now, where before, she felt miserable.

Making New Friends

All of the respondents spoke about how they had increased in confidence through making new friends in their respective universities. As we have seen above, some respondents made friends at the expense of old friends whom they knew before they attended university, but many of the respondents felt that with the new community that they were part of, they were in a strong position to make new, like-minded, friends:

> "...we got on straight away. She was dyslexic like me and as time went on, it turned out her life was just like mine. It was really good to feel that you're not on your own." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I feel I've known her for years, but we've only been friends for nine or ten months now. We've so much in common." (Female Respondent)

These close knit relationships were a real help to the respondents and they spoke of ways in which joint and corporate help could increase the academic experience at university, and foster greater self-confidence in the individual respondent:

> "When I started at [University] I felt alone. I didn't make any friends in the first week, I's always getting lost and didn't know where I was going and that... In the

second week I sat with some girls and started talking at the end of a seminar, and they seemed really nice. It's taken a bit of time, and then I went out with them and they're great, we've a real laugh. I started to feel loads more confident when I started to stay on at uni., and wasn't failing stuff like I thought I would…" (Female Respondent)

This respondent was not alone in making a link between self-confidence, academic work and socialisation:

> "The more I got good marks in homework [essays], the more I could feel better about talking to the others about my work. It made me feel lots better, and I started adding bits into conversations, when before that, I wouldn't of dared…" (Male Respondent)

Respondents claimed that the change in their self image came from a mixture of reasons; once they started to feel secure in their academic ability, their own personal self-confidence increased and that gave them the opportunity to speak to others with greater confidence. Seeking peer help further increased their self-confidence and in turn brought greater academic results. This circle of education and social interaction reinforced the feeling of belonging to a community of learners and gave dyslexic mature students a platform to increase their own general abilities. This did not simply mean extending their social and academic confidence but also their confidence in themselves. They came to believe that their own views, values and beliefs were worthy of attention.

Taking Stock of the Present: Who Am I Now?

As seen above, the respondents were asked how they viewed themselves with hindsight when they looked back at the start of the year and how they had changed. They were also asked how they now viewed themselves academically, socially and psychologically.

Who Am I Academically?

Respondents spoke freely, and sometimes self-critically, about changes in their academic confidence.

Essay Writing – Positive

> "I never thought I could write a report like I do now. I'm really surprised at myself. " (Male Respondent)

and:

> "I thought dyslexic people couldn't write or read or spell. It's just wrong, I'm proof of it." (Male Respondent)

These two respondents were especially pleased with the way that they wrote academically. They were very positive about their experience as mature students with dyslexia and looked forward to carrying on to complete their courses. Although they were not completely

confident, they felt that they could achieve academically and pursue writing with a sense of confidence.

Essay Writing – Negative

> "There's no doubt I'm better than I was, but I really do struggle, still, with writing. I wish I'd better help, but I know it's an uphill struggle; I wish it was easier, quicker." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "...loads of people in my classes are still loads better than me...It's true, I write much quicker [now], and I know better about the library, and using Word [Microsoft software] and the spellchecker, but I really would like to be faster and more motivated..."(Female Respondent)

Essay Writing – Motivation

Motivation was identified as important in this context. These two respondents spoke about it:

> "I still get low. It's not that I can't do the work, 'cause I know I can, but I just am so worried about starting an essay. It's the start that I find difficult most of all, but I

can do it, it's just getting started, and that's where my motivation is bad..." Female Respondent)

and:

> "My get up and go has got up and gone!... I've just written a seminar presentation that got really good marks, but it took ages to write, well not ages, just a day I think, but it took me ages to get myself right in the mind to write it. I think the deadline helps. I wasn't like this when I started, I had more enthusiasm then." (Female Respondent)

These three respondents found that they were losing motivation towards the end of the academic course. They knew that they could write the essay, or present a paper, or host a seminar, but the motivation to do it was lacking and one respondent described it as:

> "Just sitting there and looking at a brick wall that's only 6 foot tall, you've climbed them 100 times, but each time you think you can't be bothered anymore." (Male Respondent)

The lack of motivation at the end of the course only seemed to disappear as the academic deadlines came closer and closer, and either the respondent started writing or it became obvious that the respondent needed help:

> "My friend is the best at re-motivating me now we're nearly finished this year. We start talking about the subject and it gets me going and I feel I know more than I first thought." (Female Respondent)

This motivational 'kick' from a deadline or a friend seemed to have helped all of the respondents, in one way or another, during the year. It was the realisation that the respondents could do the work; it was a case of actual motivation and drive to finish the final parts of the course as the academic year drew to a close.

Who am I Psychologically?

All but one of the respondents felt that they had changed psychologically over the nine/ten months that they had been enrolled on their course:

I'm a better person now

> "I don't feel the frustration I did even eight months ago. I've calmed right down now. I used to get angry about people who'd been to university, mainly 'cause I's jealous of them. I'd always wanted to go, and now I'm here it makes me feel like part of my life, that was missing, is here." (Male Respondent)

This respondent had left school and watched friends go away to university, whilst he stayed in his small town working in a 'dead-end job'. This had made him resent people who had enjoyed education beyond 'O' level and he reacted against them. Now he was part of this

post 'O' Level educational system, he felt he had come to terms with his rebellion and moved on to embrace the opportunities it gave. Another respondent spoke about how she had had a change of perception:

> "I don't look at the telly and the papers like I used to. Papers talk such crap about the world. They're just trying to stir it up and get people who're too thick to make up their own minds about stuff they don't understand, and never could [understand]." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I read between the lines now. I only read The Guardian [newspaper] now. I think they give the real news, not like the News of the World or The People. I used to *read* them; I'm so embarrassed!" (Female Respondent)

These respondents felt that they had become infinitely shrewder in their ideas about society and in gathering the news from around them. They both said that they only take in information that they considered was correct and true, and not just casual hearsay.

Academic Discussion

The respondents noted a change in their own personal feelings during academic discussions. These argumentative conversations occurred in many different settings from the union bar, to debating sessions. The respondents noted they felt that they had become more confident

at putting their point across in a way they never could have entertained before coming to university. The reasons for this change stemmed from greater self-confidence in their own ability to put forward a case, which has been developed from of their own academic abilities:

> "We had a debate in class. It was about extra [examination] time for dyslexic people in universities and we were told to research the topic and argue with the other [opposing] side. I think, obviously, it's [extra examination time] fine, but I had to argue it was wrong, but it was great to argue from the other side. It made me feel I can see both sides of an argument. I never did that before and it's helped me see I shouldn't just look at my view only…" (Female Respondent)

This debate was the first time this respondent had ever had to look at an opposing view to her own, and on such an emotive subject to her. Taking this style of argument into her essays helped her academic performance, and gave her greater academic confidence as she gained better marks in her essays.

Another form of self-confidence came when discussing issues in class seminar groups. This free-for-all type of discussion did not require any previous academic knowledge, apart from general preparation for the seminar session. Yet this respondent found that it increased her general ability to argue a case, and speak up in public situations, which in the past she would not have done:

> "When you're told you're thick at school, and whatever you say's wrong, you start to say nothing, 'cause you get shot down and people laugh at you. Now I talk to my

classmates and don't get shot down for being stupid, they just take it all in. It's nice being accepted and that I've got something that's worth hearing. It's made me more confident in other places when I need to argue, like in the shops and places."

(Female Respondent)

These examples show that the respondents felt they had increased in confidence as their course had progressed in all sorts of academic situations from interpreting information in newspapers to having a debate in which they felt that they were participating rather than getting in the way. These statements showed that the respondents felt that they had changed since they started their courses and they liked the person they had become.

Who am I Socially?

The respondents felt that they had changed in their ability to gain friends. We have already spoken about respondents losing pre-university friends, but not how they had made new friends. One respondent said that:

> "I've lots in common with the dyslexic women on my course, and after worrying about getting lost around the campus, I started to talk to some of them... Now it's like we've been friends for years. I's never good at making friends before, but when you're all in it together, well you want support from each other." (Female Respondent)

This feeling of community was made also mentioned by two other respondents:

> "This friend of mine's from [Town] like me, and she's dyslexic, but she lives in the really nice part of the town, so normally we wouldn't of talked, but 'cause of uni. we've come good friends. Her husband's a solicitor and that's why they live in the nice part!" (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I'd never known someone from the States, but she's from San Francisco but doing a course here. She's dyslexic and she started talking to me because I's on my own in the learning support centre. She's a bit younger than me and great. She's so different to me, but we get on so well. If I'd not gone to [university campus] I'd of never met her. She's introduced me to people from right round the world; it's changed the way I think about everything. The world's bigger than [university town], and if I'd not gone to [university] I'd still think that [town] was the centre of the world!" (Female Respondent)

Meeting new friends, and having to get on with people from different classes and different countries helped the respondents feel that they were becoming part of a larger world. Their change in self-confidence made them able to communicate more readily with new people from university and to feel that they were not restricted to staying within their own geographical area. They could see their education taking them to many more places than they could have entertained before enrolling at university. The feeling that the respondents'

self-confidence had changed since they started their courses meant that they were ready for new social challenges and were ready to embrace them.

Social Contradictions

Two respondents spoke of their difficulties in trying to bring together their social worlds of the past and their new social world:

> "I introduced one of my uni. friends to some of the women I knew from work. We went for a drink and they [workmates] were all pretty drunk, and when Charlotte [university friend] opened her mouth they all started to laugh at her. I should of said, Charlotte sounds quite posh, and all the women [work colleagues] thought this was funny. I was so embarrassed and Charlotte was an' all [as well]... I thought afterwards about it [the incident] and thought I don't need them laughing at me and keeping me down. I've changed, thanks to uni., and am proud of it. They [colleagues] think that they're having a great time in [town], but they've no future like I do. I know that now; that's why I like uni. so much." (Female Respondent)

This respondent found that she could not marry the old world of work and her changed personality, which had come from studying at university. She felt that her old work colleagues could never get the breadth of experience within her home town that she was getting from meeting new people at the University. This was echoed by another respondent who met her partner in her first year at University:

> "He's lovely and helps me so much with my dyslexia. It's like having dyslexia support 24/7…I don't get on with my mum so much but I took him to meet my mum for dinner at home, and they were so rude to him. They [mum and partner] kept on saying that they thought all schools, where you have to pay, should be closed down and all the money should go to normal schools. Tom went to a private school and it was really rude to say it, there's no reason they should of said it, but they did and it made it really difficult for me. I love Tom, he's so good to me. Just 'cause he's from a well-off background doesn't mean he's bad." (Female Respondent)

This clash of class upset this respondent enough to start to lose contact with her mother, because, socially, she valued her university experience over her past and her family. The respondent's partner had been such a help to her both from an academic and self-confidence aspect that she felt she could not have survived the year without him.

It appears that, after a period of some ten months in higher education, the respondents' social experiences had changed their views and their ability to make friends and to be in a social situation. They identified important aspects, such as class and education, as being critical in their experiences, and all respondents found that the only way to deal with their new social world, brought about thanks to education, was to address it directly by utilising their new academic skills and self-esteem.

This respondent sums up what many respondents saw as being critical in their own personal development:

> "Coming here's changed my life. I've changed so much in the last ten/eleven [nine] months, in a way I never could of thought. It's been ever-so hard work, and I've wanted to leave loads of times, but I knew it'd be better for me 'cause I needed to get rid of this dyslexia from my life so I could write, meet people, and get things better for the future, you know, do something with my life and not just sitting on my arse at home not able to help the kids with their homework, 'cause I couldn't do it an' all [as well]... I want a degree, I think I'll get one, one day. I just hope it'll get me a good job, and get me away from my old life." (Female Respondent)

This statement seemed to encapsulate the psychological, academic and social benefits of returning to university and how various respondents felt they had changed. Although not exhaustive in any sense, this respondent's summary describes the essence of how so many of the other respondents felt greater confidence in their writing/reading, friendship-making, and social networks.

Planning for the Future: Where Next?

In the final interview session the respondents commented on their thoughts and plans for their own future. They were either looking to continue into the next year of the course they were studying, or start degree courses. One respondent felt that employment was a better move, as she had experienced financial problems. The respondents spoke clearly about the changes in their aspirations for the future. Some respondents were so pleased with their progress that they spoke about the distant future and postgraduate education. Three of the

respondents saw themselves as positive role-models for future dyslexic mature students and wanted to find a way to encourage other people, like themselves, to enter education.

The Next Step

The respondents had all thought about how they were to progress in the next academic year. The respondents fell into three categories: respondents who planned to continue on their courses; respondents who planned to start degree courses; respondents who were planning to return to work.

First Year Exams and Continuing in HE.

Over half of the respondents had started degree courses as direct undergraduates and were coming to the end of their first year in HE. Their year in education had affected them greatly as has been seen earlier:

> "I never thought I'd get to the end of the first year. I didn't have exams so I just had to hand in the final essay, and wait to hear what my average was. I got 50%, which is a 2:2. I never thought I'd do as well as that, so it's really made me feel I can do the second year. It's really made me feel proud." (Female Respondent)

and:

"You need to pass this year to get through to the next year. I failed two of the modules, so I have to re-sit them in the autumn. You only get one chance to re-sit, so I need to get it all really good for then. I'm worried about next year, 'cause you can't re-sit any modules." (Female Respondent)

These respondents were pleased with their results, even though some people might think that they were low grades. Without previous academic help, such as a foundation course, these respondents were still able to achieve success in the direct entry undergraduate system:

> "My dyslexia's the thing that really lets me down. I just can't get it right at times. It makes me wonder what mark [classification] I'd get if they didn't take my dyslexia into consideration." (Female Respondent)

Concern that the respondent's mark was varied by the fact that they were dyslexic, was picked up by two other respondents:

> "I got 49% this year thanks to them changing my mark when I told them I was dyslexic; they'd forgotten about that. It changed the mark from 45% to, which is a big difference for me... I told a person on my course and they thought it was like cheating." (Male Respondent)

and

"My 50% was altered 'cause I'as dyslexic and they say it makes a difference of about 3%. I think it's good, but I think other normal students think its wrong, you know like points for nothing." (Female Respondent)

The added 3-5% was a cause of concern for these two students, and they felt bad that they had divulged the information to non-dyslexic students. (Carron, 2001).

The respondents did feel that the extra percentage points were going to help them in the following academic year:

> "I've got another two years of this sort of thing. It's been difficult this year, but I suppose it'll get easier 'cause I know more about how to do the writing and reading, so I should get faster [even] with my dyslexia problems... Any help with the grades at the end of the day really helps me." (Female Respondent)

This appreciation of the added points was echoed by another respondent, who saw his entry into the second year as potentially more difficult:

> "I 'as told it gets more difficult in the second year, there's more to learn and they mark more harder. I've got loads better in the first year, but I think it might be like starting again learning how to do harder work." (Male Respondent)

This respondent was worried that his coping strategies would not be sufficient for the second year of his course as he feared that there would be too much information for him to take in.

Overall the undergraduate respondents, who were coming to the end of their preliminary year in HE, were concerned that, even though they had progressed throughout the year, and gained an acceptable end-of-year grade, they were set to find the second year more difficult than the first, and they were not sure whether they would sink or swim.

