This is a repository copy of *'Just deal with it': neoliberalism in dyslexic students' talk about dyslexia and learning at university*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/96224/

Version: Accepted Version

# 'Just deal with it': neoliberalism in dyslexic students' talk about dyslexia and learning at university

Harriet Camerona & Tom Billingtonb

aStudent Skills and Development Centre, The University of Sheffield, 301 Glossop Road, Sheffield S10 2HL, UK;

bThe School of Education, The University of Sheffield, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2JA, UK

There are different ways of theorising dyslexia and different ways of constructing meanings around dyslexia in different learning contexts. This paper considers the role of neoliberalist ideology in shaping conversations about dyslexia and 'fairness' during two focus group conversations analysed as part of a study into the discursive construction of dyslexia in higher education. Ideological analysis was undertaken with reference to Gee's discourse analysis and Willig's concept of the use of discursive resources in interaction. Investigation identified neoliberalist ideology as a powerful voice within the analysed texts, and as directive for identity and action. This paper argues that recognition of the ways in which neoliberalist ideology shapes everyday conversation about learning and learning differences is vital in the construction and maintenance of fairer higher education in the UK.

Introduction

Dyslexia is recognised in the UK to be a specific learning difficulty characterised by what are often termed as cognitive or neurological deficits which impact upon reading ability (Nicolson and Fawcett 2008). However, there is much argument about how dyslexia is defined, where it comes from, and how it is identified (Ho 2004; Stanovich 2005; Elliott and Grigorenko 2014). Cognitive psychology dominates in the field of dyslexia, and it is experts from this field who thus help to shape the practice of dyslexia assessment and support within the British education system. Powerful organisations (such as Dyslexia Action) and lobby groups (such as those affiliated to the British Dyslexia Association [BDA]) also influence the direction of practice (see e.g.

the 'BDA Quality Mark' conferred by the BDA to organisations which meet its standards for specialist provision: BDA 2015). Varying media representations of dyslexia also contribute to the controversy surrounding the label (see e.g. Hitchens 2014). One result of the many popular competing conceptions of dyslexia, the multiple interest groups, and the shifting diagnostic goalposts is that the term 'dyslexia' has become connotatively loaded and confusing.

Elliott and Grigorenko (2014) make a strong case for a move away from the use of the term dyslexia as a scientific and educational category, especially in higher education, and they suggest that provision of specialist support solely for the sub-group of poor-readers labelled dyslexic is unjustified. However, this paper argues that, while they contribute greatly to the conversation, cognitive psychologists such as Elliott and Grigorenko have insufficiently attended to the experiences of dyslexic people and the ways in which different learning contexts and discourses shape the ways dyslexia is understood and managed (Riddick 2010; see Pollak 2005 for a detailed exploration of the different identities dyslexic students can take on). There is also, arguably, a tendency for psychological science to forget that its measurements and conclusions are the product of social processes and are therefore not a neutral route to the discovery of 'facts' (Latour 1987). This is not a criticism: it is a reminder. It is argued here that such scientific study should be considered alongside attention to the socially situated aspects of learning and learning difficulty, to the discursive construction of learning differences and disabilities in context, and to the people whom have been labelled in whatever domain as outside a norm.

There is a conception among some parents, educators, dyslexic people and other members of the public that dyslexia is a myth and that the specific literacy difficulties associated with dyslexia are instead a result of laziness or stupidity (Riddick 1995; McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne 2006). This is arguably a misconstrual of scientific research which questions the existence of dyslexia as a specific sub-group rather than questioning the existence of people who struggle in specific cognitive or behavioural domains. Alongside the perception that dyslexia is a myth is the feeling that a dyslexic student is somehow cheating by getting extra help that other students do not get. If the student feels that she or he may be cheating in the name of a mythical condition, there is some evidence that this student will be less likely to make use of accommodations offered in an educational institution (Marshall 2001; May 2001; Ferri et al. 2005; Denhart 2008). Whether or not the provision of accommodations is fair or not is not the subject of this paper; rather, the point being made here is that such perceptions and behaviours are in part driven by discourses which draw heavily upon neoliberalist ideology (see below).

Neoliberalism, education and dyslexia

Neoliberalist ideology is understood here as a web of discursive and material practices which upholds the idea of the market and the individual as the ideal starting point for shaping the social and institutional worlds in which we live, and which presents competition and deregulation as necessities for freedom and progress. But beyond this, its twin ideals of 'privatisation and personal responsibility' (Duggan 2003, 12) are defined in such a way as to give the outward impression of cultural neutrality, 'a way of being reasonable' (Duggan 2003, 10) that manages to shift concerns about inequality into the 'private' domain (Duggan 2003, 14). In other words, one's difficulties and personal challenges become one's own business, and one should not make a fuss about them in order to be given (according to neoliberalism) an unfair advantage. Dyslexia, under such a discursive regime, becomes the individual's problem, not the problem of the state (or the educational institution). Furthermore, efforts to address the disadvantaging of groups of people with learning differences by promoting respect for neurodiversity are diminished by the neoliberalism which works to both 'subordinate and commodify difference' (Runswick-Cole 2014, 1118).

