‘Sit in the corner and don’t eat the crayons’: postgraduates with dyslexia and the dominant ‘lexic’ discourse

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The lack of cultural diversity in higher education is recognised by policy objectives and a current focus on the development of widening participation for a range of students, including those with disabilities. Amongst this group are those with dyslexia who might previously have been disenfranchised from formal education and under-represented within it. This paper explores the personal narratives and learner histories of six postgraduates and academics with dyslexia from their earliest memories of learning to their present experiences. It examines how literacy, as a dominant form of discourse, has defined concepts of academic ability resulting in the early exclusion of these learners from formal education. It is argued that this dominant discourse can be challenged by non-authorised, informal learning resulting in stories of resistance.

Keywords: dyslexia; postgraduate; literacy; narratives; learner history

Introduction

The development of recent initiatives to increase participation in UK higher education suggests that previous representation came (and still comes) from a relatively limited quarter, reflecting the lack of cultural diversity in the sector (Gorard et al. 2006). Although the focus for widening participation relates primarily to socio-economic background, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) also indicates an aim to increase participation for students from other groups, including those with disabilities, mature students and all ethnic groups (HEFCE 2008). Students recognised as dyslexic fit within the range of students identified as disabled, although for some this is identified as a ‘hidden disability’ or learning difficulty. In addition to a potential shift in admissions to higher education, the introduction of the ‘Disability discrimination act’ (DDA) 1995 and ‘Special educational needs and discrimination act’ (SENDA) 2001 suggest an aim to move towards an inclusive environment that supports collaboration, communication and representation of those with disabilities. The ‘Disability equality duty’ (2007) goes further and demands the inclusion of disabled voices in decisions with regard to the policies and procedures of public bodies, including higher education institutions.

It could be argued that the largest disenfranchised group are those with ‘unseen’ or ‘hidden’ disabilities, not just in the UK but also in Australia and the USA.

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This marginalisation is not restricted to those from comparatively wealthy English speaking countries and we are aware of the further significance for those who are also potentially disenfranchised by the focus on Western perspectives on disability and education (Gabel and Danforth 2008). Current hypotheses about differences in language acquisition and the existence of dyslexia (see, for example, Law and Or 2001; Ziegler et al., 2003) indicate scientific investigation of linguistic difference across cultures, positioning dyslexia as a cross-cultural phenomenon. However, there may be no global consensus where basic educational rights and resourcing implications are understood from a largely Westernised perspective. We do not aim to contribute to this dominant view but acknowledge that this study is based on the academic experiences of those in a new UK university and the discussion relates specifically to their perspectives.

Richardson and Wydell (2003) suggested that the numbers of students with dyslexia participating in UK higher education is disproportionate to the number in the general population and that there is an uneven representation across disciplines. Conversely, postgraduates with dyslexia could also be described as a small social subgroup who demonstrate both ‘giftedness’ and dyslexia (Ferri, Gregg, and Heggory 1997; Brody and Mills 1997; Fink, 1996). We argue here that they may be well placed in any attempt to challenge the literacy-based hegemony of the compulsory education sector and the apparently clear connections that are made between concepts of literacy and academic ability.

This study originated from our interest in the types of conditions and circumstances experienced by people with dyslexia who had graduated and continued to study at postgraduate level and our aim was to gain an understanding of why and how some could gain this degree of formal ‘academic success’ where others have seemingly ‘failed’ (although we recognise that these concepts of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ are not unproblematical). The focus of this study, therefore, was to talk to a number of individuals about their experiences of learning in order to consider attitudes and occurrences that had contributed to the ways in which they were engaging with or had engaged with postgraduate education. Although there is limited literature available on students with dyslexia who are postgraduates it seems reasonable to assume that the relatively small pool of undergraduate students with dyslexia is also representative of participation at the postgraduate level (Richardson and Wydell 2003; Madriaga 2007).