Starting a Degree Course

The pre-degree respondents were pleased with their results at the end of their year, but were apprehensive about their move to university. This was shown in their worry about the transition between pre-degree standards and degree standards, and also how the support differed between pre- and degree education:

Transition from Pre-Degree to Degree Courses

"I'm ever-so-pleased about finishing the course here. I could never look back now, I'm just so different, but I'm worried about what's coming up next. I've applied to four universities and got a place at two of them. But I don't know what to expect about the standards and that." (Female Respondent)

The worry about the transition from this respondent's A to HE course, to the first year of a degree, was of great concern to her. She found her course difficult enough, but was worried that a degree was set to be much harder:

> "The sort of people who go to university are properly clever, and me, well, I've come a long way, but it's a different way of life at university and I don't know much about it there." (Female Respondent)

Another respondent spoke about her concerns:

> "I did [a] foundation [to HE course], and that's what it's all about [higher education], but I'm still worried I'm not gonna be as good as the real 'A' level students 'cause they've been doing it for years, and I'm still getting better at it." (Female Respondent)

The respondents seemed to be concerned that they did not know how universities worked from an everyday aspect between pre-degree and degrees. For instance: how often students needed to be in classes, lectures timetables, where to go, what to read – when and why. These concerns were flagged up as important, but the most important concern was the provision of support:

> "I know what I get here's good for me, but I don't know if I get a different type of support at degree level?" (Male Respondent)

This was echoed by another respondent:

> "Do they allow different things at big university… things like you can't record lectures, and you don't have to read out during seminars like I do here? No one here knows what happens; they say it depends on the university I go to, but I want to know in advance, 'cause that'll change my decision about where to go." (Male Respondent)

The apparent lack of knowledge and helpfulness from the staff at this respondent's FE college seemed to worry the respondent enough to consider choosing her university on support alone, something that the respondent readily admitted was wrong as there were many factors that would make her university experience enjoyable:

> "I know it's wrong, but I need to know about the support, as I could be at a university where the support's good and the social life's bad, or one where the support's bad and the social life's great, but I need the degree, and not a social life… I know it seems back to front, but I really need the support." (Female Respondent)

Although these respondents, who were about to become undergraduates after a year on pre-degree courses, had far greater confidence than they did when they left their jobs, they were still worried about moving on to an educational system that they didn't fully understand, and furthermore they worried about the support systems in place to guide them in their new courses.

Back to Work

Two respondents left their universities before the academic year was complete. The first respondent to leave made it clear that she did not want this research to divulge her reasons for leaving, other than she found the experience extremely demanding both academically and psychologically. She did, however, grant permission for her earlier experiences to be used within the study. The other respondent found that she needed to return to work after just one year in education:

> "I've no money at all, and I want to be at uni. with some money. I've tried part-time [paid] work, but it gets in the way of my [university] work and my dyslexia, so I've got to the end of the year and start in the office of the place I used to work in, in November." (Female Respondent)

The respondent went on to comment on how she felt about going back to work for the company she used to work for, but this time she was not working on the shop floor, but in the office:

> "It's gonna be really weird. I'm not like I was, and I'll see the old people who I worked with, ones I've sort of dropped since I went to [University], but I sort of don't care about them. I'll be in the nice warm office and they'll look up and see me and wish they were me, stupid bastards." (Female Respondent)

This respondent had already arranged to suspend her University registration and would resume her course after one academic year. She was sad to have left the flow of education, but mostly worried that the support available at the university would not be available in her office job:

> "I didn't tell them I'as dyslexic, I just wanted to get an easy job doing letters and that. I get to use a computer like at uni., you know with [Microsoft] Word, but I can't use my dictation software. I just need to get faster at typing. I think I'll do it without [University support tutor] help. She said she's only a 'phone call away if I need some help." (Female Respondent)

This reliance on technology, which was not readily available in the workplace, could cause this respondent some difficulties, yet she was confident that she was doing the right thing, and was grateful to her experience at university:

> "If I'd not done the course I'd not be able to do the office work. I feel stronger because I'm not on the factory floor with those bastards, so uni. has really helped me." (Female Respondent)

Aspiration Changes as a Dyslexic Adult

Various respondents recognised that their career aspirations had changed since they started their courses, and their futures were set to be quite different thanks to their newly found

educational ability and consequent improvement in their confidence and self-esteem. One respondent commented:

Career Changes

> "I wanted to work as a teacher's assistant in a primary school. I didn't think I'd do any better than that, but now I think I'd be able to be a teacher. It's only since I got a [good] grade at the end of the year that makes me think I'm good enough for it [teaching]. Now I think I could do it [teach], and so does the lecturers." (Female Respondent)

This change of future plans had put the respondent into another category of earnings and promotion. As a teacher's assistant the respondent would have been earning little more than the minimum wage, yet as a teacher she would start on a healthy salary of a little under £20,000 per year. To a woman who had been earning £11,000 when she left her last job, this would make a great deal of difference. Having said this, the responsibility would be much greater. Yet, this could set her on a career path that would give her greater confidence and further salary increases.

Another respondent changed her job aspirations over the year:

"I'd always wanted to be teacher, but I 's dyslexic [and] I thought I couldn't so I went to university to look at other careers I thought I could do, but now I feel more confident about my spelling and reading out loud and I thought I'd like to be a

teacher again. I'm still not sure, but I can do a course after a degree to make you a teacher, and you get some money to do it. I'm really happy about it, it's like a dream come true." (Female Respondent)

Postgraduate Ambitions

One respondent, who had been accepted into the second year of a degree course with no pre-degree qualifications, was feeling so confident with her end of year results that she was set to move on to a Master's degree at the same university.

> "I went to see the head of department about an MA in business studies and she said that if I get a better 2:2 in a year's time, they'd let me on. I still can't believe it. My life's changed so much in the last year. I never would of thought of getting a degree never mind two!" (Female Respondent)

The confidence that this offer of a Masters degree had given the respondent was enough to make her focus sharply on her work in the next two years:

> "I've got to get a good 2:2 or better. I'll be a post-graduate, and still have dyslexia… I still can't believe it. I'm going to really work hard this next year, and get all the support I can." (Female Respondent)

This respondent's contagious enthusiasm gained her a provisional place on a taught higher degree, conditional on a good 2:2 undergraduate degree. This confidence had given her a

boost that would spur her on to achieve as highly as she could in her undergraduate degree, and access as much support as she could.

Graduate Recruitment

The respondents at a pre-1992 university commented that they had recently attended several recruitment fairs, and company presentations. These fairs aimed to attract undergraduates to work in some of the country's largest companies in diverse fields such as HR, accountancy, law, media and consultancy. These three respondents were surprised at how serious these graduate employers were about taking mature students and welcoming people with dyslexia:

> "I was taken along to the presentation given by [international company] in [University Town]. There was lots of food, and I wore a suit. I looked a bit out of place 'cause I was much older than the other students, but I spoke to this guy and he said they had a policy in getting mature students on to their graduate recruitment programme. I told him about my dyslexia. He said that that would guarantee me an interview. I was really happy." (Male Respondent)

This positive discrimination made the respondent feel that he was able to compete in the graduate recruitment field. There were many twenty something's there, all vying for a place on highly competitive programmes, and the fact that this respondent, with life experience, could enter at a different level was extremely important. Another respondent echoed this finding:

"After the presentation we all went out for a drink with the guys from the company. We ended up in [nightclub] and there was this one guy who'd been to my university a few years earlier talked to me about an internship and how I'd get one. He said that they'd help me with the paperwork as I was dyslexic, and that there was a disability manager in HR." (Female Respondent)

This level of support helped the respondent arrange a paid internship within the company for the following summer. The experience would be very helpful indeed and place the respondent in a much stronger position for the graduate market.

Helping Others to Achieve: The Role Model

As the year drew to a close, three respondents were asked to help promote their courses to potential students who were mature or dyslexic. These respondents were considered role models to potential new students and were able to help them come to a conclusion about seeking admission to HE:

> "It was really funny when they asked me to go to the open day to talk about the course. I was really flattered, but I felt a bit of a fraud, 'cause I didn't know about how to get people to join the course. I'd had a hard time getting myself right before I went along, and I wouldn't want to of pushed anyone." (Female Respondent)

This respondent did not feel that she was a such a positive role model, and might give potential respondents a bad impression of her course. This was echoed by another respondent:

> "If I told them [potential students] that it was as difficult as I found it, then they'd not come! I found it [the course] really difficult, but great, but I can't say that can I?" (Female Respondent)

This concern with the truth of the educational experience made these two respondents feel that they would not make the most positive role-models, even though they had gained a great deal from their course to date. Another respondent described himself as a very positive role-model and took to encouraging other people in his position:

> "I can really make people enthuse about coming to [University]. I want people to have the experience I've had. I know it's difficult, but worth it in the end. I feel great about helping others... I've become so much more positive about being here and I want to make sure others do as well." (Male Respondent)

This positive attitude was important as this respondent was, at the beginning of the year, extremely negative about his educational experience. To see a mature dyslexic student enthusing about their course in this way could help future students with their decision to return to education.

Overall, the findings in this chapter show that the respondents had been through a journey of self-discovery that had led to changes in their self-confidence and in their academic and social life. The journey has affected some of them in extremely personal ways: Relationships with family, friends, partners, children, past colleagues, had all changed as they found a new future. Coming to terms with their past, and making it fit in with the present, and planning for the future within the educational setting, meant that they had had to learn about their own personal dyslexia and how to live with it, and adapt to their changing circumstances within the academic disciplines they were studying. One respondent summed this up:

> "When I think about my past, and where I am now, I can hardly recognise myself… The future's really exciting for me, but I'm worried I could still fall on my arse; nothing's perfect. I reckon I'll change again a few more times, but I'm so much happier with myself now. I don't look at the world like I did; I can see loads clearer now. I don't feel so little; I've got something to say… This dyslexia I've had for years, [it's] still a problem, but I've learnt about it and I can rule it now… I'll never be a brain-surgeon, but I can be loads more useful to myself, and other people. I can never thank the teachers [university lecturers] enough for sticking by me; I just wish my school teachers were as helpful." (Female Respondent)

Discussion

In this chapter the respondents identified their own understanding of the changes in their lives since starting at university, through reflection on their past school and work experience. This revealed some interesting observations regarding the need for acceptance by other

students, reflection on school life, and how they had changed. All of the respondents identified positive changes, as HE had given them more options in life, a greater learning capacity, and more fulfilment of their capabilities.

The most valuable experience for the respondents was that they had persevered throughout the year. Each of them had travelled a different personal journey, some of which had been very taxing indeed. They had faced all sorts of barriers which could have reduced them simply to giving in and returning to their old employment with a sense that they had 'given it a go'; yet each of the respondents identified something in their educational journey that made them stick to their goal of achievement as this respondent showed:

> "If I went back to the factory, they'd have a go [mock] at the beginning, but they'd forget. I'll of given it a go, but I didn't want to go back, I really didn't." (Male Respondent).

Many of the respondents spoke about their frustrations with their academic work: Simply not understanding it, or being left behind with the reading; yet they still managed to get through to the end of their course. They had felt frustration with their dyslexia, computers, lectures, support services, friends (past and present), family life, seminar presentations, travelling, tutors, commitments, paid work, the list carries on, yet eight out of ten were progressing into the following year of study having overcome adversity (Riddick, 2000; Polak, 2003). As this respondent states:

"I'd get really angry about it all. Learning to type on the computers, trying to understand what they wanted from me, and, worst of all, trying to get someone to help me do it all, but I got through 'cause I know I've made good friends who I needed now." (Female Respondent)

After facing up to the frustrations and disappointments of their school experiences, and feeling of helplessness in their careers, each of the students identified that they were hoping the support offered at university would give them the boost that they saw as essential for achieving success in their academic work:

> "[Support tutor]'ll help me. She said she'd be there to hold my hand in the first few months." (Female Respondent)

The support services had offered many of the students regular educational developmental sessions. This is consistent with the work of Palfreman-Kay (2000) and Riddick (2000) who identified good practice for different dyslexic students and support services in HE. The support services had helped the respondents with their academic work, and had given them greater confidence, thus helping them to gain a sense of belonging in the educational setting, and foster closer relationships with the non-dyslexic students:

> "[Support tutor]'s the greatest woman I know. She's helped me all the time. She's like a super-women for me. She reads all my work and then changes bits that are wrong, or talks about stuff that she would of changed, and then gets me to do it." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "Yeah, it's [support tutor] who's done most of the reading for me. [Another support tutor] did some an' all, but really [support tutor] would find the stuff in the books that were best for me to read, and we'd look at them together, then I'd read them at home, and talk about it again, so I can talk about it with my other friends on my course." (Female Respondent)

In contrast to the constructive academic support systems enjoyed by most of the respondents, there were a number of students at one university, who claimed that they had received little or no academic support. This group of students also felt that the academic staff were not sympathetic to them and their learning difficulty. Looking specifically at this group it is noticeable that early in their new academic career the respondents had identified the academic support service at their university as a potential source of help. This could suggest that the support unit had a good system for publicising the support it could offer, making sure that every undergraduate was made aware of the service, and what could be done to assist each dyslexic, or potential dyslexic student. This did indeed seem to be the case; publicity was well presented and effectively distributed.

> "I thought the poster was really colourful and helpful, but they're [support service] no help ever. Okay, they can try and get you extra time in exams and DSA, but that's it. I knew I'd need to help myself, or get other people to help me." (Female Respondent)

This support service also made a very special effort to contact all mature students upon their arrival, telling them of their services:

> "I got here and we heard about [support service] and we'as told about it all [dyslexia support], and I thought: I'll go along and see what help I can get... What a waste of time, they're crap, just crap. They say they'll get back to you, and nothing happens." (Male Respondent)

Potentially this could have made their lives even more difficult. Nevertheless this group of respondents, faced with little dyslexia support, still managed to achieve success within their academic studies, and showed a real determination to continue their course at university. Their strong social networks could go some way to explaining why this specific group of respondents did not fail but flourished against a background of little or no academic support. Sometimes these "social networks" seemed somewhat extreme:

> "As long as no one knows it's me [within this study], but I need to stay here [university] now. I need to graduate in two years time. I'd do *anything*, and I mean *ANYTHING*, to get through and get a job so'ze not to go back to what it's [was] like. The only reason I'm sleeping with this guy is to get help with understanding about the essays. He's not the first one; I had to shag this boy to get hold of his essay." (Female Respondent)

Nevertheless this university also had an exceptionally strong network of clubs and societies. The social life of this university did not simply depend on membership of an academic department. There were numerous extra-curricular activities, and each of the students identified closely with life outside their department. The many academic and social activities made the respondents feel that they were part of a community that was not only inclusive, but also encouraged a sense of success and achievement. It could be argued that these wider networks, independent of dyslexia, were in fact the *support* that the respondents *actually* used to assist them in their studies, when the dyslexia support service was not perceived as helpful. Their academic peers were achieving good academic results and acted as a role model for the respondents, who in turn felt a sense of belonging to this community of achievers:

> "I'd no help from the lecturer, or [support service], so I asked my tutor. She was really nice about it all, and helped me try and understand stuff. She spent time helping me to understand about the work and how I'd try and understand more about it… She got me to talk about my work with other students in my tutor group and it started to make sense, they started to help *me*, not by thinking I was a thick grown-up, in my thirties, but like a dosey big brother who's like, well, like a sort of nice, but dim!" (Male Respondent)

and:

> "I'm in the [football] club. It's the first time I'd done exercise since school. It's really hard work, but the others seem to like me, and we work together. I didn't have a hobby like that before, so I just do everything with these friends. They help

me with getting on with my [academic] work… They don't help me with the words and library [books], but I go and study with them, at the same time in the library and 'cause I'm working with them, I sort of found that the work flows easier, without the people from [support service] who're supposed to help me." (Male Respondent)