Universities are increasingly becoming a force for individualism (Williams 2014). The discourse has shifted from a recognition of universities as beneficial to all in society, to an emphasis upon individual gain by those who attend, and individual responsibility for success. Moreover, universities are increasingly under pressure place economic growth and employability as central concerns and to shrink the attention they give to any practices which are not market driven (Johnson 2008). The traditional (and non-market driven) role of the university as a critical voice of government and society is then diminished (Williams 2014). There has also been a subsequent shift in perceptions in what is valuable in a student's university education from knowledge and learning in and of itself, to those aspects of what students appear to be doing which increases marketability (Ainley and Weyers 2008).

One of the outcomes of talking about learning, disability and education without recognising or challenging neoliberalist discourse is that getting on alone in any walk of life is usually presented as a good and admirable achievement. In other words, neoliberalist discourse promotes the American ideal of the individual who succeeds with sheer effort and determination and does not ask for help (Dudley-Marling 2004, 483). Promotion of this idea to those in education may mean that a student will not ask for help, for fear this will be perceived as weakness (Dudley-Marling 2004). This survivor rhetoric can also lead to oversimplification and imbalance, by only promoting those stories where people have overcome a particular set of odds (Ferri et al. 2005). For those who are unable to overcome such odds there is the likelihood of self-blame.

The dyslexia label

The labelling of educational difference is fraught with difficulties, and this is no less the case for dyslexia (Ho 2004). Elliot and Grigorenko (2014) argue that disagreements about where the cut-off point should be in identifying dyslexia reflect their understanding that there is no distinct group to whom the label should be applied. However, that decisions about cut-off points can be problematic does not mean the label is without value. It is likewise not the categorisation itself which is to blame for unequal provision of resources: this is instead an allocation problem (Riddick 2010). Dyslexia is not, and cannot be, a socially neutral label; its meaning is bound to political, educational, and social contexts, and to individual experiences. From this perspective, a neat, static definition of dyslexia would not be the ultimate goal; the emphasis would instead be placed on understanding the role of context and history in helping to create the shifting construct of dyslexia (Danermark 2002).

The category 'dyslexia' may be seen in part as a product of capitalism, 'concerned with distilling worth from bodies previously understood to be worthless' (Campbell 2013, 213). The 'worth' of people in formal education is arguably closely tied to their performance of particular literacy practices. It is not the cognitive difference which produces the disability, therefore, but the centrality of high literacy to conceptions of individual worth: 'we should not let "dyslexia" disguise or cloak Lexism, which is the real issue' (Collinson 2012, 69). Being proficient at reading and writing is of such cultural value that it is hard to 'make positive sense' of difficulties in these domains (Gwernen-Jones 2012, 16). Moreover, we should not underestimate the discursive connections between literacy practices and conceptions of academic ability, which make it difficult for individual learners to resist 'the rules of the game' (Collinson and Penketh 2009, 15; see Macdonald 2009 for a similar perspective). Attention to experiences of dyslexia is also one way of engaging with the anti-labelling movement present in some of the literature in the field (Macdonald 2010). It is by listening to people's experiences we might better understand the uses of the label in everyday contexts. It is also important to recognise that the genuine attempts by cognitive scientists such as Elliott and Grigorenko to reveal the contradictions and potential misuses of 'dyslexia' as a diagnostic category are potentially being hijacked in the neoliberalist cause, consciously or unwittingly. Much of the power of neoliberalism here lies in its appearance as common sense, and in the familiarity of its language: 'neoliberalism gets into our minds and our souls, into the ways in which we think about what we do, and into our social relations with others … ' (Ball 2012, 18). The aim in this paper is to offer some insight into the ways in which talk about and around dyslexia, by dyslexic students, is moulded through ideological push and pull: with particular attention to the work of neoliberalist discourse.

Methodology

In concurrence with Billig (2001) the aim in this research 'is to see how the themes of ideology are instantiated in ordinary talk, and how speakers are part of, and are continuing, the ideological history of the discourse themes they are using' (218). The current research uses a relatively loose understanding of ideology as belief systems (after Van Dijk 2006) expressed through discourses; or, after Giroux (1997), as a 'weight' in discourses that may not be immediately obvious. Ideology can also shape sets of beliefs or values which are eventually understood as common sense, and, write Carr and Hartnett, 'what is distinctive about common sense is that it is an inherited way of thinking … inevitably impregnated with the myths, superstitions and prejudices of the past' (1996, 3). By the time the ideas have become 'common sense' their ideological nature is obscured. This need not mean the common sense view is 'wrong' or negative, but that it no longer has questions asked of it; it is this understanding of ideological common sense that is used in the current paper.