Our study aimed to explore stories of how formal and informal educational experiences had contributed to individuals’ apparent inclusion in post-compulsory learning, yet they revealed stories of early exclusion from learning as well as stories of resistance to being identified as one who is unable to learn effectively. We appreciate that experiences are shaped by complex factors and do not aim to simplify individual experience. We are conscious that some may level accusations of ‘unconventional sentimentality’ at the ideas explored in this paper (Becker 1964). Becker suggested:

The unconventional sentimentalist assumes and refuses to examine the assumption, that things are in fact ‘worse’ than they might be. He assumes to take a different example ‘that the underdog is always right and those in authority always wrong’. (p. 5)

We aim to problematise the learning stories that emerged from our interviews, acknowledging that other is no simple polarity of ‘authority’ (a teaching establishment) and ‘the underdog’ (subjectified learners). However, we would also suggest that the field of disability and dyslexia research has historically prioritised the ‘conventional
sentimentality’ that Becker suggested is less often attacked. We therefore admit that we may tend to lean towards the ‘unconventional sentimentality’ described by him as the ‘lesser of two evils’.

It is useful to acknowledge that dyslexia is a contested term and definitions are complex (see, for example, Mortimore and Crozier 2006). It is therefore important to outline the ethical and political reasons why we have embraced this term, rather than the generalised term of ‘specific learning difficulty’. Dyslexia, for the purposes of this paper, is understood to be a failure to meet the demands of particular social expectations of literacy. It is normally associated with significant poor short-term and/or working memory. Dyslexia has, on occasion, been defined as the failure to meet the social norm or expectation of literacy acquisition by a child of normal intelligence (see, for example, Waber 2001, 107), which is in itself deeply problematical. A social norm of literacy is a temporal, specific and constantly changing construct which fails to acknowledge the broader cultural context (ethnicity, gender and social class, for example). Amongst the adults with dyslexia in this study dyslexia primarily related to poor short-term/working memory, day-to-day organisation and persistent difficulties with spelling.

This paper explores the learner histories of six postgraduates, identified as Salim, Craig, Adrian, Jane, John and Mike, all assessed and identified as being dyslexic. The participants described themselves as dyslexic rather than allowing themselves to be categorised as having a ‘specific learning difficulty’ or a learning disorder. The study was heavily influenced by the personal experiences of Craig, who is both a researcher and participant in this project and whose own learner history is discussed as part of the paper. Riddick (1996) noted that children with dyslexia and their parents preferred the term ‘dyslexic’ to the official term ‘specific learning difficulties’ (SpLD) used by schools and educational psychologists. The introduction of the statutory ‘Disability equality duty’ (Disability Rights Commission 2005, 56–7), which stresses the inclusion of the disabled voice and choice of ‘label’, seems significant here. Cooper (2004), identifying himself as a researcher with dyslexia, suggested that many academics have attempted to impose ‘their’ terminology on people with dyslexia for decades and have failed. Cooper argued that the use of alternative terminology to dyslexia ‘has been resisted precisely because it is the term that most dyslexics feel comfortable with’ and suggested that ‘every group with a disability has the right to determine how it will be named’. For the purposes of this paper it would be both unethical and disempowering to use any other term and a number of the participants would have been unwilling to take part in this research if they had been described as having a SpLD.

In considering dyslexia we are aligning this discussion firmly within the social model of disability. As the focus in this paper is on the use of literacy as part of a dominant discourse, dyslexia as a specific impairment of literacy is the most logical and meaningful term to use. The participants in the study were disabled by the societal structures and conditions that prioritise specific aspects of literacy and define academic ability in relation to such definitions. We reject the medical model of disability that would define people with dyslexia as disabled as a result of a personal or individual deficit and argue that the experiences of those in the study have been shaped largely because of this concept of deficit. Their exclusion from formal education, we would argue, has been as a result of educational practices that have resulted in some students with dyslexia becoming defined as non-academic on the strength of their abilities to work within a cultural framework that prioritises literacy as a
dominant discourse that defines academic ability. The aspects of these stories of particular significance for this paper are the ways in which individuals have resisted such definitions and asserted their learner identity in the face of such cultural dominance. These learners’ experiences appear to indicate that they had achieved academically despite the challenges that they had faced during their early education within the compulsory education sector. The focus of this critical debate does, however, focus more on the dominance of text-based forms of learning and how particular learner identities are created within the compulsory education system.