In attempting to identify *how* these respondents worked, whether coping strategies, copying ideas or slow and methodical work, each of the respondents gave similar answers:

> "It's just like being with my friends and working together… I just hear how they talk about how they're doing it, then I can do it to... I never get the good grades they do, mine are always like 15 points (per cent) lower, but it's a pass." (Male Respondent)

This was reinforced by another respondent who claimed that:

> "There's no one way I use [to cope with the work], I just feel I understand it more, and when you've talked it [through] with mates, well it makes sense, and they make it make sense, so then I start typing and it comes out." (Female Respondent)

This learning ambiguity stemmed from an inability to express how they coped with their work. In formal support services, there are set methods and systems to build coping strategies for dyslexic students as seen in the work of McLoughlin et al (1994) and Heaton and Mitchell (2001). Yet with no formal support, the respondents could not identify any one

way of coping with the work, other than that their social network and a modern computer had assisted their academic learning experience:

> "I've got all the ideas in my mind and they've [friends] talk about how they're gonna put the essay in a writing way [form], well it makes sense to me and I do it, but in the way I think's best. I just write and write and the computer does [checks] the spellings." (Female Respondent)

Looking beyond their university based groups, several respondents said that they did not see their pre-university friends any longer, as they felt they had little in common with them. This suggests that the respondents were finding a different social identity within their academic setting which was contrary to their experience at school of being a failure, forced to suffer ridicule. Although Cline and Reason (1993) drew attention to these factors, they did not address these specific class diversity issues. These respondents were now willing members of an academic community; they were looking to achieve success by studying, and by encouraging others to do likewise:

> "School's [was] bollocks. Work's [was] bollocks. Now uni's different. I've got friends who want me to get a really good job like they will. I like my new mates; they're not like the other [past] sad bastards [friends]. They [past colleagues] only wanted you to have a shit life. I don't need them... I want to be at uni. I never wanted to be at school, or go to work, I only went 'cause I needed the money. I want to stay here forever!" (Male Respondent)

The work of Jackson and Marsden (1962) can perhaps shed light on this phenomenon. Their work unearthed various difficulties between working class, and middle class, values within the secondary school system. They identified the same rejection of past working class life as seen in the last comment, yet they also identified that parents' low expectations were incidental to the pupils' lack of resources and uneasy relationships with teaching staff. This was also cited by The Plowden Report (CACE, 1967), which noted that working class parents and friends of pupils offered less support to their children in the educational environment. Tizard (1972) built on this to argue that pupils could reject their working class parents in favour of the opportunities available in the educational environment.

It has to be remembered that this social pressure to achieve success within the university, could result in making some mature dyslexic people feel that they were not good enough to be there. Too much academic pressure from peers may lead students to feel that they will never achieve the high grades that their peers gain. Nevertheless, every relevant respondent in this study felt that the social aspect of their university life had helped them feel that they could fight on, not only to achieve success, but also to flourish by the end of the year, especially after they had passed their examinations. This reinforces the work of Zeitlyn (1988) who found that the first year of examinations made mature (non-dyslexic) students a great deal more confident in their work.

Many of the respondents felt, early in their return to university, that their dyslexia had been the root of their academic failure at school (Riddick, 2000; Pollak, 2003). Yet it was not the dyslexia itself that angered them, just that they should not have suffered ridicule because of it. They felt that if they had received effective support at school they might have possibly

progressed to university. Yet it seems that it was exactly this school-focused anger which was the dynamic that spurred them on with their studies at university, contradicting the work of Gerber et al (1996) whose respondents claimed that school experiences were irrelevant to them. Yet, within my study it could be argued that even though the respondents had suffered at school, they had become more focused on their studies, once they realised that they could succeed in an educational environment:

> "When I thought the [academic] work was getting too difficult, I'd think about school and just how pissing shit it was. Those fucking teachers really shafted me, and I'm going to shaft them one day. I'm going to get this degree if it kills me." (Female Respondent)

This respondent identified a sense of anger about her previous career when looking back over her year at university. This anger seemed to have come about, not from frustration with her dyslexia, but at having worked for so many years in dead end jobs. It came from a sense of wasted time in the workplace, and recognition that she could never get those years back. This was also recognised in the work of Moody et al. (2000). Some of the respondents felt bitterness towards their old employers that they had never encouraged them to study as a day release student, nor given them the ability to attend night school. This pent-up anger seemed to have given the students an urgency with their work, and a need to make sure that they could make a better career for themselves and gain a greater earning capacity than previously:

"Years of my life down the drain working at [factory]. I did nowt then, and they've all gone. I'll get them back somehow. I've a lifetime to do it, but I will. They treated us like dogs, like robots with no feelings, but I'm so angry for the girls left there doing nothing. They [staff] cannot even get to a writing course. The best they can do is dream. I'm going to show those lot what I can *really* do with my life now… Just thinking about it makes me really angry, makes me want to get on at uni."

(Female Respondent)

When the respondents looked to their future they felt that they would be able to achieve a great deal more than they had at first thought possible. This feeling of confidence epitomised their new social identity (Hunter-Carsch, 2001). The respondents were in surroundings that opened new opportunities to be explored, from increasing academic ability, to new friends and career prospects that previously could never have been dreamt of. Being surrounded by fellow students who were confident of achieving successful post-university lives, the respondents were able also to feel that they too could aspire to better life opportunities without a sense that they would be ridiculed as they had been at school, but taken seriously as a potential graduate. All of these affirming actions made the respondents feel that they were able to move on from their past failures, gain greater confidence within the social setting, put their previous academic and social failings behind them and feel a sense of ability, achievement and self-worth:

"I *will* get a good job. I *will* get a good degree and I *will* tell the truth about who I was and where I've come from… I want to earn more, live in a nice house, and not always make do with crap. Just because my family have crap, and never thought

they'd get any better, doesn't mean I need to. I don't care if they [family] or school or work or anyone thinks I'm getting too high for myself, they can piss off, I'm going to be a self-made man and no dyslexia or anything is going to stop me." (Male Respondent)

In looking back at changes in themselves as learners, the respondents demonstrated that they had all succeeded beyond their expectations. (Riding and Rayner, 1998) Yet it needs to be remembered that two respondents left prematurely, one for financial reasons and the other for personal factors, yet both of these respondents cited positive reasons for returning to education in their earlier interviews and they did find that they had progressed, albeit not to the end of their courses. In addition to these two respondents, another respondent claimed that she had not experienced changes in her life. This appears to contradict the fact that she had made extremely good academic progress, as her end of year classification showed, and made new close friends within her social network, of which she spoke very highly from both an academic and support point of view. There could be two reasons for her to state that she had not progressed: First, she received little support from the support unit at her university and felt this had kept her back; second, she was simply not in the mood to admit that she had *actually* been successful.

Some respondents had utilised their university experience to the full, by taking advantage of the support systems in place, such as the academic support offered to dyslexic students, and with this had developed coping strategies to learn more efficiently. In addition, a small number of respondents had appeared to become dependent on the dyslexia support service and felt bound to their unit, creating a dependency that was not conducive to independent

learning. Lastly, there was a group of respondents from one university who, through immersing themselves in a more localised non-academic support systems, had achieved equal if not better outcomes than those respondents with full academic support. These respondents had been able to develop a range of strategies that assisted them in their studying, and gave them greater confidence amongst their academic peers.

It appears that there is not one specific way of assisting a dyslexic mature student in their journey to academic confidence. Some students find that a reassuring non-dyslexic specialist academic support tutor can guide them in their studies, yet, as seen in the last chapter, students can develop dependency on one specific tutor. Other students had to find their own way to locate a support community within which they could feel a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging was in stark contrast to their school experience of failure, and thus their university social experience could be seen as providing a positive view of the future and greater success.

Chapter 10. Discussion

Introduction

This chapter brings together the various contributions this research has made to knowledge about mature dyslexic students' psychosocial difficulties on entering the Higher Education environment, and the wider issues of dyslexia, mature students and Higher Education. I will, in addition, discuss the extent to which the theoretical framework and the methodology helped me to gain access to the respondents' experiences as they progressed through the education system.

Some factors affected individual students and require investigating and linking to university and government policy. These may have affected the students in both a positive and negative way: Positively by opening opportunities for them to study, but negatively by restricting the availability of support mechanisms. These key factors look at the role of universities in the life of the dyslexic mature students, as well as the role of quasi-medical professionals and their power over the dyslexic student. In addition to this, it is important to recognise public opinion about labelling dyslexia as a disability and the involvement of the media in its portrayal.

The chapter will first identify the new evidence generated by the data which in turn will be discussed in light of various government initiatives, such as business ideals and support policy; this will include how the research has illustrated the respondents' academic, social

and psychological progression through the year. Particular emphasis is placed on self-identification as dyslexic, a sense of belonging within an academic community and the support services. This then leads to an appraisal of the methodological and ethical framework of the research. Finally we consider how this study can inform the academic community in the future.

Original Research Material

The research has provided support to existing knowledge and understanding about students with dyslexia in HE. However, it also provided original evidence that had not previously been reported.

At the centre of this research was the remit to gain insight into the experiences of ten respondents who were experiencing the first year of study at five different HE institutions. The data generated was based on about eight hours of interviews with each respondent, in an attempt to gain data that was rich enough and extensive enough to provide new understanding of the field. Previous research proved invaluable in planning this study. However, it indicated the case for sustained interviews with fewer respondents, but over a longer period. For example Riddick (1996) interviewed 16 respondents on 3 occasions each. Similarly Pollok (2003) interviewed 50 respondents for one hour each. Both studies yielded valuable data. However, the present study gave respondents time to reflect on their experiences, both in the interviews, and outside the interview sessions, which they were able to report when we met on the next occasion. This proved to be extremely interesting. Respondents quickly came to understand the nature of the research. They rehearsed their

experiences outside the interview session, something that previous research had not been able to achieve in depth because of time-critical restrictions.

Longitudinal Nature of Research.

The rich data, built up over an academic year, gave the study a longitudinal quality that is perhaps missing from other dyslexia research. The fact that I was able to collect data from respondents as they were experiencing changes in their lives, made the data dynamic and reflective. Over just one year, the changing nature of the academic, support, social, family, psychological and self-confidence journey of the respondents could be traced, illuminating how mature students with dyslexia were re-assessing their place in HE and their self-belief systems. This longitudinal element enabled the research to unearth the experiences of dyslexic mature students during their first year in HE, and does not appear to have been undertaken before by other researchers in quite this manner.

Positive Researcher Impact on Respondents

The interesting dynamic of my own background, as a researcher *with* dyslexia, undoubtedly played a part in the data generation. I was not a member of staff, and could not be viewed in such a light. This will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Unnamed Respondents

As discussed in Pg. 346, the confidential nature of the respondents' identity was also paramount in the richness of the data collected. The respondents were only able to speak with such clarity about their experiences because they had a guarantee that they would not be identified, even with pseudonym. This, inevitably, has made reporting the continuity of experience difficult; yet the outcome, as presented, aims to reveal the experience of the respondents in an equal and balanced manner, giving all of the respondents as much exposure as possible, yet revealing rich data that might not have been forthcoming if there had been any chance that the respondents could have been identified.

Specific New Findings from this Study

One important feature of the data was the importance that some of the respondents placed on being dyslexic, and thus part of a disabled community that they felt they could belong to. Equally important was feeling that they were members of a community of learners that was not simply confined to other students with dyslexia. These two broad conclusions are linked to the initial seven research questions identified in chapter 4. These conclusions then make way for a wider discussion of various findings set within other important research factors.

1. **a. What are the motivating factors for dyslexic people to return to education after a period in the workplace, especially when they only become aware of their dyslexia *after* their entry into HE?**

and

b. How have experience at school *and* in the workplace affected the dyslexic mature student in their first year of education at university?

a. This study encompassed the experiences of respondents as they moved from school in to the workplace. This crucial transition has been little researched in the past, apart from the work of Dow (2004) and Moody et al (2000) whose interest was mainly in finding ways in which people with dyslexia could be assisted in the workplace. The present study highlights important aspects of the respondents' journey from school into work by linking their constant battle with dyslexia with their experience at work, showing how it halted their promotion, created social difficulties, and caused difficulties in carrying out their work.

b. Data on the respondents' decision to return to HE builds on the work of Riddick et al (1997), identifying a variety of paths that finally gave the respondents the courage to leave work and return to education. It reveals new areas not covered in previous research, such as the difficulties, both social and academic, of leaving work, and the feeling that there was something missing in the respondents' lives. It also sheds new light on the respondents' initial classroom experience. For example, feeling that they were being treated as a child in the lecture hall, adds weight and new insight to the work of Palfreman-Kay (2000).

2. **Do the many different 'types' of universities affect mature dyslexic students in different ways?**

There was clear evidence that some lecturers at different types of institution did not accept that they had a responsibility for helping students with dyslexia. This was compounded by support services which were perceived as unable or unwilling to challenge these negative staff. Thus, the research adds to the work of Palfreman-Kay (2000) who recognised that there were still some lecturing staff who were not used to dealing with dyslexic students.

3. **Do all 'types' of universities provide the same nature of support to all mature dyslexic students?**

a. One pre-1992 university was not perceived as offering the same level of dyslexia support as the other four universities. Indeed, some of the respondents claimed that they were not offered any direct dyslexia-specialised support. This could suggest that they would simply have struggled until they failed, or that they would attempt to find dyslexia-specific support from outside of the university setting. Yet, neither of these responses was taken. Instead there was a successful attempt at building social support networks that assisted the respondents not only in their social development, but also in their academic work, by feeling part of a community of learners outside of the disability framework.

b. Data from two students, both in post-1992 universities, appeared to reveal a culture of support dependency. These findings showed not only that the students were becoming more and more dependent on their dyslexia support tutors, but that the support tutors were

aware of this phenomenon, and realised that it was likely to create difficulties when the students graduated. Yet they did not appear to be attempting to halt the over-dependency.

c. Students perceived the various support services as over-stretched and not able to cope with an increasing number of students. However, there were marked variations between students in this respect.

4. a. How important are the first few weeks after returning to education for the mature dyslexic student?

and

b. How does the mature dyslexic student's perception of their academic progress change in the first year of their degree? In addition to this academic progress, how do the respondents perceive their own social and emotional development in the same period and how do these change over time?

a. There has been a great deal of emphasis on the role of the family in the initial return to education. In addition, there was evidence that the family's role changed over the first year in education as family members varied widely in their responses to the respondents' decision to resume their education. Some were positive, others not. An important issue that has not been intensely explored in related research, for example Stacey (2004), is the role of social

class in family members' responses. Sibling rivalry was intensified when one sibling felt that the other was betraying their roots by seeking to mix with "posh" students.

b. In addition to the university experience, there were examples of respondents going to great lengths to make sure they stayed within the university setting and kept up to date with their academic work. These responses to the academic demands of dyslexic students in HE do not appear to have been investigated in other research. In this study they included plagiarism, including internet plagiarism, and sleeping with another student in order to gain access to his/her essay. Lecturers clearly cannot prevent such practices but, as one sensitive lecturer recognised, they can cooperate with support services to help students develop more constructive responses.

c. At the end of the year, respondents described changes in their long held opinions about education, family and friends. In doing so, they not only expressed high levels of self-criticism, but also demonstrated that higher education can be a fluid, dynamic process, leading to far-reaching changes in family relationships and self-esteem. This data added a new perspective on the experiences of mature students with dyslexia. The most important outcome from this was to show how the respondents felt that they had put their past behind them, vowing not to return to their old lifestyle, where they felt they were held back. This section is extremely positive and extends the work of Pollak (2003).

d. With changes to their self-esteem and general outlook on life, by the end of the year respondents were optimistic about the future. One respondent had obtained a conditional offer of admission to a MA course, and all were anticipating higher paid and more fulfilling

employment. Initial approaches had suggested the possibility of graduate entry to dyslexia freindly and mature student friendly employment.

