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Title: Experiencing Dyslexia Through the Prism of Difference

Purpose: Within the body of research conducted in HE, few have focused on the overall experiences of students with dyslexia studying in HE. My study addresses this gap in knowledge as it provides an insight into how students with dyslexia navigate, HE. Contemporary discourse and literature surrounding dyslexia is often dominated by notions of disability, deficit, lack, vulnerability, and social expectancies around achievement in education. Accepting dyslexia as an integral part of the self and viewing it through a prism of difference as opposed to a deficit, were emerging themes in this study, as motivators to success. Institutional and attitudinal barriers also emerged as common themes in this study as did the impacts on academic self-worth, self-esteem, and self-confidence as a result of studying in third level education with dyslexia.

Method:

Ethnography was used as the principle method of research in this project. The participants varied in age range and identified as different genders. The range of programmes studied by the participants were at undergraduate and postgraduate level and my research participants were attending four different HE institutions. The methodological tool I employed mainly was participant observation, which is the distinguishing feature of ethnographic research. Ethnographic research is well-suited as the basis of an analysis of dyslexia as a lived reality in the everyday practices and experiences of those living with the hidden disability.

Results: My research found that when students identify dyslexia as a limitation, it becomes a barrier to successful learning and has a negative effect on their identity, which impacts them socially and academically. However, an easier pathway to success is achieved when viewing dyslexia as a difference and this approach enabled my participants to achieve academic success, not despite their dyslexia but in partnership with it. This research and its findings are therefore relevant to several stakeholders such as policy makers, third level education institutions, disability support staff and teaching staff.