It is also important at this point, however, to establish that we wish to avoid what Read (1970, 6) referred to as a ‘false authoritarian concept’. He suggested that: ‘talk of encouraging in one direction and repressing in another direction implies an exercise of power from a centre and that is precisely the false authoritarian concept I am anxious to avoid’. There is no identifiable centre and no ‘system’ against which these participants have had to ‘fight’. The construction of a dominant lexic discourse is embodied in the range of social and educational structures the participants have experienced and these structures and bodies are themselves subject to complexity. Professionals, parents and pupils work within these structures and are produced by and contribute to the production of such educational discourses.

**Literacy and academic ability**

In this paper we draw on the work of Foucault (1980, 171) by identifying specific definitions of literacy as a dominant discourse in defining intelligence and academic ability. Literacy (Foucault referred specifically to writing) can be defined as part of the ‘political and economic apparatus’ for transmitting knowledge and has been identified as a vital tool with which to monitor, educate and control. In recognising this dominant ‘lexic’ discourse the individual with dyslexia can be described as representative of ‘subjugated’ or marginal knowledge forms. The narratives in this research, reflecting personal and unofficial histories, are a central component of the ideas expressed here. Foucault’s discussion of official and unofficial forms of knowledge is significant in the light of the subsequent power dynamics that come into play in shaping educational experiences. Official forms of knowledge, such as forms of assessment, written reports, setting arrangements and educational psychologists’ reports, as well as the individual actions of the teacher and learner can act as instruments of normalisation. Individuals are measured against literate norms (via standardised compulsory testing for example) and deficits can therefore be identified, with individuals ‘treated’ in order to manage what is perceived to be a deficit. These deficits, identified as part of the individual, suggest a personal inability to learn in a specific way, rather than a potential difference in the ways that we might learn. It could be argued that this emphasis on specific and dominant modes of learning based on assumptions about the ways pupils learn can lead to some pupils being disadvantaged and potentially excluded (Woodrow 2007).

The identification of dyslexia within the clinical or medical discourse also acts to create the concept of ‘learner in need of medical intervention’, effectively pathologising their ability to learn (Ho 2004) and providing a framework for identification, monitoring and intervention. We would argue that this concept of a literate norm is, potentially, a false one, since the need to be ‘functionally literate’ is a fluid social construction based on the needs and demands of the economy as well as specific
cultural contexts (Ferdman 1990; Reid Lyon 2001). The creation of the individual with dyslexia as ‘abnormal’ can therefore be described as an ‘intellectual construct’ (Rice 2004) based on the false concept of the ‘lexic’ as a universally constant phenomenon.

**Methodology**

Participants were asked to talk about their experiences of learning and we asked them to think about their earliest learning experiences, through to the present. The stories that the participants constructed were based on their own interpretations and ideas of what constituted learning and incidents were interwoven with formal and informal episodes. Although learning experiences were the focus of the interviews, the narratives reflected the degree to which these experiences could not be isolated from life and can be described as socially situated (Plummer 1995).

A time line was used as a device or prompt for participants and although this suggested a linear approach to the recollection of key events participants could (and did) approach their recollections in a non-linear way. The time line was annotated with key learning events and episodes or critical moments were identified (Webster and Mertova 2007) and this was written into a narrative account which was then re-read and edited by participants, developing what Haggis (2004) referred to as ‘situated narratives about learning’. Notes made during the interview were constructed as extended narratives that were sent back to the participants who edited or amended them accordingly. A grounded approach to analysis (Charmaz 2005) based on these critical moments was used and they were analysed initially as positive and negative experiences, which provided a framework for a further analysis relating to concepts of inclusion and exclusion. A further theme of resistance emerged at a later stage.

With this narrative approach there was a will to provide an opportunity for individuals to talk about their own subjective experiences (Owens 2007) and to take an active part in the ways in which the subsequent narratives were constructed, but we are also aware of the difficulties with concepts of ‘giving voice’ to a particular group of individuals. All but one of the participants were members of an advocacy group, already identified as a very loose and informal network, who took this opportunity to use their voice to talk about their early learning experiences as well as the ways in which they were still negotiating their learning within systemic practices that do not always provide the richest of learning, living or working experiences for people with dyslexia. It is important to realise that the narratives do not reflect a linear progression to overcoming individual barriers to learning but that they suggest living and learning experiences that are dominated by the literacy tradition as remaining potentially problematical. Taking part in the research could therefore be described as part of this ongoing act of resistance via participation rather than the work of benevolent researchers.