5. **Are dyslexic mature students more receptive to discussing life experiences with another dyslexic mature student, or with a professional researcher?**

The data uncovered findings which claimed that the respondents gave enormous detail to the study thanks to their relationship with the dyslexic researcher, the study and its independence from their university. The fear of being identified was also key in this rich data, as not only were the respondents clear about total anonymity, but only allowed their sex and age group to be displayed.

This combination of independent researcher and total anonymity appeared to give the respondents a freedom that they felt completely happy within, coupled with the fact that they felt that a past mature student researcher understood their comments, and would, in conjunction with them, put their ideas into a form they were happy with, thus creating a happy working partnership.

6. **Do dyslexic mature students recognise oppressive barriers in their educational journey, at various stages in their lives?**

a. Some of the data on the respondents' past educational experience at school supported previous research recognising past barriers in their academic journey. For example, the respondents did not believe that teachers knew about dyslexia, they found the blackboard difficult to use, and copying was a difficult task (Riddick, 1998). But there were some interesting additions to the debate about dyslexic students' school experiences. Peer tuition was not welcomed by the respondents; they found the whole experience patronising, and felt that they were regarded as second-class pupils. This challenges previous research (Ryan, 1994) claiming that peer tutoring is a positive way of progressing dyslexic readers to achieve alongside their contemporaries. Ryan's work, though, was based on his own evaluation of perceived outcomes, as opposed to the views of his respondents.

b. Building on the research of Palfreman-Kay (2000) on the educational difficulties regarding pencils and pens in the classroom, there were new examples of how the transition from pencil to pen affected two respondents, and how this had lived with them as they progressed through junior school. This extension of existing work adds to the dynamic of how important the transition to using a pen can be, and how the erasable pen was important in assisting this transition.

c. In recognising past barriers in education the respondents' own psychosocial responses were identified included bullying, truancy, vandalism, school disruption, mute silence, depression and, most interestingly, self-harm. These examples were identified by the respondents as being a culmination of pressure arising from their dyslexia, created in and by the school environment. These experiences add weight to the school dyslexia arguments of Alexander-Passe (2004) and Thomson (1996).

d. The topic of labelling is an important aspect of dyslexic pupils' school experience, recently researched by Riddick (2002). To add to her work, this study recognises that labelling occurs not only in the school environment. Labels can be carried into other areas of the dyslexic child's life. Chapter 5 gave examples of labels being attached to pupils for the whole of their school career, even when changing school, and in one case, to the workplace.

e. This study adds to research such as Hales (1994) with examples of teachers' negative labels filtering throughout the family, and also into the playground where the teachers' negativity is reinforced by other children.

7. Are mature dyslexic students aware of any differences in academic expectation, between different 'types' of universities?

Respondents claimed that matriculation requirements informed their decision to attend a particular university with the rationale that the lower the requirements, the easier the degree. This logic does not follow as the universities with lower entry requirement appeared to challenge the respondents' academic abilities in much the same way as the universities with higher entrance requirements.

In addition to this finding, the reason 5 respondents attended a pre-1992 university with high 'A' level requirements was that the kudos of that particular institution attracted the respondents. These finding suggests that all types of universities are open to dyslexic mature students for many various reasons, ranging from low entry requirements to status.

To investigate the issues summarised above further, the rest of the discussion will link them to respondents' interviews, and place them in a wider context of changes in university education, for example increased numbers, business ideals in HE and the public face of dyslexia.

The Effect of Education Reform

Some respondents saw government policy as adding to the problems they had experienced at school:

> "When I'as at school the teachers were always complaining and striking 'cause they didn't have books and chalk and stuff they wanted, 'cause Mrs. Thatcher was taking all the money to make nuclear bombs. We had loads of time off school, all of us used to just hang around, 'cause my Mum didn't know when they were on strike or not... I wonder if they'd of seen my dyslexia if they had more stuff [resources]?"
>
> (Male Respondent)

and:

"I can remember a window fell on a girl once. She was okay, but the headmaster tried telling us there was no money to get windows fixed 'cause they'd spent the money on getting exercise books and things. The school governor man sent a letter to [girl pupil] mum saying sorry, and he [governor] said they'd no money left from the government." (Female Respondent)

As school pupils they had felt themselves to be the victims of problems that were not of their own making:

> "This teacher said to me about they didn't have enough teachers in English so they had to do loads more work, and cut the class times down and get more of us [pupils] in a room... I heard her moaning to another teacher about us [the school] being like a sausage factory..." (Female Respondent)

This 'sausage factory' quote encapsulates the feeling of many of the respondents concerning the teaching at their school. They felt that they were being pushed through an impersonal system with no room for deviation from the norm. Eisner (1985) also compares this phenomenon to a factory with the school as the factory and the pupils as raw materials:

> "The superintendent directed the operation of the plan. The teachers were engaged in a job of engineering, and the pupils were the raw material to be processed in that plant according to the demands of the consumers. Furthermore, the product was to be judged at regular intervals along the production line using quality control standards which were to be quantified to reduce the likelihood of error. Product

specifications were to be prescribed before the raw material was processed." (Pg.42, Eisner, 1985)

Yet the same problems were experienced in the university setting:

"It's like school and the teachers with no chalks [being in HE]. They don't have enough [academic] staff for the students, so the lectures are really big. There isn't any time left to speak to them 'cause they're off to teach somewhere else." (Female Respondent)

and:

"Now I'm in the sausage factory again, like that teacher said you know, but now I'm doing a degree. We're just filled with the information they squeeze in our heads and then we're supposed to all be the same for the same exam, but I can't learn like that, that's why I need the extra support." (Female Respondent)

Both in school and in HE respondents reported two problems. The first was the difficulty in the task; the second, far more serious, was the response of teachers (at school) and lecturers (in HE). At school:

"It [the memory of school] makes me so angry 'cause we'd [do] these bloody spelling tests, and I couldn't get it right, I just couldn't, but the fucking teacher went on about being bloody lazy and how I was too bloody thick, so she made me do the

> fucking tests in front of the class. I felt like shit about writing after that, no wonder I felt so bad." (Female Respondent)

and at university:

> "I'as just getting used to my laptop, and the fucking teacher [lecturer] started complaining about the noise of the keys making a tap [ping]. Everyone was looking, and she said I was cheating with a computer, and if everyone had one, it'd be really noisy and everyone else doesn't need one, so what makes me special? I didn't use the laptop 'til a different teacher [lecturer] took over the class. " (Female Respondent)

The point of these two probabilities is that the potentially destructive experience came not from the difficulty of the task, but from the lecturer's response. Students were made to feel different to the norm. The fact that respondents suffered negative experiences in the compulsory system illustrates the need for universities to make every effort to understand this particular group of students.

Access to Assessment for Dyslexia

Looking at the wider implications of the assessment for dyslexia, it may appear good value, from a financial point of view, to arrange individual diagnosis by psychologists as it is cheaper to support an individual student than to change the whole learning environment to accommodate dyslexic students. The individualist approach may be cost effective, but still meets the criterion of 'support'. Yet, with more and more students entering Higher

Education, because government principles require universities to increase academic participation, there is a conflict between the greater numbers of students and existing systems of academic support. If more people, especially from non-traditional backgrounds, enter HE it is highly likely that there will be a larger number of dyslexic students. So, the larger numbers will overload traditional diagnostic systems, and extending them would be expensive. As a result, various universities have found that university-based systems of diagnosis may prove to be more effective in diagnosing dyslexia as universities consider whether:

> "...full psychological or diagnostic assessment would be warranted (because psychological assessment is quite expensive)." (Pg. 87, NWPD, 1999)

Systems of university-based diagnosis had already been used by two of the respondents who knew that they might eventually need to see an educational psychologist:

> "I got told it were really expensive to see a doctor [educational psychologist] so they had a cheap way to do it themselves, so if they were happy I wasn't just thick, they'd let me see the doctor... [Support Tutor] did my test in her office, and asked to spell words and look at numbers and stuff. It was really bad, 'cause I really didn't get much done... It was really difficult you know. I thought I was just thick." (Female Respondent)

and:

"They put me off when they said they'd pay for me to do the test with the Ed. Psych., but I'd have to pay if he [educational psychologist] said I's not a dyslexic. It costs like £200, so I told it'as too much and I might just be a bit slow. So they did a test for me but not with the Ed. Psych., and that test said I's a dyslexic, so I then did the big [Educational psychologist's] test." (Female Respondent)

The increasing cost of individual diagnosis raises two questions. First, is it possible to extend the disability funding scheme to enable it to cater for more students? Second, if not – as seems likely – how can a university policy be developed to make teaching and facilities more accessible to dyslexic people? However, the current reality is that students need individual assessment in order to access support. We therefore have to examine how the psychologist is viewed by the respondents.

The Medical Model of Disability

One student said:

> "I'm dead pleased they wanted to try and help me, but part of me kept wondering: I could be thick, and they'd find out and then I'd have to leave... It'd prove I'm thick and not dyslexic." (Female Respondent)

In light of this respondent's views, the psychologist's assessment is like a medical examination. The respondent was expecting to find out if she would be considered able to achieve the necessary level of educational attainment expected of her at different points in

her life, like 'A' levels and 'O' levels. Indeed, the psychologist would be looking to find medical problems like:

> "Evidence of birth difficulties and/or early developmental difficulties (for example in speech or motor development)… emotional causes, or poor general health." (Pg. 97, NWPD, 1999)

The psychologist would not only be looking for medical issues, but issues that might affect the individual:

> "Evidence that the manner and extent to which the difficulties or disabilities that have been identified are likely to affect learning." (Pg. 97, NWPD, 1999)

In other words, the psychologist would be seeking to find out why the respondent was not making 'normal' progress like their educational peers. The assessment results in recommendations for helping them cope with the same work as their non-dyslexic peers. This can take many forms such as one-to-one help, extra time in essays and computer provision.

The Power that Professionals hold over Clients

Educational Psychologists are in a powerful position within the life of the dyslexic student as they have the power to administer diagnostic tests and are expected to be well placed to analyse and make recommendations about the dyslexic student's need, being aware of the

various dyslexia strategies, funding and technologies that are available. The psychologist has potentially three routes to assist the student:

First, they have the power to keep the student in a dependent role;

Second, they can work with the student to make informed choices, helping them to take control of their life;

Third, they could take a holistic approach to advise the institution on how teaching and learning could become more responsive to students with SEN.

The second and third routes are the most enabling to the individual student, placing them in a position of control within their educational needs provision. Yet, there could still be barriers placed in the interpretation of the psychologist's report. This could come from support unit professionals not accepting the psychologist's report and by restricting the facilities to the student. This support prevention has been highlighted within the research as respondents found that it was the support service who were holding back psychologist-recommended dyslexia support.

Individual Modes of Support: Do they foster Dependency?

The individualistic nature of a diagnosis of dyslexia follows on into the support provision offered. Academic support is often given in a one to one session or may come through the use of specific hardware and software. This academic support is designed to assist the student to integrate into the education system, along with other non-dyslexic students. It

aims to give the dyslexic student a sense that they are able to achieve on the same basis as their academic peers:

> "The recorder [dictaphone] used to give me the chance to help me remember stuff I can't take in during a lecture or seminar. I can't remember stuff most of the time, so writing notes and listening and understanding it's almost impossible, so with the recorder I get to hear it again, but slowly, so I understand what they're saying. I mean I can understand what normal students get to understand. I think that's right, that's what I was told it's for." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "The laptop's great, and free from my home LEA. I got it 'cause I's told I need it so I get ahead [an advantage] over the other students 'cause I am slower than them understanding the essays, so if I've a computer all of my own, I can take longer than them, and come out with a good mark. Well that's what's supposed to happen I think, [but] I still find it difficult." (Female Respondent)

Again, this could be seen as educational professionals maintaining the barriers that dyslexic people encounter. When educational professionals tell dyslexic students that they need specialist equipment to complete their courses, the students accept that they *will* need this equipment and there is no other way in which the system can help. This effect is compounded when academic support staff see it as their task to ascertain exactly what

equipment the respondent needs, not simply by working with the student themselves, but by interpreting the outcomes of the educational psychologist's report or the internal diagnosis:

> "We met up in her [academic support tutor] office to tell me what I could have to help me. She said the psychologist recommended a computer and some basic stuff. I was really grateful. But a friend told me about her computer and all the stuff she got; it was loads more than me, and she'd seen the same man [educational psychologist]... I went back to [support service] and asked to see my report from the man and they said no I couldn't 'cause I wouldn't understand it. I saw my [department] tutor who got the report for me, and it said I should have all the stuff my friend has, but [support service] just didn't want to give it to me...They [support service] said I didn't need it all, and their opinion was final." (Female Respondent)

In stark contrast, a student at another university found that:

> "I got a copy of the report for my own, and we [dyslexia support tutor] spent an hour going through it, and finding out what I wanted, and how much time I could give to one-to-one support. It's great that they want to help me, I feel like a human, not a naughty school girl." (Female Respondent)

Although the advice was contradictory to each other, the outcome regarding individuality has the same effect: The academic support staff were asserting the professionals' authority over dyslexic students.

The professional support services exist to help students to improve their writing and reading so they will be able to compete in the academic world and beyond. This authority can assist some dyslexic people, but the research showed that it can also create dependency, not only on support equipment recommended by the professionals, but on the professionals themselves:

> "I've said it 100 times: I'm useless without [academic support tutor]. I can't write an

and:

> "I'd just fail without [academic support tutor's] help. She's always been on the 'phone when I've needed her." (Female Respondent)

Oliver (1987) criticises the work of well-meaning professionals for their tendency to create a culture of dependency by a system where:

> "professionals know best what disabled people need and are in charge. The provision of services in such a way is at best patronising, and at worst further disabling."
> (Pg.18, Oliver, 1987)

Those respondents, who seemed to have become dependent on their academic support tutor, were both accessing the same support service at a post-1992 university and if they had had

their support suddenly removed they believed that they would have been unable to complete their academic work:

> "If they took away the support classes, well, I don't know, I'd have to leave I think. I just can't do it without [academic support tutor]. There's no one else to help me, no one at all who knows about my problem." (Female Respondent)

The group of support professionals, such as educational psychologists, lecturers and academic support tutors, all play different parts at different times in the academic journey of the dyslexic student. Different people are involved in initially discovering the dyslexia, diagnosing the special needs associated with it, and providing support. It has to be recognised that dependency can be seen as another form of oppression experienced by dyslexic students. Yet the contemporary situation is that dyslexic students need to make the best of their circumstances by trying to work with the professionals to gain the best academic support for their academic work.

Even with appropriate dyslexia support within compulsory schooling and HE, the marginalisation that some respondents felt by being classified as 'different' to their non-dyslexic counterparts and by having to receive special academic support still has to be acknowledged. In addition to this, there is a feeling of difference that some respondents find when they realise that other dyslexic students receive different levels of academic support. These aspects of dyslexic education also help to maintain the power that professionals have over their dyslexic students.

More Students: Change of Ethos

As noted above, with more and more students entering British universities, the individual model of support is becoming extremely expensive and there is a real need for an alternative system of support. Government statistics show a year on year increase in government funding to universities to meet the needs of disabled people, just as there has been a year on year growth in students requiring additional support. This has risen from some 4,800 dyslexic students registered at British HE institutions in the academic year ending 1995, to just under 50,000 students registered as dyslexic in the academic year ending 2004 (Pg.1, Disabilities Task Group, 2005).