The researcher organised two focus group conversations, one with six participants and one with seven participants, which were audio recorded and transcribed. The participants were all dyslexic students studying at a single higher education institution. The focus group conversations were stimulated through use of broad and open questions around the topic of dyslexia and study at university. The researcher allowed the conversation to develop in a participant-led direction after these open questions had been asked, though new topics were introduced once a particular discussion appeared to have come to a natural end. The transcripts were analysed using the guidance of Gee (2005, 2009) and Willig (2008) to identify (from an interpretivist perspective) the ways in which the participants made use of ideologically laden discourse in their constructions of dyslexia. The feelings and perspectives shared by participants were considered to be a partial product of the particular conversational context, and fundamentally tied to the language used; certain perspectives and feelings may have been difficult to construct because of the particular social peculiarities of conversing with others (including myself as a researcher) in the given environment. As such, it was understood that some perspectives and experiences may have been avoided. This approach is in keeping with a critical realist perspective (after Bhaskar 1998). As such, it is considered that feelings and emotions are primarily socially and discursively produced, yet are not separable from the humans who experience them; or, as Harré puts it, an emotion is an 'interplay between social conventions, moral judgements and bodily reactions' (1991, 143). Emotions may be understood as 'quasi objects' (after Latour 1991); 'much more social, much more fabricated, much more collective than the "hard" parts of nature' (55). Recognising feelings or emotions as 'collective activity' (Billig 2001, 213) arguably makes it easier to identify the ways in which some feelings or emotions can be 'put to work' for political ends (Williams 2001, 11) and can strengthen dominant ideologies.

The analytical approach considered narratives, social context and linguistics as important analytical aspects (after Gee 2005; Willig 2008). It also considered that institutions and other aspects of social life have a material existence as well as a discursive one. This is again in keeping with critical realism in the recognition that sociological study is concerned with a different ontological level of reality from biological study and requires a different methodological approach (Danermark 2002). This does not mean that the biological and psychological are not important elements in the experience of dyslexia, but that these are not the most useful starting points for the present investigation. It does mean that the social model of disability may not alone be sufficient as a philosophical basis for understanding disability; recognition of the material and of individual experiences is also essential (Riddick 2001; Gwernen-Jones 2012). Gee's (2005) approach to discourse analysis takes a balanced look at socio-historical factors, personal narrative, social languages, linguistics and local contexts. Gee recognises that people have differentiated access to different kinds of language in different contexts, and therefore, different possible ways of being in those contexts. Willig advises the analyst to 'locate the various constructions of the object within wider discourses' (2008, 115); she asks for attention to significant words or phrases that seem to be relevant, or seem to indicate a wider discourse. Willig leaves it open as to how a wider discourse should be recognised.

This work is concerned with examination of meaning in context, rather than analysis of linguistic form and function from a more abstract perspective (Gee 2009). The current analysis drew upon Gee's approach to critical discourse analysis in an exploration of intertextuality and ideology in the focus group texts, but only to the degree that it corresponded to the given research questions. Linguistic elements are combined with a broader thematic analysis which relies more heavily on social contexts.

Undertaking such an analysis involved several stages: after gaining familiarity with the audio recordings, the transcripts were read and reread. Notes were made in the margins of the transcripts to identify points of interest and record initial thoughts. Each line of the texts was numbered. Time was taken to work gradually through the texts with attention to the ways in which language was used to construct meaning around dyslexia. Attention was given to the evolving narratives, to linguistic structure, and to the (interpreted) localised meaning of words and phrases. Careful notes were written in the margins. When this process was completed, the transcripts and notes were reread and the researcher reflected upon the links and contradictions between the different discourses. During this stage of analysis, several key themes were named. It is recognised that these themes were a product of the researcher's interpretation of the text, and other analyses may have led to a different set of themes.

Ethics

This research was granted full ethical approval by a higher education institution in the North of England.

Findings and discussion

It is argued in this discussion that neoliberalist ideology is prevalent in the focus group discussions and that this ideology produces particular ways-of-being dyslexic in higher education. The discussion is arranged according to three key themes: grades, effort and merit; self-blame and self-help; and equality versus fairness. The first of these thematic sections includes extracts in which participants construct the existence of direct and unproblematic relationships between hard work, merit and success within the education system. Within this initial discussion attention is given to ideas of effort and success which are central to the construction of the 'rugged individual' in the American Dream (Rand 1957/1992; Greene 2008). The second thematic section questions the ways in which the participants and the researcher located educational success and failure within the individual, and drew upon common sense understandings to isolate individuals from their social contexts. Adoption of this group of ideologies via meritocratic and individualist discourse had profound implications for identity construction in the given context, but also pointed towards particular behaviours and self-concepts which probably persisted beyond the focus group conversations. The final themed section considers how the rhetoric of neoliberalism selectively draws upon democratic ideology, and discusses the ways in which the participants were situated precariously between such contradictory 'ideals' when they talked about dyslexia.