It is also useful at this point to acknowledge that a focus on narrative affords a view of the individual and specific experience of individuals. Undoubtedly others could offer alternative narratives based on their experiences of literacy and learning and, indeed, make a different sense of these experiences using an alternative to the theoretical framework we have proposed. However, it is the inclusion of ‘subjugated’ voices (Foucault 1980, 81) that is significant for us here and the ways in which these individuals articulated their particular experiences that is significant.
Stories of inclusion/exclusion

A first stage analysis of the narratives reflected formal and informal learning experiences and these included both positive and negative experiences for individuals. However, initial experiences of formal education were largely described as negative experiences that related to specific descriptions of literacy-based learning. Craig described being unable to remember and recite the alphabet and John spoke of being unable to differentiate between the use of ‘their’ and ‘there’ and being asked to stand up in a class and account for this. Individuals described their first immediate memories as negative or unpleasant, referring to individual teachers or tutors as in some way hostile or at least as lacking in empathy. Craig commented ‘I felt crap at everything, I was made to feel crap at everything’ and Mike identified with being out of place by referring to a specific incident in a lesson where his written work had failed to match the expectation created by his verbal and practical participation in the lesson:

I was the class fool I didn’t want to be there. In chemistry when we were writing reports other people would write 3 pages but I – there was mine – the teacher held mine up, I think he thought ‘he knows it but he can’t be bothered’. (Mike)

Again, it is useful to draw on Becker’s definitions of ‘unconventional sentimental-ity’ by offering these examples of negative and positive experiences, yet it is significant that the first learning experiences recollected were associated with literacy and were recalled as negative or humiliating. It is difficult now to ascertain whether this reflected the ‘reality’ of the experience for all participants, but it is significant that all referred to a literacy-based experience as a first recollection of learning and that this was negative.

Participants, although recollecting these memories of learning, did not talk about what had been ‘formally’ learned but the degree of humiliation or the sense of low expectation that the memory had for them. These ‘first stories’ were shaped as narratives providing a critical moment or key turning point which made direct negative associations between literacy and learning. Bruner (1990) discussed the role that narrative can play for us in making sense of events by explaining a breach or exception and these ‘first stories’ for participants appeared to act as example events that were used to exemplify a type of breach in terms of an individuals recognition that there was some element of departure based on a concept of expectation in relation to a literate norm.

Jane’s first story is interesting in this respect as she identified being a relatively confident learner until she had a particularly bad experience in her primary school. She identified one specific incident:

I think there was a bit of a personality clash, there was a new teacher when I was eight or nine and I came out thinking I was stupid – I remember really enjoying writing pages of a story and the teacher shouted – there were big circles around spellings and a spelling mistake in every sentence – I was scared to go to school. For two years I’d done OK but I came out then thinking I was stupid ….

Jane went on to describe a change of teacher (‘he was fantastic – gave you confidence – he didn’t shout at you in front of the class’) and her school experiences appeared to have shifted between positive and negative experiences, yet this offers a useful
example of a first story as a critical moment that is based quite specifically around literacy expectations and concepts of ability.

Salim’s first story is markedly different, since his early childhood was spent in East Pakistan and his earliest learning memory was based on his experiences of a Christian missionary school:

There was a picture of fruit – A is for apple – it was a beautiful drawing in pencil crayon – I’d never had an apple before – we had the messy mango but this was a very nice shiny English apple.

Salim’s narrative emphasises a colonial presence, yet even this strong sense of cultural jarring is expressed via his experience of literacy-based learning in the ways in which he was introduced to the English alphabet. Salim’s selection of this early narrative directly and explicitly linked learning with a concept of literacy.