This increase in numbers can be traced back to pressure on Higher Education to increase student numbers. As more and more students entered HE, some support staff commented that they found it difficult to make their budgets stretch to cover one to one support. Three academic support tutors commented:

> "Our numbers have risen year on year, and our budget is getting smaller, as the university takes money away from us; money that they used to give us from their budget. Now they expect it all to come from central sources, and they don't give us nearly as much." (Support Tutor)

and:

"Yes it has got more and more difficult to provide support. The university are very helpful with access funds, but we have so many mature students, and so many of them require some kind of support that we're over-run with students who need our help, and not enough staff and resources to help them. We're really going to have to limit our assistance in the next two years if it carries on like this." (Support Officer)

This limited funding for individualistic methods of support can create barriers for mature dyslexic students.

Academic Success without Academic Support

Respondents at one university felt that they were not receiving one-to-one academic support or group learning sessions. One might have expected an increased risk of failure, or at least a reduced chance of academic success. Yet all of the relevant respondents did well, academically, after a slow start:

> "It took a while, but I started to get alright grades." (Female Respondent)

This seemed to be based on a highly developed sense of community at this particular university, not necessarily a community of dyslexic mature students, but simply a mix of undergraduates with common academic and non-academic interests:

"I really liked debating. I'm good at shouting, and it's sort of like shouting but quietly, and I've learnt so much." (Male Respondent)

and:

"These kids, 'cause I'm a few years older than them, are really good. My [partner] thinks it's really funny, but they're like really good friends for me." (Female Respondent)

This 'team' work could explain why these specific respondents felt that their academic results were so good, bearing in mind the perceived lack of academic support from the support services. It could be argued that the sense of community worked in two distinct ways:

1. The group acts as a micro community to encourage academic work in the macro community of the university. As these individuals work together in various fields, such as sport, debating, union and student-based study groups, they felt that their identity became corporate. As they worked within their specific groups, they often assisted each other; and because there was a feeling of acceptance, the dyslexic person wished to achieve; they were not afraid to ask for assistance because they felt they would not receive the same negative responses as at school:

"It's like they're my family and they want to help me along. Now I'm in the [Club], you know like the inner-sanctum sort of, everyone's really close together and they've taught me so much now." (Male Respondent)

and:

> "We're as thick as thieves you know? I wish I'd knew these lot at school. It'd of been loads better for me 'cause it's really what motivates me, and helps me with all the information I need for essays and, if I'm being thick, they're great. Yeah, school would of been totally different, and no one needs to of known about my dyslexia, I might never of found out I suppose." (Female Respondent)

These respondents all felt that their new sense of community, which accepted them even with their limited academic abilities, could enable them to achieve acceptable academic results.

2. The fear of academic failure could have motivated these respondents into persevering with their academic work. This could be because they did not want to leave this specific group of friends. Failing at the end of the academic year would have resulted in leaving the university and thus their place within that micro community:

> "I feel right at home. This is my home… If I failed, I think I'd be too embarrassed to see them all… I keep on working hard and 'cause they help me, it all seems to work out." (Female Respondent)

and:

"I've been trying all year to get even better results, and I think it's 'cause I've got this sort of help from my mates here at [university]. I really need to keep it going 'cause I need to be with them next year, and if I don't, fuck knows what I'm going to do. I need to work with these lot." (Male Respondent)

The acceptance shown to the respondents from their particular micro community suggests that they felt an urgency to work hard to remain a member of that community into the following year; they felt that they were gaining something that was missing from their school education.

Both of these explanations are valid and could show that direct academic support is not the only way to assist some dyslexic people within HE. This highly developed model of teamwork between dyslexic and non-dyslexic students could be an assistance to traditional methods of individual support, or possibly a new, naturally occurring, and highly cost-effective means of support requiring little, if any, one-to-one tuition.

The effect of dyslexia in wider society

The respondents commented that outside the confines of the university setting they felt reticent to talk about their dyslexia (Carron, 2001). They felt that there were still various forms of oppression that dyslexic people faced within the wider community:

"I daren't tell the family [about dyslexia], 'cause they'd be really nasty to me about it. They called me thick for years, so now this'd make it even worse." (Female Respondent)

and:

"NO, NO, NO. I've had enough stick getting in to university. I don't need any more trouble from anyone. I's called a spaza for years, at school and work, I don't need to give them more reasons." (Female Respondent)

This negative attitude to dyslexic people within the wider community was widely commented on by respondents. One reason for this could be that society views academic qualifications as key to getting a well paid job, and a source of status within the community. These qualifications, from GCSEs to PhDs, are seen as measuring tools that place the individual within society and thus limit their ability to progress to a well paid career or good job security:

"If I get a degree, then everyone'll think I've really done something with my life, not just nothing, like they do now." (Female Respondent)

These respondents felt that graduate status would give them a professional career in a field they chose and gain them security:

"I want to get a job that's going to give me something to think about, not what I had before, you know: Dull and slow. I want to think and not like to let my dyslexia get in the way, and people think I've really come on in life." (Female Respondent).

This idea that graduate status, within the community, gives more options to dyslexic people is summarised by Bolton (1986):

> "... the possession of a degree is, in most cases, a passport to a wide range of careers." (Pg.6, Bolton, 1986)

Qualifications are perceived as being crucial to success. Hence, if the needs of dyslexic people are not addressed in Higher Education, they are likely to be seen as failures in the wider community:

> "Just because I couldn't read [at school], they knew it wasn't worth bothering with me, 'cause it'd take loads of extra time to try and try. So when I started at [garment factory] I knew I'd never get any better [job], and it made me feel even worse, 'cause I really wanted to do more in my life, but if you can't read, or have qualifications, you might as well be dead." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I wanted an office job, in the warm, but I couldn't write, never mind type! I knew I wasn't like the other women on the machines, I thought more stuff than they did.

I's really interested in learning things, but only understood if someone told me about it or I saw it on telly… I needed to get GCEs [CSEs], but I'd never ever get them, not in a million years. I used to think what it'd be like if I had GCEs [CSEs], I could do loads with my life." (Female Respondent)

These respondents commented on how important they saw qualifications in their lives and the wider world. They recognised the power of qualifications in the hierarchy of society, with the professions at the top, such as doctors, politicians, teacher/academics, solicitor/barristers, and blue collar un-skilled manual workers, such as factory workers at the bottom. Thus qualifications determine status on the career ladder and bar various people from various jobs. The importance of a university degree in enhancing life chances was described by one respondent:

> "Coming to [University] shows me I don't have to work at that fucking dump [previous place of work]. I can get a degree and get the job I feel I want, not just the only job the [school] job adviser said I could do." (Female Respondent)

Media and Disability

Within the wider community, perspectives on disability have tended to be rather limited. This has not helped to promote understanding of dyslexia. In the media, there are very few successful personalities who admit having dyslexia. Indeed historically there has been very little media coverage of disabled people within education, with the exception of a long-running BBC programme, as shown by to Palfreman-Kay (2000). However, this situation has

changed since the Broadcasting Standards Council's 1994 research claiming that disability is under-represented. This lack of media representation was also noted by Riddick (1995), when interviewing mothers about their experience of dyslexia in the popular media. It appears that disability is used in the media in a highly visual way with examples of exceptional characters like:

> "The sinister cripple [and] the 'supercrip', who has triumphed over tragedy." (Pg. 146, Shakespeare, 1999)

This reinforces the view that disabled people are different to the norm, and are somehow to be pitied as lesser beings with endurance stories, or chips on their shoulders. The media is in a powerful situation to help show disabled people as leading their lives in their own way, and not as something different.

> "They [family] thought I's saying like I'm physically disabled, and when I said that dyslexia is a disability, they started on at me about trying it on, and talking bollocks. They'd only seen disability on the telly like people in wheelchairs, looking ill." (Female Respondent)

Ang (1996) and Eldridge (1997) have shown how the media can help re-shape the way in which people view disability. However, there has only been limited exposure of dyslexia and it has not always been linked to disability. This reduces the chances of diagnosing the condition in society or in HE. But, even if dyslexia is diagnosed, there is still a chance that the person will be labelled and oppressed by being thought of as a 'sad' character or by

people thinking that dyslexia simply does not exist and that it is simply an excuse used to explain away slow or lazy learners in the middle classes:

> "He said I couldn't be dyslexic 'cause I could talk about things, and write my name. He said he'd seen a programme on telly about it and dyslexics couldn't write, and they couldn't talk much. I'm buggered if I know what he's seen, but he's seen it on telly." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "No son of his was a spastic. I should wash my mouth out before the kids hear. He'd never heard of dyslexia being a disability. If it'd not been on telly, then it couldn't be true… I just had to keep on telling him it was true, and he'd have to accept that I was disabled, and there was nothing he could do about it." (Male Respondent)

There seemed to be a catch-22 in the media for dyslexic people: If they are not portrayed in the media they could be viewed as a section of society that is not worth exposing, yet if they are exposed to the media, they may be viewed as 'sad' characters.

Limited References

The limited references to dyslexia in the media help to explain some of the negative attitudes of the respondents' families. Their families continued to think that dyslexia was simply an excuse, or technical name, for people who were educationally sub-normal, justifying use of

terms such as thick or retard. The problem here is that the media has a strong hold on public opinion and generally portrays a view of disability that does not include dyslexia. If this argument is valid, with limited references in the media, dyslexic people will consider themselves unimportant and cut off, as their needs are not seen as important and worthy of exposure.

The limited media exposure of dyslexia, and consequent general lack of knowledge about it, results in people, such as the respondents, entering HE who have not heard of dyslexia. They could feel that there is something wrong with their academic learning that they cannot quite identify. They could perceive themselves as simply stupid, or slow. It is important that universities ensure that mature entrants are made aware of dyslexia, and that academic staff recognise signs of dyslexia in a student's academic work. As mature students have often had a long journey of discovery before returning to the classroom, it is essential that this second chance should optimise their opportunity to gain academic qualifications and thus their overall prospects. One respondent sums up the media's apparent lack of dyslexia interest by claiming that if she had heard about dyslexia in the media, she would have had knowledge about the condition:

> "I just wanted to get a qualification to help me out of my old life. To say I'm dyslexic really helped me put things into perspective, and now I see I wasn't totally to blame at school and work [with writing and reading problems]. I didn't know anything about dyslexia before, nothing. I'd heard the word but not seen anything on telly, or on the radio, so how am I to know about it?... I'd never of read [a book or magazine], so the telly's the only place to find out" (Female Respondent)

Disability Movement

Within the pressure groups that act for disabled people, there is still a lack of connection with dyslexia. This could help explain why there is such lack of knowledge in the community. The disability movement, over the last twenty years, has helped change people's perception of disabled people, and has tried to lift barriers within society. Theoretical methods, such as the social model of disability, have helped to make the world of disabled people clearer to the non-disabled person so they can identify barriers that get in the way of:

> "Economic, social and political inclusion." (Pg. 211, Chappell, 1998)

The social model of disability has been successful in identifying issues in society. Yet, in seeking ways to help people with dyslexia, there needs to be a realisation, by dyslexic people, that they see themselves as disabled. In this study all but one respondent saw themselves as disabled. They accepted that they were *dis-abled* in reading and/or writing, and thus saw themselves in this light. They also saw people with stammering as disabled and interestingly, they identified old age as a disability brought about by society's perception of the elderly. All of the respondents recognised that their LEA funding came from the Disabled Students Allowance and felt it was right that they should receive that particular grant.

When looking at the term 'learning difficulty', it is interesting to note that all of the respondents were happy with the term:

> "I do have a learning difficulty, it's not my fault, but it's the way I am. I'm disabled as well, and that's not my fault as well, but learning difficulty's better 'cause I don't get linked to people in wheelchairs." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "...no, I think I prefer 'dyslexic' to 'learning disability', but I'm happy with all three words [terms]. I'm a disabled man with a learning disability called dyslexia – how's that then?" (Male Respondent)

The Body as Disability

A great deal of disability movement work is focused on physically impaired people and thus little time is spent in dealing with non-physical issues. As Hevey (1992) states:

> "...the history of the portrayal of disabled people is that disabled people are portrayed as flawed able-bodied people, not as disabled people with their own identities" (Pg.118, Hevey, 1992)

Writing about the body as the source of disability means dyslexia will not feature, as it is not obviously linked to the body. This can be taken one step further when dyslexic people attempt to make a more concrete link to impairment, as opposed to physical disability. The

problem with making a link to the social model of impairment is that most of the work to date in the field of impairment has sought to analyse pain from a physical point of view. So when using the social model of impairment to clarify the situation of dyslexic people within the disability movement, some writers draw on their own specialist fields of physical and mental impairment, on which they can speak with first hand experience, such as the researcher and author Michael Oliver.

Film and Television

As seen, some dyslexic people do not see themselves as having a disability, as media portrayal of disability has mainly focused on the lives of people with physical and mental disability. Film and television show their work in the visual medium, so it is hardly surprising that they opt for physical disability, rather than one that shows no physical 'abnormality' whatsoever. Yet there are still examples of films (Bronek Pekosinski, 1993; English Patient, 1996) that show disabled people as 'different', and thus the disabled lobby has focused a great deal of its attention on challenging this perception. Hence, disabilities such as dyslexia, are not considered so urgent. This means that people with dyslexia have not had the same success in fighting for social and political rights as other disabled people do.

Location of Dyslexia

Another reason for this lack of link to disability comes from important organisations, such as the British Dyslexia Assoc., (2000) who define dyslexia as affecting:

"reading, spelling, writing, memory and concentration, and sometimes maths, music, foreign languages and self-organisation. Some people call dyslexia 'a specific learning difficulty.' Dyslexia tends to run in families. Dyslexia continues throughout life. 10% of the population is dyslexic, 4% being severely dyslexic. Dyslexic people may have creative, artistic, practical skills." (BDA 2000)

This could help to explain why some people with dyslexia do not class themselves as disabled; the dyslexia organisations appear not to link the syndrome to disability as illuminated through the social model of disability. Perhaps they too see the disability movement as being more concerned with the body as a source of disability.

Looking at the picture as a whole, it is clear that some dyslexic people feel part of the disability movement, and others feel apart from it. This makes some dyslexic people feel that the disability movement cannot recognise their needs. It could be argued that if dyslexic people do not view themselves as disabled, and there is little recognition that dyslexia is a disability, then this could create divisions and enable 'professionals' to hold on to control of these groups.

If the disability lobby does not see dyslexia as a disability, this may create problems for dyslexic mature students in education and they will continue to feel marginalised. This could be because disability lobby groups do not always pressure LEAs to develop greater understanding of dyslexic people within education, especially of their psychosocial needs as mature students. Without such understanding, there is the risk that this group of potential

students may not re-enter education and thus never get the chance to improve their lives through gaining much needed qualifications.

Appraisal of Methodology and Theory

In appraising the use of critical social research and grounded theory in the methodology and theoretical framework of this study, it is important to ask if these research tools enabled the study to give a clear and precise picture of the site under investigation. In this study I have chosen to develop a mixed research method to explore the social site. This mixed approach has been employed in other disability studies by such as Layder (1993) who comments that these are the views:

> "Of Merton and Glaser and Strauss … in developing an alternative approach which builds on the stronger features of each of these theories." (Pg.7, Layder, 1993)

This research approach provided the opportunity to investigate the many-layered nature of the site under investigation, seeing the smaller picture as closely as the larger picture. This was achieved through looking at macro issues, such as the universities and the wider community and its structures, but also at micro issues that affected the respondents, such as their relationships and their actions. This approach, as advocated by Layder (1993), provided the opportunity to use both Critical Social Research and Grounded Theory to explore the environment of the mature dyslexic student in HE.