The narratives are also discussed here as stories of inclusion and exclusion from learning, where individuals had a sense of being physically or emotionally excluded from the centre of learning as a result of their engagement with literacy-based learning. Although individuals were all ‘included’ in mainstream education, the degrees to which they could be described as actively participating in ‘legitimate’ and ‘authorised’ learning can be questioned and it is possible to read their narratives as stories of exclusion. In some cases this related to physical removal to a remedial unit or separate area within the same classroom. Foucault (1991) described individuals being assigned to ‘the bench of the ignorant’ and these narratives suggest that when measured and found wanting (in terms of literacy ability) learners were removed to a different physical space, not identified with learning but rather an inability to learn effectively. Adrian interpreted this as being told to ‘sit in the corner and don’t eat the crayons’. Craig was sent to work in ‘Hut 5’, a place for him clearly associated with remedial learning, since many of his peers referred to him as a ‘Hut 5 job’. The intention may have been to create a separate space for individual or group work, yet both stories describe the physical removal from those ‘legitimate’ learning spaces associated with examination success and higher teacher expectation to different spaces not associated with this type of academic ‘success’.

Although individual and small group learning may be effective, the legitimacy of particular spaces is significant. Armstrong (2003) discussed the social and cultural significance of specific learning spaces and the implications for those who are removed to learn in spaces that are symbolically and culturally associated with ‘others’ who are less academically capable. She described these ‘spatial markers’ as physical locations where individuals become recognised as ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’. These stories of removal to alternative learning spaces, even within the traditional classroom, appears to have contributed to the ways in which particular learner identities were formed, since the symbolic significance of these environments were related directly to learning difficulty and low levels of academic achievement. In these contexts participants could be described as being created as ‘other’ on the basis of their level of ability in relation to literacy.

In some cases the learners excluded themselves, often in response to having been removed from a ‘legitimate’ learning space to one that identified the learning taking place as ‘special’ or ‘remedial’. This removal from the legitimate learning space was in response to perceived difficulties with literacy in respect of reading and writing which appeared to be incongruent with the learners’ level of verbal/oral ability. Adrian’s narrative described long term truancy as a response:
I could talk a good subject but didn’t write and started off in higher sets in secondary [school]. I got put in a remedial class but I thought ‘I’m not one of them’... I was clever enough to get my mark and then truant but I was always back in time for the school bus so it was a long time before my mum found out.

Jane described a regular retreat to the art department, which became a kind of sanctuary associated with alternative types of study and different modes of learning that did not make the same types of literacy demands.

Non-formal learning, indicated by parental support, informal and non-directed reading for pleasure and some strong connections with a peer group, appears to suggest the creation of spaces where learning could take place apart from the formal structures that appeared to deny participation in legitimised learning. However, these types of activity (Craig described learning the 24 hour clock and learning to write neatly with his mum at home or reading a large number of Ladybird history books and talking through ideas about books and fantasy games with friends) sit outside the official systems of recognition. Although providing a significant contribution to personal concepts of learning, these stories reflect unauthorised learning, potentially lacking in the credibility required to provide official recognition that learning was taking place very effectively and with some degree of success. The spatial marker of ‘home learning’ is removed from the legitimate learning of the formal school setting.

Further to this was a sense of non-physical exclusion, defined by the learner’s concept of the teacher’s attitude related to low expectations of the learner. Again, these narratives can be described as identifying a breach, with learners study at post-graduate level offset against earlier experiences of low expectation. In Craig’s story there was a recollection of a teacher. He recalled: ‘she seemed to be treating me differently and I was made to feel stupid. She was the one who told my mother that she shouldn’t expect too much of me’. Craig was later able to gain a first class honours degree after re-entering post-compulsory education and to some extent this story has acted as a catalyst for his resistance and determination. The message within these learner histories appears to have been that early experiences of formal learning are related directly to the acknowledgement and development of literacy ability and, therefore, ‘learning is not for you’. Initial perceptions of difficulty with literacy were translated early in the learner’s school career into low expectation and any potential in terms of an ‘elite’ learner identity as a postgraduate student was far removed from these early experiences.