This approach can be evaluated by testing it against a set of principles. The work of Stone and Priestly (1996) advocates a research scheme for disability which provides several key points highlighted in bold:

I **The adoption of a social model of disablement as the epistemological basis for research production.** This was met within this study by attempting to understand the respondents as not only individuals returning to the educational site with a recognised past history of academic failure, but people who have a specific disability, and their disabled place within the social world of the educational setting.

II **The surrender of claims to objectivity through overt political commitment to the struggles of disabled people for self-emancipation.** In an attempt to be completely open about this group of people, there was a need for the research to be controlled by the respondents to show their true academic journey in an attempt to be considered equal students to their non-dyslexic counterparts, and not to be restricted by a sense of covering up difficult issues, as one respondent claimed:

"I really hope this research thing of yours really shows what it's been like for me, and what I've been through to pass this year. I really hope stuff's not blurred over to make it seem nice, or I'm a freak, 'cause I'm not… I'm worried about here [university] and I think people who like control universities should know just how I feel." (Female Respondent)

III **The willingness to only undertake research where it will be of practical benefit to the self-empowerment of disabled people and/or the removal of disabling barriers.** In attempting to expose how respondents have dealt with their social, psychological and academic issues in this study, there has been a remit to help other dyslexic mature students in the future:

"Well, if what I've [had] to say helps other people, it'd be worth it then...Make them feel they're not on their own, and someone's been there before." (Female Respondent)

IV **The evolution of control over research production to ensure full accountability to disabled people and their organisations.** Whilst making every step of the research as clear as possible, it was important that the respondents were clear about their role in the study, and how they and other interested parties would be able to trace the history of the study and its evolution over the research period:

"My words read by other people? No one's been interested in what I think; now I could be like helping other people to help other people like me... I'd never of thought it!" (Female Respondent)

V **Giving voice to the personal as political, whilst endeavouring to collectivise the political commonality of individual experiences.** The respondents were political without perhaps realising it and it was important to realise these issues and place them together to reinforce the strength of their experiences:

"You're joking, I'm the first to ever of got anything [qualifications] after school in my family. They didn't know about university from their background." (Female Respondent)

This, and other personal comments have been collectivised in an attempt to strengthen the occurrence of experiences both political and non-political. (Pg.706, Stone and Priestly, 1996)

By using the social model of disability, the research was able to explain the respondents' experience of returning to education. This model helped these disabled people realise that they were not necessarily the issue in the disability argument, but rather that society was not structured to see and respond to their needs.

Respondents and the Social Model of Disability

This model is highly structured, in terms of its use in research, with measures to identify the way in which disabled people work within society. Yet it is interesting to note that three of the respondents devised their own take on the social model of disability, without ever having known of its existence:

"Imagine dyslexia's like having one leg, but if you wanted a really good job you had to walk a mile, just one [mile]. You could do it, but it'd be really difficult, and you'd

see loads of two-legged people just doing it ever-so-easily, and some two-legged people just not bothering to do it, but they could. It'd make you really upset 'cause why should you *need* to do a mile? Who says? Why can't you *not* walk, but talk for an hour?" (Female Respondent)

and:

> "It's all bloody unfair. Universities just don't see what it's like being a fucking dyslexic like me. Everything's set-up so it's just not what you need. If they just taught everyone pissing stuff in the way I need it, well, it'd be loads better, but it's not and they're all fuckers." (Male Respondent)

The social model of disability helped to show how the respondents responded and worked in society and in their new academic setting. It helped to identify barriers that were in place within the universities and, beyond, in the wider community. These included a lack of knowledge of dyslexia by various key staff within the academe and in the wider world, and a lack of understanding from non-university friends in the workplace or at home. To frame the understanding of the wider work, critical social research has been employed to observe how the respondents work within their environment.

Researcher Impact

The fact that the researcher is himself a man with dyslexia and thus had an understanding of the oppression that the respondents identified at school, work and university, created

difficulty in making the research objective. Hence, it is important to recognise that the research attempted to empower the respondents by viewing them not simply as 'subjects'; rather, it aimed to enable them to actively control the research, by giving them the freedom to speak openly about their lives and experiences. The researcher's personal understanding of the field and his wish to enhance the position of dyslexic mature students in university provided the stimulus to bring the research to fruition.

> "I couldn't talk to someone who doesn't understand what I've been through. You knowing about dyslexia and going to uni makes me feel you're okay." (Male Respondent)

and:

> "It's not like I don't trust [academic support tutor], and she's been just great, but I'd never tell the support manager the sort of stuff I tell you, no way as much, 'cause I'd always be worried they'd tell my teachers [lecturers] and then I'd get marked down." (Female Respondent)

Even though the respondents only knew that the researcher was a man with dyslexia and a mature student wishing to research the psychosocial phenomena of this group of people, it was interesting to note that over three quarters of the group claimed that they would not have divulged nearly as much information about their life experiences if the researcher had worked directly for a university. This could be because they felt a member of university staff

might inform their lecturers about important points, even though there was a confidentiality clause. Another reason could be that the respondents felt that they were helping to formulate the research and had complete control over their anonymity, so they knew they could freely speak their minds and thus provide very rich data.

Practical Benefits to Respondents

When considering the conduct of the research it is important to recognise that there should be some benefit to the respondents involved, because research can often be criticised for the lack of:

> "Immediate improvements in the material conditions of life." (Pg.109, Oliver, 1992)

The respondents asserted that this study had assisted them to talk to other dyslexic people about their dyslexia, and experiences of it:

> "I found out she was one of your dyslexics [respondents] in your study, and we got talking, and she's like me in loads of ways, and we just talk and talk, and if I'd not done this talking to you about me, I'd never of met her." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "It's [research] really made me think. I've had a few nights just lying in bed thinking about the past, and remembering loads I'd forgotten. I've thought about the way I

was at school, and the teachers, and at work in a way I've never thought before, and things feel clearer now, clearer for the future." (Male Respondent)

This self-reflection came from being challenged to locate deeply held beliefs about the self and one's place as a dyslexic person. It was only by having up to eight hours of interviews with each respondent, and building up trust over their first year in a totally new environment, that the research could give such support to these respondents, much of which was self-oriented. This self-orientation was taken one step further by respondents coming to their own conclusions regarding their past and the oppression they had faced.

Dissemination

In the wider academic field, there were opportunities for the researcher to help others understand the findings. This was through presenting papers at departmental and college research sessions and by writing to dyslexia e-groups. For personal reasons, the researcher was unable to present papers at various relevant professional conferences. This should alter in the not-too-distant future, due to a change in the researcher's personal circumstances and he hopes to be able to disseminate findings in that and other ways. By sharing the findings of this research, it is possible that schools, workplaces and universities may become more open to this group of people.

Research Control

As stated above, the respondents were not only providing information regarding their own experiences, but were helping to control the way in which the research was carried out.

"It's good you feel I can see where your work's [study] going. I mean that you're interested in letting me look at how big the work is, and why I think some things are good, and some are bad." (Female Respondent)

In an attempt to offer complete research transparency for the respondents there was the opportunity to help all of the respondents to understand the research in whatever way they found of interest. This could be through asking questions regarding the way it was being carried out, and how the research could be presented. In addition to this, there was the opportunity for respondents to suggest changes to interview schedules at any stage of the study.

The interview schedules were based on an earlier pilot study, in which respondents answered questions pertinent to their general understanding of their experience within the HE environment, such as "what do you identify as central to your understanding of being dyslexic?" and "what do you identify as central to your understanding of dyslexia in the workplace?". These were then organised into the eight interview schedules used in the main part of the study. This shows how the respondents were helping to formulate questions for the study right from the beginning. This respondent control was taken further by asking them if the schedules were a suitable representation of their experience on entering the HE environment. If the respondents did not think that questions were suitable, changes were made to bring them into line with the respondents' views. Again the respondents were consulted at the final stage of the research, when the data was being processed, just to check that they felt the research was in keeping with their experiences, as they saw them.

"Yeah, it's what I said at the time. I've really changed haven't I?" (Male Respondent)

All of this ensured that the research was developed by the people whose voices spoke of the experience of mature dyslexic students entering HE.

> "I really feel part of this work of yours [researcher]. It makes me want to help people, especially when they feel part of the whole thing [research process] and want everyone in the world to hear about it." (Female Respondent)

and:

> "I can't believe anyone wants to hear about me! It makes me feel I'm someone when I talk about my life, even though it's been crap and boring. It's really interesting what you're doing; not just the talking, but the way you put it all together. If I's clever, I'd try and help dyslexics to." (Male Respondent)

Rich Data

Speaking to respondents over a specific time span, and enabling them to satisfy themselves that the research was open yet confidential, gave the respondents a chance to provide deep and rich data. This gave the researcher an opportunity to gather data that identified the barriers that affected the respondents collectively as well as individually. During the writing-up period, some of the respondents were shocked to note the commonality of their own

personal experiences. Looking at the experiences of the respondents collectively discourages the individualisation of dyslexia research and provides a picture of the wider barriers (Abberley, 1992) that mature dyslexic students face at school, work or university.

Some researchers feel that mixing research approaches provides the opportunity not only to present qualitative data, but quantitative options as well (Stone and Priestly, 1996). This study used an extremely basic questionnaire and eight semi-structured interview schedules to understand the respondents' experiences during their first year back in education. Oliver (2001) expounds the view that research using an emancipatory approach can be both qualitative and quantitative. By being as open as possible with the respondents, and using a semi-structured technique, the research gave students, and staff, as much opportunity to speak about their experiences as possible. It thus ensured that the respondents and staff were identified as the experts in this subject, and not the researcher. Yet it cannot be forgotten that there is no method that does not contain some element of oppression nor have some type of loaded agenda (Hammersley, 1993)

Using the Social Model of Disability to explain the respondents' experiences shifted the research from being objective research, to being committed research. Using this particular approach to research aimed to give the study as a whole validity in the eyes of the disability movement, and thus make an important link to dyslexia. This helped the conduct of the research and assisted in justifying the theoretical framework and methodology. Turning to the research methodology's limitations it has to be noted that the respondents did not assist in developing the semi-structured interview technique. The reason for this was that semi-structured interviews were used at the beginning of the research, when dyslexic students

were asked to help identify issues of importance to them. The researcher felt that it would be better to continue this method into the main stage of the research to ensure continuity of the study. To reduce this inconsistency, each respondent was shown the interview structure at the beginning and end of each interview, and asked if it was acceptable. They were told that they could go away and e-mail or telephone the researcher if they felt they were unhappy with any aspect of the schedules. In the event, the respondents expressed themselves as extremely happy with how the schedules were presented.

Looking again at the negative aspects of this study, this research may not seem to be regarded as wholly scientific. The reason for this is that Critical Social Research does not respect:

> " ...the positivist view of social research as the pursuit of absolute knowledge through the scientific method and the gradual disillusionment with the interpretive view." (Pg.110, Oliver, 1992)

In contrast to this view, the use of Grounded Theory, which helps analyse experience, can be seen as a scientific method as it is a:

> "Systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon." (Pg.24, Strauss and Corbin, 1990)

This theory helps in the confrontations of oppression within the academic environment that dyslexic students face at both micro and macro levels. Use of grounded theory in this research gave strength to the framework and methodology.

Using these two research approaches in this study enabled the researcher to build a complex picture of the academic environment under investigation, by providing micro and macro pictures of the school, the work environment and the transition into HE. By using Grounded Theory and Critical Social Research to show that there are complicated problems that dyslexic mature students encounter in the academic environment, the research has exposed some of the issues facing disabled people. It demonstrates the:

> " ... need to satisfy the rigorous demands." (Pg.715, Stone and Priestly, 1996)

If it meets this goal, this study, looking at the psychosocial phenomena of mature dyslexic students on entering HE, should make an original contribution to existing knowledge of non-traditional learners, and help to expose the barriers that they face in the community.

Chapter Eleven. Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research.

Introduction

This chapter brings together the main findings from this study. It discusses outcomes and how these can be applied and improved upon.

Overview

In bringing the whole research together, it is important to see the study as adding value to existing research and helping to extend current knowledge. This research identifies large discrepancies in general knowledge of dyslexia within British schools, workplaces and universities. Students at some institutions were offered lots of academic support whilst other institutions seemed to be largely unaware of the needs that dyslexic people bring into the educational environment, even though there are important government guidelines (e.g. DfES, 2003). In general there appears to be a more effective system of dyslexia support in the HE system than in the compulsory school system, though this could be seen as contrary to the intention of government policy.

An important question to ask is why support in HE is more effective than in schools. The answer may lie in it being more sharply focused on the individual where at school there was a pressure to conform to a norm. There is an important developmental factor operating here. Pressure to conform to peer norms and to seek peer approval is greater at ages 11-

15. Students who dress, behave, talk, look and learn differently from others at these ages stand out, and feel more self-conscious than at other ages. That developmental pressure is increased by teachers using conformity as a form of social control. At university no one cares very much about unusual individuality, hence there is a potential for individual support, even though numbers of disabled learners are on the increase.

School Background

From the way that respondents spoke about the school system, there is a clear suggestion that they felt that dyslexia was either not known about, or perhaps not acknowledged, by almost all of the teaching staff. Not only were these teaching staff apparently unaware of the difficulties they faced, but most of the respondents' parents and families showed little appreciation either. The outcome of this lack of understanding was that the respondents were all labelled as educationally backward, usually resulting in hurtful terms of abuse.

If one looks for reasons why the respondents thought the teaching staff did not know about dyslexia, it could be that they branded the respondents as slow or 'thick'. For the respondents these were their most vivid memories. In each of the schools, at least the SENCO would have known about dyslexia, but these respondents seem to have escaped the SENCO's attention as far as identification of dyslexic was concerned.

> "I just think they [teachers] didn't know about dyslexia." (Female Respondent)

and:

"Well even if they did know [regarding dyslexia] they never said anything to me." (Female Respondent)

This lack of recognition as perceived by respondents resulted in the respondents feeling that they were simply 'thick' and could never do well academically within the school setting. This was made worse by feeling that, later in life, they might never be able to succeed in the Higher Education field as they were not capable, or that they would, once again, be labelled as 'thick', and not be able to achieve because of this label:

> "When I's at school I didn't know about what I had was dyslexia, so any thoughts I'd had about going to university, when I was older, were stopped 'cause I's stopped 'cause I's thick not 'cause I's dyslexic... I know I could of gone to university if I's dyslexic, but not 'cause I's thick like the teachers said I was." (Female Respondent)

This respondent recognised that the label 'thick' was the attribute which stopped her feeling that she could progress beyond school. She had no experience of dyslexia before entering HE:

> "When I came to [University] and was told I's dyslexic, well that made me think I could do it, and if someone'd said I's dyslexic at school, well, I'd of thought I wasn't just thick... Dyslexia's different to being told you're thick for years, you can do something about dyslexia, you can't change being told you're thick." (Female Respondent)

Even though the respondents experienced negative labelling whilst in the school environment, they did actually return to education, and at a higher level than at school, by enrolling at universities. The respondents came into their new environment at different levels of entry, some through foundation courses, and one respondent direct into an honours school degree. Their reasons for returning to education were numerous, but all of the respondents went through a journey of self-discovery before they entered a university. They all seemed to have entered HE in the hope of making their lives better, improving on their current employment, and achieving a sense of fulfilment by pushing themselves to prove their school experiences wrong.

Positive Experiences of University

Within the HE system there appears to have been a greater awareness of dyslexia than in the respondents' schools. Not only were the support staff aware of this condition, many academic staff were sensitive in broaching the subject for the first time, and in providing relevant support. Those staff who were sensitive in their actions were appreciated, not least because some other staff were perceived as totally insensitive by the respondents. The ability of academic staff to recognise aspects of dyslexia in a student's work suggested to the students that there was a possible explanation for the difficulties that they had lived with for so many years. It enabled them to find out about the consequences of their dyslexia, and thus to overcome their feelings of stupidity. Skills in initial dyslexia recognition enabled the staff, and thus the institution, to extend an awareness of opportunities open to mature dyslexic students.

Flexibility of University Policies

Students at post-1992 universities tended to report more flexible policies in helping mature dyslexic students. They helped with flexible essay deadlines, and an option of speaking their essays in a *viva voce* style, rather than requiring written work. Two universities gave the respondents the option of re-entering their essays to try to gain a higher mark. These measures were put in place within individual university departments to assist dyslexic students, with a special emphasis on additional flexibility for mature students. These measures meant that the respondents felt that university was not a repetition of their school experience, with its rigorously held timetables and its ability to foster a sense of negativity towards pupils who were not able to meet its criteria. By offering flexibility to some students, there was scope for individuals to improve their education and gain better jobs.

Smaller Groups and Computer Learning

The newer universities delivered a positive experience of teaching styles by extended use of smaller classroom settings. The respondents at those universities experienced a sense of intimacy by working in smaller groups, with seminars to reinforce their learning at which they could talk with other people about the topics under discussion. This also extended beyond the classroom by utilising computer generated learning systems that enabled them to learn in their own time, as opposed to being *talked at* in a lecture hall, with little time to ask questions. This environment helped the respondents and gave them a feeling that they were included within the community of learners, thus assisting them towards educational success.

Peer Help

Many of the respondents felt that they had a good relationship with their non-disabled peers. These peers were mainly interested in the student as a person, rather than their academic ability, so when they learnt of their friend's dyslexia, and were told about its effects, they were helpful in trying to find ways to assist within the academic environment, for example with spellings and general encouragement. Regarding relationships with other dyslexic mature students, the respondents felt that they helped each other as they often had a great deal in common. This was seen in assistance such as advice in gaining various forms of support. The fact that respondents had fellow dyslexic people as friends helped them to realise that they were not on their own in their disability and life experiences, and thus they gradually became able to feel included in the educational environment.

Negative Experience of University

The discovery of dyslexia was a difficult one for some respondents. They had to come to terms with their new-found educational situation, with the added difficulty of deciding whether to tell their friends and family. Some respondents felt the discovery of their condition made sense of educational difficulties which they had experienced throughout their lives. This in turn led to anger as they realised the implications that earlier discovery could have had for their educational career at school.

Support Services

The systems of testing for dyslexia were often a source of friction. Some respondents found that they were actively discouraged from having the test; they were deemed to be borderline dyslexic, and the cost of finding out was too high for the support service to sustain. Other respondents felt that the support services were trying to keep numbers receiving support down, because they could not cope with the volume of work. Respondents felt they had a constant fight to prove their disability to the very people who were supposed to help them discover it. This sort of attitude made the respondents feel unwanted, and did little to help them to achieve success in the educational environment.

Academic Staff

There were some academic staff who left the respondents feeling that their needs were simply not understood. For example, some students were made to feel that by using laptops or dictaphones, they were an inconvenience within the lecture hall. These were considered, by some staff, to be cheating, as the other students did not have access to such facilities. Finding that some staff were not aware of dyslexia, or seemed to have an active dislike of people who suffer from the condition, made some respondents feel at a disadvantage, and did nothing to help them with their feeling of inadequacy in an academic setting.

The engagement of the respondents with the lectures and seminars they attended was identified as a problem for some respondents, because they found it difficult to take in all of the academic information. Because reading and note-taking during lectures took so much longer in comparison to their non-dyslexic counterparts, the respondents felt that they were getting left behind. The fast pace did not suit respondents who could not always articulate their thoughts on the page. This difficulty put the respondents at a distinct disadvantage to their non-dyslexic peers. Yet with the help of note-takers and modern digital recorders, their lectures and seminars were eased.

Positive and Negative Effects

All but two of the respondents in this study survived to the end of the academic year, many with a great deal of personal and academic success. Yet reports from students in some universities suggested that their university's systems were less successful than others in providing them with affective academic support. Neither the support service nor the academics in one university appeared fully aware of their important role in helping their students with dyslexia identification, and subsequently with support. This was in spite of excellent publicity about dyslexia at the university in question (see Pg. 102). This partial acknowledgment of dyslexia suggests that some mature dyslexic students may miss out on help that could motivate them to improve their life opportunities through education. It also shows how there are substantial differences between universities both in the way support services operate and in the help provided by academic staff. Looking to the extended future, the end of SENDA and the 2005 DDA could play a part in the realization of these recommendations. This could be in areas such as staff training, and support mechanisms.

There is no way of measuring the potential effect of these new measures, but to say that the 2005 Act is far-reaching and it is a hoped that it will eventually assist mature dyslexic students in their academic life.

Methodology and Framework

In bringing together the various aspects of the study, it is important to remember why the methodology and framework was chosen.

The methodology and theoretical framework is one that is known for being robust in research into disability. Critical Social Research Approach was used to challenge long held beliefs that may well have been oppressive, and thus had the potential to improve the lives of dyslexic respondents within the academic environment. As the study also used a Social Model of Disability, it was able to treat the respondents as experts in the field, with first hand knowledge of what it was like to be disabled in the educational environment.

The downside to this strategy is that Critical Social Research has not gained complete respect in some parts of the academic community (Harvey & MacDonald, 1993). Yet the analysis using grounded theory helped to ensure that the data spoke for itself and was not misrepresented by an imposed theoretical framework.

Recommendations

In light of the data and discussion, the following recommendations may improve the situation that dyslexic mature students encounter as they consider, or enter, the Higher Education environment. The recommendations aim to help identify needs of this specific group, which may otherwise not always be recognised within the HE setting. Although this research discussed the respondents' lives since work, it was important to recognise that compulsory education had played a major part in forming their ideas regarding their educational abilities. Hence, recommendations arising from the research start by looking at the compulsory sector, as this informs the later consideration of return to education at HE level. It also needs to be recognized that the affects of SENDA and the 2005 DDA will have and affect on the future of these recommendations, as more changes take place within the educational site.

School Education

Respondents saw schools as a major cause of their feelings of low educational ability. The school system not only needs to recognise that pupils may suffer from dyslexia, but also include the subject of dyslexia in the curriculum, so that each pupil in the UK would be taught about its effects. Putting this into the teaching schedule would demonstrate that the needs of this group of pupils were being acknowledged, which in itself could help this group to gain educational success. By doing this, all pupils would gain an understanding of dyslexia early in life, and potentially reduce the risk that the pupils or teaching staff will allow name calling of dyslexic pupils. This would then trickle down into society and increase tolerance of this issue. This recommendation was reinforced by one respondent:

"...but if they knew about it [dyslexia], I mean all the other kids in my class, I'm sure they'd of understood about me and the problems I had, and not [treated] me the way I got... If only they'd taught it or something like about learning about blindness, or stuttering or things." (Female Respondent)

This argument assumes that all school teachers need to be aware of the possibility of dyslexia in their pupils. The best way to ensure this would be to make it compulsory for all teacher-training courses to teach about disability, including dyslexia. Trainee teachers should be required to *demonstrate* their knowledge of the subject and also the consequences if children are not supported, or even ridiculed for their disability. Criteria for i.t.t. courses do indeed require trainee teachers to be aware of disability in the educational setting, yet support staff at two universities claimed that this was not necessarily the case:

> "...I've done some looking into this and there is little taught about disability in general on the PGCEs... Here we only have one lecture about such a wide subject, and there's no essays to show that they've understood anything about it... I don't think our *teachers of tomorrow* really know about disability... In fact I'm sure of it." (Support Tutor)

This was echoed by another support tutor at a different university:

"No, I know they don't teach enough [disability awareness] on any of the teacher training programmes... One girl graduated last year, and I asked her about what she learned [about disability awareness]. She said "nothing". She'd not done that

module, you know, about teaching SEN, so she'd learnt nothing... It's a problem I think... The children in her class might not be spotted [with dyslexia]." (Support Tutor)

Teaching about dyslexia and its effects could be seen as compulsory 'competences' that the TTA and DFES require of universities and trainee teachers. There is a range of ways to include disability issues within the i.t.t, for example:

1. A very short, yet compulsory, course on the subject of educational disability, which all trainee teachers attend in the lecture hall sessions.
2. Both primary i.t.t. and secondary i.t.t. students could be taught about educational disability within their reading and literacy courses.
3. Again, both primary and secondary i.t.t. could be taught to recognise the value of teaching about disability within the PSHE curriculum.

If at least one of these recommendations were implemented within University courses, then teachers would be in a better position to have current and tested knowledge about disability.

Turning to the "hidden curriculum" within the classroom, it is possible to influence pupils' lives positively by addressing the issues faced by dyslexic pupils outside the formal curriculum. This could help to avoid exposing these pupils in any formal and open setting. The limitation in this approach is that it depends on time constraints and the personal beliefs of each individual teacher.

Making knowledge about dyslexia part of formal teacher training could help to make the subject of disability and dyslexia part of every teacher's, and every pupil's, understanding, without there being any doubt about it being recognised. As the 2005 DDA takes affect in the university setting, it ought to be clearer that i.t.t. programmes should reflect the Act's policy on encouraging a positive view of education for disabled and non-disabled learners working together.

Universities

In the HE environment, it is important that each university has clear guidelines on advertising their awareness of dyslexia, and how they accommodate it within the publicity system. This could take several forms: Posters in government owned buildings, such as schools, libraries, council offices etc, local radio stations and open evenings at community centres and other places where people meet. If universities are sufficiently active in their publicity regarding people who might recognise themselves as mature dyslexic students, then they will succeed in bringing these people back into education. To help with the advertising of this publicity, the subject of dyslexia could be placed within the setting of general educational disability, or in F to HE publicity. This was highlighted by one respondent:

> "A friend told me about a leaflet at her daughter's school. It'as an open day or evening or somit [something]. They had a big table with leaflets and posters and books and that, and she picked one from her University about foundation [courses] and if you weren't good at reading they'd help… so she went and now's doing a post [graduate] degree…"(Female Respondent)

Workplace

Money should be made available to companies, both large and small, to encourage staff to attend a university course to enhance their learning skills. This could take the form of day release or night school. Active encouragement to take an interest in themselves as learners might make staff more useful to their company. As one respondent commented:

> "I know they were trying to keep us thick so we'd never leave, but if they only just gave us some time off to go to do a course, I'd of felt better about being there [work]... Other people I knew got free courses at [F/HE College], but they got a grant or money from somewhere." (Male Respondent)

The 2005 Act could potentially make a difference in this setting, as it encourages companies to value its disabled staff, which could lead to a greater understanding of their individual needs.

Various University Courses

Looking specifically at the courses available to dyslexic mature students, there does not appear to be any one area of study that is more popular than another:

> "Okay, I'd like to get the wage a brain surgeon gets, but I'm not that clever, dyslexia or not. Anyway, my hands are too shaky!" (Male Respondent)

and:

"I'm not sure I'd of wanted to of done law, 'cause there's lots of reading about really difficult stuff, so I'm happy doing something that's easier for my poor brain."

(Female Respondent)

Yet it has to be noted that the Foundation to Higher Education and Access to Higher Education courses are still very popular and have in place a system of educational building blocks to assist mature dyslexic students in achieving their academic goals. One respondent commented:

> "I think that the work we did got more difficult, but it was only the sort of difficulty that was okay for us at that time in the year, I mean that they wouldn't of given us stuff we just couldn't do, so that's what made it good for me at [University]."
>
> (Female Respondent)

Role Models

Not only should these two pre-degree courses be encouraged, but students' motivation can be further encouraged by showing what previous students have achieved after completing the course. One respondent explained:

"There's this women who came in [to see the A to HE students] talking about her life. She's like me, but at [from] a different factory, but she'd done it [A to HE] a few years ago. She went to [University] and did a degree in biology or something like,

and then she did another one [degree] that they [university] paid for, and then she did a doctor's degree (Ph.D) that made her a doctor and she [now] works for the university… It took years and years and now she gets paid loads. I think I could be like her and really make my life different to what it's now." (Female Respondent)

This encouragement needs to come from regular sessions as students appreciate the opportunity to meet role models throughout the year:

> "We got another one [past student] come in a few months [later]. She was like the other one, but different. She'd done a degree at somewhere, and got a job working for the council or something like that, and she sounded really confident and [looked] smart… She said we could all be like her and do even better, but we had to learn the work and keep at it. I liked her; I can't remember her name." (Female Respondent)

This group of past students seems to have helped this respondent. The role model was looked up to, especially when the academic work became taxing. In addition to this, past students could be used in publicity for the dyslexia service. Publicity could cite past students as successful alumni and show that even with dyslexia, they were able to achieve success once they had returned to education and gained recognition of their disability.

Peer Mentoring

Another form of help in higher education is an adult dyslexia mentor group. This could take the form of a dyslexic mature student in a higher year, acting as a friend who will help a new

student to succeed. This system was in place at one of the universities and was a great help to two students:

> "We both found Paul loads of help right at the beginning 'cause he took all of the worry out of finding the right places we couldn't [find]. He knew the right people to ask about things we didn't know [about] and we'd just ring him, it was great." (Male Respondent)

Although this system of mentoring needs to be monitored to make sure that the new students don't rely too heavily on their mentor, it could well make the early period of transfer, from work to university, much smoother.

Staff Attitudes and Training

Looking at staff attitudes to mature dyslexic students, it appears that some staff showed, or chose to show, little understanding of dyslexia, or did not recognise that mature students with dyslexia could well have a different experience of education to that of other students. It would help if all academic staff were not only trained in how to identify aspects of dyslexia in their students' work, but also to understand that there are issues that mature dyslexic students face when they return to education. If the academic staff recognised these issues, then the progress of the mature student in the educational environment could be more comfortable. As one respondent highlighted:

"He just didn't understand me and my problems with home and not reading well and school problems when I was small. I think he thought I's just there to make the university look okay in the government's rules about disabled people." (Female Respondent)

Looking to the future, the 2005 DDA makes clear that all employees are to support disabled staff and empower non-disabled staff to work on an equal basis to their colleagues.