Stories of resistance

Rather than considering these learners as passive bodies to be excluded or included in learning processes, it is also possible to consider aspects of their narratives as stories of resistance. Although potentially excluded from learning, there was a degree of resistance and perseverance resulting in shifts from exclusion to inclusion in formal learning in later life. Rather than being described as stories of triumph over adversity, however, the need for an ongoing engagement in forms of resistance appears to be a necessary form of action. As younger learners the stories reflected early academic ‘failure’, yet individuals re-entered education as mature learners, resisting their former exclusion and gaining tertiary qualifications which might result in them being considered academically successful.
A recurrent narrative was one of ‘resistance through persistence’, which to some degree could define all six participants, since it appears that their persistence, tenacity and resilience appear to have been defining factors in enabling them to continue with formal education. John’s story is particularly significant in this respect, in the way in which efforts to gain formal qualifications and examinations were revisited repeatedly, as he continually looked for a way to re-engage after apparent failure. His narrative is spattered with references to grades as a formal recognition of his lack of ability and his first recollection ‘I’ve still got some reports and I averaged grades of D and E’ hinges on this discussion of a formal assessment of his learning from early primary experience through to his experiences of postgraduate study. It could be argued that this suggests a degree of compliance rather than resistance. John’s narrative of ‘resistance through persistence’ appears to reflect an acceptance of ‘the rules of the game’ by seeking to gain affirmation of academic ability via formal recognition of learning. However, there was a refusal to accept the identity of one who could not and would not learn effectively and the recognition of formal qualifications featured significantly within this.

A further aspect of this resistance narrative, ‘resistance through immersion in knowledge’, enabled individuals to develop a degree of academic assertiveness, resisting the medical model of being learning disabled. The initial rejection by some who suggested that individuals would not succeed academically because of a personal and medically defined deficiency appeared to have fuelled a keen and genuine interest in their subject, resulting in a desire to use subject knowledge to illustrate their ability to function well academically. One moment of resistance, as an example, was when Craig revelled in his subject knowledge explaining the origins and symbolism of the image on a 50p coin to a group at school. The story of this explanation to a class of his peers appeared to act as a narrative of transformation, where the participant described shifting from his position of being perceived as a ‘Hut 5’ job to gaining a round of applause from his class for being able to articulate his subject knowledge so well. Other stories centred on describing recognition for academic achievement at the point of graduation as evidence or proof that they were ‘not stupid after all’. This focus on formal qualifications and the ability to perform well academically as graduate and postgraduate students was offered as a way of laying claim to an elite learner identity that others had suggested would remain inaccessible. This is perhaps the most significant form of resistance, since it involved making a challenge from ‘within’, using academic performance as a means of resisting identities formed in early education that aligned them with an inability to perform well academically.

Although spatial demarcations were explored earlier within the context of exclusionary practices, the narratives also suggest a range of ways in which individuals removed themselves, relocating to preferred ‘unofficial’ learning spaces. Some stories related to taking some control over physical location. Craig described removing himself and sitting under the table in order to engage in reading whilst a disruptive pupil threw chairs around during a teachers absence. He had become so absorbed in his reading that he was unaware that the disruption had finished and the teacher had returned and he continued with his own reading unaware. Adrian described playing truant for a sustained period of time because he was ‘clever enough to get away with it’, taking some control over his own physical presence. Leaving school at the earliest opportunity to find employment is a further example of the way in which Jane, Mike and Adrian described relocating themselves, although initial experiences of paid work were not without difficulty for those unable to avoid literacy demands.
Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) described self-elimination from formal educational processes whereby individuals removed themselves rather than waiting for rejection. The education system, identified as ‘an agency of continuous selection’ (p. 154), eliminated some learners even before they began and although the arguments here are based on class distinctions and socio-economic factors, the discussion of social definitions of knowledge promoted by examination systems is relevant. Mike described his own disruptive behaviour and his ultimate exclusion from school for blowing up part of a classroom. This is perhaps one of the more sensational descriptions of this will to self-eliminate and could also be described as a more dramatic act of resistance:

I got thrown out of school at 15 for setting off an explosion in the sewing room. I was sent to work in there when I did badly in my biology mock and I hadn’t been entered for the exam. I rigged up a device and set it off – the teacher was in shock – I’d been suspended before so now I was excluded from school. I was in a form with all the ‘naughty boys’ in school – most of them have ended up in prison ….

Non-formal education and parental intervention for some offered the potential to challenge the dominant view of a learner who would never achieve much in formal academic terms. John’s narrative described the parental support received throughout when pursuing a graduate profession, referring to his father’s difficult education and employment history and subsequent success. Craig and Jane also described a similar parental long-term commitment to improving their literacy and the provision of the emotional support needed to survive in a hostile school environment.

Additional tuition, after school or at weekends, although potentially exclusive in creating additional demands on individuals by lessening social or ‘play’ time, can also be viewed as a way to oppose the apparent lack of opportunity in school. As well as offering a story of resistance on the part of the learner, parental roles assume some significance here, with parents acting on behalf of their child in order to support their own unofficial view that their child might have a greater potential academically than formal systems such as examinations might recognise. Salim frequently referred to his father’s high academic expectations, which created tensions for him as a learner as well as a will to succeed, and John’s parents were willing (and able) to make a significant financial contribution to supporting his move to a private school where they felt he would be more likely to succeed.

The parents too appear to have carried out acts of resistance by ignoring professional ‘expert’ advice and persisting with their child. The role of some teachers is also significant here in the ways in which individuals advised or encouraged parents to seek additional support for their child outside school structures. Parent-focused narratives appeared to emphasise a departure from the singular pursuit of literacy skills as a defining element in academic ability and a recognition of potential that appeared lacking in the experience of formal education.

Discussion
To consider academic achievement as a main definition of ‘success’ is not unproblematical and there are some who might reject reaching postgraduate study as a definition of academic ability. However, this study sought to develop an understanding of how some individuals with dyslexia could re-enter formal education settings and complete their studies where so many others could not or did not choose to do so. All withdrew
from formal education at the earliest opportunity to re-enter later via non-traditional routes, bridging or access courses, which appear to have been well suited to their development as learners. The ‘narratives of academic success’ were rooted clearly within the experiences of access courses and the undergraduate experience which appeared to offer opportunities to achieve academically. Although these undergraduate experiences created some significant demands, they revealed a real sense of excitement, optimism and achievement, with the low expectations in compulsory education often acting as an incentive to succeed. A clear difference in these narratives relates to the positioning of literacy, since it appears to have shifted from a position of central concern and deficit in compulsory education-based narratives to being of seemingly marginal importance for these learners as undergraduates, although specific programmes studied were largely assessed via written assignment.

We are not implying here that these learners’ experiences of higher education were entirely positive and there is literature which suggests that students with dyslexia might find study at the higher education level challenging (Ryan 2007; Bolt 2004; Doering 2003), but there is a distinct change in the focus of these learner narratives at this point of returning to learn. Craig, for example, recounted a story of having his work read out to his tutorial group where the tutor commented on the quality of the work rather than on the quality of the spelling. Jane also described gaining her first degree as her most positive and confident moment. These undergraduate stories are also largely defined by the individual work that was done with tutors and other staff, with relationships built on a concept of the potential for academic achievement rather than individual deficit and learning difficulty.

In discussing potential barriers to participation in higher education Gorard et al. (2006) referred to the impact that previous poor experiences of education could have on the ability of some to have the resilience to continue with their education. It is possible that these narratives might have reflected a break in what was described as ‘the reproductive nature of education’, where those who are best equipped and able to participate do so while others are excluded. The narratives reflect particular experiences of the ways in which individual relationships and experiences and formal and informal learning situations were able to contribute to the learning experience. In considering the narratives of postgraduate students it is evident that their stories did not reflect a clear, linear progression and there were significant demands that emerged from descriptions of work life and their further studies. Adrian, for example, having gained a 2:1 degree, was finding the opportunity for postgraduate teacher training difficult to access, largely as a result of specific expectations in terms of literacy requirements, ‘self-eliminating’ once more when asked to provide evidence that he could meet specific literacy requirements.

What was evident from the narratives was the clear and dominant role that specific attitudes and concepts related to literacy and academic ability had had for these individuals. There were discrepancies between the expectations for these learners early in their academic careers, and these seemed defined largely on the basis of connections made between their perceived academic capabilities and the role that literacy has, as a dominant discourse, in defining concepts of academic ability.

References