Academic and Support Service Collaboration

Looking further at the lecturers' and support staff's roles in the dyslexic mature student's development, it is important that these two separate staff groups work more closely together to enhance the learning experience for this specific group of students. The research suggested that respondents at one university thought the support staff were so frightened of upsetting the academic staff that they let the students fail rather than cause a potential argument with a specific academic:

> "I think she's just frightened 'cause they're all clever lecturers and she's just a sort of like secretary for [support service]. The lecturers think they're it, especially Dr. [Lecturer], he's not going to be told what to do by some secretary type person." (Female Respondent)

and:

"Well, do you think he's [lecturer] going to listen to her [support tutor]? I heard him shouting down the 'phone to her. I's in the room and heard it all. He said he didn't care about non-existent excuses [dyslexia]." (Female Respondent)

All of the universities had complaints procedures, but these were extremely lengthy and potentially upsetting for the respondents. This respondent was too frightened to go through the official appeals procedure and the matter was dropped. Both support and academic staff could work together, in a whole departmental exercise, to make the subject material more user-friendly and more accessible to dyslexic people. This procedure did exist in one of the universities with a support tutor aiming to visit each department. Yet there is evidence that academic staff did not find it a useful exercise:

"He [academic] said 'we've been told about you dyslexics'. It's just an excuse if you ask me.' " (Female Respondent)

and:

"He said '[the university] tells us to let in some dyslexic students'. He's [academic] only just been to the [support service] afternoon, and he still felt like that!" (Female Respondent)

Professional Recognition

Another way in which the academic and support staff could improve in their working relationship is by gaining a professional teacher status in dyslexia matters, such as the British Dyslexia Association Approved Teacher Status Certificate, or the proposed new qualifications of the National Association of Disability Officers. These two organisations provide information that assists academic and support staff in their professional dealings with dyslexic students, thus helping them to understand the complex issues arise when supporting dyslexic students.

This recommendation may be considered unrealistic for all academic staff. They may feel that they are under heavy enough pressure to publish their research, without having to be involved with yet another organisation; yet there might be a provision within the HE teaching certificate for a competency on educational disabilities, which could assist the academic staff in their understanding of disability.

Further Research

By using grounded theory and critical research methods, this study has been able to gain in-depth access to the educational environment, and has given a vivid picture of the respondents' experiences through their own words. If further research is to be carried out in this field, grounded theory and critical social research should be considered as they have a commitment to exposing social experience, led by the respondents, in a clear and issues-led way, challenging the barriers that oppress such groups as mature dyslexic students. These could encompass looking at the wider issues of social class in the return to education, especially at HE, and the idea that there could be specific areas of support offered to mature

students with dyslexia, as they enter the HE environment. These are further discussed below:

Social Class

An area that requires further research is the contribution of social class in the experience of the mature dyslexic student. This research highlighted issues which all mature dyslexic students shared, yet these were not broken down into issues that would affect class:

> "I've said it before and I'll say it again: If I's from a middle class family, I'd have no problems now. If you're working-class like me, you're on the scrap heap before you're started." (Male Respondent)

This respondent saw his class status as something that reduced his opportunities in the classroom. It would be valuable to investigate whether middle class dyslexic students have less damaging educational experiences at school and work than working class.

Initial Support Programmes

Alongside research into good advertising, there is a need for research into how to support this specific group of students when they do start at university. University-wide policy could be tested to see if the students feel that they are able to put their past negative school experiences behind them and move forward within the university system as a fresh start, without having to refer to past experiences at school and the workplace:

"I always look to the past when something goes wrong. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I don't think people here know what me and the other dyslexics have been through before coming. No one seems to realise just what." (Female Respondent)

This respondent went on to say that she could have benefited from initial dyslexia-specific social support when she first attended university, so she did not feel that she was on her own. This research has highlighted that good academic support services can help mature dyslexic students with their academic work, set in an environment in which students do not become too dependent on the support service. Yet, in addition, the research has shown that peer support and social support can also play a vital role.

If university academic support systems are to be effective, they could encourage a culture of social interaction amongst their students, by attempting to increase the facilities for social interaction between their dyslexic and non-dyslexic students. This could, as seen in the study, form a crucial aspect of mature dyslexia support, yet it is important that this does not lead to a *nanny state* reliance on the university arranging friendships.

All of the above recommendations could help to improve the lives of mature students with dyslexia in their efforts to succeed within the academic environment. Without such research, aspects of oppression and institutional barriers could remain in place and the needs of this group remain unrecognised.

This research has added to understanding of mature students, taking account of pre-university experience and of the first crucial and decisive year in the university environment. It has also shown that there are still issues of support that need addressing, such as over-dependence on academic support tutors and a lack of support measures between different institutions. There is also a case for peer-support mechanisms to be formalised, and for changing the ways that academics view dyslexia. For the future, advertising campaigns need to focus on this specific group of potential learners, and the openings available to them at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Although these respondents were interviewed at a time when the full affects of SENDA were not realized, and the 2005 DDA was not implemented, it is a hoped-for outcome that positive changed will continue to take place within HE, as dyslexic mature students continue to become a vital part of the HE community.

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Appendix 1

Early Examples of Respondents' Pre-edited Academic Work

"Youth traynors [trainers] and there training sceems [schemes] [have] been developed over many [,] many years now. [,] And they have these sceems in many british univercitys [universities]. If you look at the stuents [students] and the way thay like the sceems.[,] They like to unbastand [understand]the coarce [course] by doing it: and not writting [writing] it in SAs [essays]…" (Degree, Male Respondent)

"my writining [writing] stile [style] is nice and clere [clear] so I can undersand [understand] it wehn [when] I red [read] it dacke [back]…" (Pre-degree, Female Respondent)

"King lere [lear] is a book thats ['s] been on TV. I thik [think] I will engoy [enjoy] readin if [it] this simista [semester] becose [because] I want to read Moore [more]…" (Pre-degree, Female Respondent).

"Capitaizm (Capitalism) is an [a] market forse [force] learer [leader] in the UK today. As [a] westarn cuntry [country] we are subjectted [subjected] to it [in] every partt of our lives. Lots of buisnisessess [businesses] are subjett [subject] to this way of working as well as local counsils [councils]…" (Degree, Female Respondent)

Appendix 2a

Interview Schedule 1: Why Return to Higher Education?

1. What, if anything, has brought you back to University?

2. Could you tell me: when did you find out that you were dyslexic?

3. How would you describe your school experience?
   a. Academically?
   b. Teachers?
   c. Peers?

4. After leaving school, how did you feel about education in general and your specific educational experience?

5. When you left school, what *line* did you follow and why did you follow that particular *line*?

6. Did your dyslexia show itself in that *line*?

7. What were you expecting university to be like just before you came here?
   a. Academically?
   b. Lecturers?
   c. Fellow Students?
   d. Environment?

8. Did you worry that any school problems would be repeated at University, if at all?

9. How have you found university so far?
   a. Academically?

b. Lecturer?

c. Other Students?

d. Environment?

e. Support Service?

10. Did your dyslexia affect your university experience?

11. What, if any, encounter of your university experience, so far, would you change?

12. Have you decided upon what would you like to do once you have left university?

Appendix 2b

Interview Schedule 2: School Life

1. What were your:
   a. Best subjects at school?
   b. Worst subjects at school?

2. What about your school experience did you:
   a. Like?
   b. Dislike?

3. How would you:
   a. Describe yourself as a school pupil?
   b. Describe yourself as a teacher would have seen you as a pupil?

4. Did you find the school environment a safe place to be?

5. What was your first memory of realising that you didn't read and/or write in the same way as your peers?

6. At school, did you know formally or informally that you were dyslexic?

7. (Do you think you would have experienced a better experience of school if you categorically knew then that you were dyslexic?)

8. Did you ever have any:
   a. Academic difficulties as a pupil?
   b. Social difficulties as a pupil?

9. Were you ever labelled 'thick' or 'stupid' or 'will never amount to anything' or 'waste of time' or any other negative label?

10. Did you ever have:

a. Nightmares?

b. Play truant?

c. Refuse to go to school?

d. Disrupt a class?

e. Become violent against another pupil?

f. Be bullied?

g. Become angry against the school?

h. Worry about exams?

i. Any other psychological or social trait you would like to tell me about?

11. What do you think is the worst thing a school can do to a dyslexic pupil?

12. Can you tell me how your academic journey is progressing at this moment in the academic year?

Appendix 2c

Interview Schedule 3: After School

1. At school, did you ever consider the option of A' levels?

2. Did you worry about your career post-school years?

3. What did your parents think was your future, post-school?

4. When you left school, did you think that you would ever return to education?

5. What was:

   a. Good about leaving school?
   b. Bad about leaving school?

6. Were you worried that the effects of your dyslexia would show itself at work?

7. Did you attempt to hide the effects of your dyslexia to other people at work?

8. Did your company ever send you on any courses? If so, what percentage of the courses were:

   a. Practical?
   b. Written?
   c. Maths?
   d. Reading?

8a. Did the effects of your dyslexia show itself in these courses?

9. Were you worried about school experiences emulating themselves in that educational setting with:

a. Teachers/lecturers?

b. Fellow students?

c. The university environment?

10. At what age/career point did you consider returning to education; what made you entertain this action?

12. If you could turn back the hands of time, what educational changes/decisions would you have made at this 'work' point in your life, if any?

13. If you could recommend a course of educational action for someone in your past work situation, what would you recommend they do?

14. Can you tell me how your academic journey is progressing at this moment in the academic year?

Appendix 2d

Interview Schedule 4: Return to University

1. What made you return to university at this point in your life?

2. How long was it, after deciding that you would return, before you started your course?

3. How did you find out about the application process?

4. Was the application process straightforward, were you given help if asked?

5. How did you decided on your specific course?

6. What were your initial thoughts about:
   a. Lectures
   b. Fellow Students
   c. University Environment
   d. Support Services

7. Did you have a financial plan in action when you came to university? If working part-time, please explain how this works in with your studies.

8. What did you family and friends think of your return to University?

9. How have you found the timings of lectures, essay schedules, tutorials, seminars?

10. How did you find the support services at first? How do you find them at this point?

11. What did you like/dislike about University when you first started?

12. How have the above changed since then, if at all?

13. Did you/do you, find yourself thinking back to school days about:
    a. Lecturers
    b. Fellow Students
    c. University Environment

14. What was your biggest worry, once you had started back at university?

15. Can you tell me how your academic journey is progressing at this moment in the academic year?

Appendix 2e

Interview Schedule 5: Being Dyslexic Whilst at University.

1. When/where did you find out that you were dyslexic?

2. At what point did you tell your university that you were dyslexic?

3. Who suggested that you might be dyslexic? Who encouraged you to find out?

4. How did you feel about dyslexia before you where assessed? Did you ever think that you might be dyslexic before you when for the test?

5. What did you think dyslexia was, and what did you think dyslexia people were like?

6. What was the main incentive to take the test? Where you worried about the costs involved?

5. How long did it take for you to be diagnosed?

6. How did you feel when you discovered that you were dyslexic?

7. How did friends and family react when you told then that you were dyslexic?

8. Were you given any dyslexia literature when the university became aware of your dyslexia?

9. How did the academic staff respond when they found you to be dyslexic?

10. Were you made aware of support groups when you were discovered to be dyslexia?

11. Have you been made aware of additional grants?

12. How has your dyslexia effected you whilst you have been at University?

a. academic work.

b. socially.

c. self-confidence.

13. Do you think that mature dyslexics and non-mature dyslexics have a different experience of the dyslexic higher education scene?

14. Do you think that mature dyslexics students and non-dyslexic mature students have a different experience of the dyslexic higher education scene?

15. What is your advice for anyone who feels that they might be dyslexic?

16. Can you tell me how your academic journey is progressing at this moment in the academic year?

Appendix 2f

Interview Schedule 6: Support Systems at University.

1. Was there any support advertising that helped you choose your particular University?

2. How did you, if at all, access the support networks at your university?

3. What sort of support was open to you, and others, at your particular university?

4. Have you received any special equipment whilst you have been studying, if so - what?

5. Have the academic staff provided you with any extra support above the provision of non-dyslexic students?

6. Have your friends and family offered to assist you with support of your academic work?

7. Have you told any friends and family about accessing support at your university, if so, what have they commented about it?

8. If you have applied for any financial support, did the support service assist you in your application?

9. What opinion do you have of the support services?

10. Does the support of the support services help you with your work?

11. If you had received this level of support at school, how do you think you would have faired?

12. Do you think that a councillor should be available to understand dyslexic difficulties?

13. What were your initial reactions to the support you received?

14. How has the support offered changed through your time at university?

15. Do you think there is a different support need between mature dyslexics and non-mature dyslexics?

16. Can you tell me how your academic journey is progressing at this moment in the academic year?

Appendix 2g

Interview Schedule 7: How are you coping with the Academic Work at University?

1. Have you gradually improved in your academic skills whilst studying?

2. How do you think you have a good relationship with your academic staff?

3. Do you feel that you have the potential to produce academic work to a better standard than your school work?

4. Are some academic aspects of your course better than others?

5. What is it like for you studying in the university environment?

6. Is your course too fast, just right, or too slow for you as a dyslexic learner?

7. How do you find the learning areas at your university?

8. How have you found the:

i. Classroom?

ii. Lectures?

iii. Seminars?

iv. Tutorials?

9. Have you found that various coping strategies have helped you in your work?

10. How have you found the course literature?

11. **Foundation Only** Has the gradual building of academic content helped you gain greater confidence in your academic development?

12. Do you find writing assignments difficult or easy?

13. Does the support systems at your university help you with the academic aspects of your studies?

14. By undertaking a course at University, have you gained any extra skills?

15. How do you find the learning areas at your university?

16. Have you received academic support from your family and friends whilst at University?

17. What are the two most important things you have gained from your academic abilities so far?

18. Can you tell me how your academic journey is progressing at this moment in the academic year?

Appendix 2h

Interview Schedule 8: Final Schedule

1. Would you recommend a return to education for dyslexic adult students, if so, what would you say to them?
2. Looking back over your educational career so far, how do you feel you have changed as a person?

a. Academically
b. Personality
c. With fellow learners
d. Job prospects
e. Dyslexia

3. What in your university experience would you change, if anything?
4. Do you feel proud of your achievements?
5. Do you feel that your dyslexia is a great burden, if so, how much of a burden?
6. Would you have achieved higher marks if you were not dyslexic, if so, how much higher?
7. What are positive/negative elements of dyslexia?
8. Has anyone been a role model/ constant source of support to you at university? If they were not there, how would you have faired?
9. Could you have done your course without your computer, or extra support?
10. Has this Study helped or hindered you in your academic work and dyslexia journey?
11. Do you see yourself as a role model to other dyslexic adult students?
12. Did anyone/thing put you off university?

a. Staff
b. Work
c. Dyslexia
d. Money

13. Was there any time when you thought about ending your course prematurely?
14. Do you still have the same ambitions as you did at the beginning of your course, or have your motives changed?
15. Do you think your dyslexia has altered over the course length; if so, how?
16. Have staff changed their attitude to you over the length of the course?
17. Have you increased in confidence with:

a. Seminar work?
b. Reading?
c. Writing?
d. Organisational skills?

18. Is there any way you would improve/change the support given to you throughout the course?
19. Do you worry about your dyslexia in further study or the workplace at all?
20. Can you think of an analogy to help me understand your university experience?
21. Is there anyone from your past (possibly work or school) that you would like to meet again to tell them about your university achievements?
22. Do you have any views on how schools should prepare dyslexic children for post-school education?
23. Do you think you were more or less anxious at university than your non-dyslexic year peers?
24. How do you think your written work compares to others at university?
25. If you get to your chosen career, what may prevent you from climbing the ladder as far as you would like?
26. Why did you choose your university?
27. Can you tell me how your academic journey has progressing at this moment in the academic year?

Appendix 3

Initial Questionnaire

1. Name

2. Date of birth

3. Contact address

4. Telephone number

5. Name of university

6. Name of course

7. Who put you in touch with this research?

8. Have you been diagnosed with dyslexia by a university support tutor?

9. Have you seen an Educational Psychologist about your dyslexia?

10. At what age did you leave school?

11. Have you been employed in a full time job, if so, for how long?

12. Would you be willing to take part in a dyslexia research project looking at mature students in Higher Education?

13. Would you be willing to meet with the researcher for an initial informal meeting?