Key to transcription:
[ ] – square brackets indicate overlapping speech
, - comma indicates brief pause
. – full stop indicates downward intonation and longer pause

Effort and merit

Below are two extracts, both dialogues between the researcher (H) and S. Both extracts arguably powerfully uphold the notion of the struggling, and succeeding individual.
Extract from focus group one: S and H

S: It was something I always felt, well, just deal with it. I mean I suppose it has influenced me in that when I come to do work I sort of apply masses amounts of time,
and I'll read twice as, I'll read five times as much as anyone else does and do ten times as much research.
H: mmm. mmm.
S: erm, so that might be overcompensating a bit in and that's sort of my general mentality anyway?

S is talking about how he experienced being dyslexic at school. He said elsewhere in the conversation that school teachers did not really take much notice of his dyslexia – and here S tells us how much effort he put into his work, and how he coped by himself. The line ' … I always felt, well, just deal with it' gives the impression of an internal voice, an inner 'S' who counselled the 'outer' S on how to be. S is then emphatic about the amount of effort he puts into his work as a way of dealing with the challenges of dyslexia. The (likely) over-exaggeration in 'I'll read twice as, I'll read five times as much … do ten times as much … ' is put to the task of positive identity construction. The use of 'I'll' here is used to indicate a tendency or habit, something that is common-place for him. His construction of himself here fits well with the idea of the 'rugged individual' (Greene 2008), a 'moral' individual, and someone who compares favourably to 'anyone else' in terms of effort put in. This hard-work ethic is part of his 'general mentality': a construction of an internal character trait which may be interpreted as admirable. In this sense, S presents himself, intentionally or not, as the ideal worker, productive and uncomplaining. His specific statement of how much additional work he undertakes compared to others might be seen as an attempt to maintain his position as morally worthy in a landscape which condemns those who fall behind to 'continuously teeter on the brink of moral regulation' (Ball 2012, 20). It also presents his own success as separate from the community he is working within; others appear only present to help identify where in the competitive hierarchy he sits. This hard-working, uncomplaining, getting-on-with-it self, the ideal self of neoliberalism, is also one who cannot both ask for help and maintain his favourable identity if he remains within this ideological landscape. S repeatedly presents himself as a survivor who does not need any hand-outs.

In the extract below, the researcher begins by asking the group how they feel about being 'disabled' according to British law.


Extract from focus group one: H and S


H: … In in the law, dyslexia is a disability, so erm, according to them you are all disabled. I just wondered if you feel like you're disabled or, or not. Or, if not, what does it, what does it actually mean?
S: personally, no, but I've just always had to deal with it. It's like having having a bad ham string, you've still got to run a race, [run] the race, regardlessly of
H:                                                                        [mm]
S: how badly he's injured. Erm, but I can totally imagine that other people may feel disabled.


The way S responds to the question is interesting because he uses the metaphor of the runner with a 'bad ham string' to support the argument that he is not disabled. This is surprising, in some ways, because one might expect the runner with a damaged ham string (in this analogy) to be an excellent example of a person who exactly is disabled,

particularly in the context of a race. Arguably, this oddness or mismatch between the metaphor and the position it is being used to support is a reflection of the power of the individualising, survivalist ideology to overwhelm socially familiar constructions of (physical) disability. If S constructs himself as the injured runner, battling on through the 'race' to educational accomplishment, he appears to be assuming the race is compulsory, and the only honourable way to proceed is without acknowledging his weakness, and without asking for any consideration of the unequal level at which he is participating. He finishes 'I can totally imagine other people may feel disabled.' In one stroke he elevates himself above the 'others' who are not as tough or resilient as him, or those who need to rely upon a 'disability' label. He constructs disability as a mere feeling and as something one can therefore decide to overcome with enough strength of character, and, crucially, he entrenches himself in this conversational turn so firmly within this particular ideological position that it takes a good number of conversational turns for him to credibly position himself in any other way. From this position it is arguably impossible for S to say that accepting help is an honourable or socially admirable thing to do: making use of 'reasonable adjustments' is likewise incommensurate with the self as survivor. His ideological position also impacts upon the positions other participants can easily take up in subsequent turns because to say they needed help would be to construct themselves as morally inferior under this discursive regime (Dudley-Marling 2004). This is an example of how assuming a particular ideological stance can have hidden consequences – in this case, arguably, aninvisible self-discipline which places all eyes upon on the individual and absolves society of any responsibility. This perspective echoes the conclusions in the literature which suggest dyslexic students tend to take responsibility for their own difficulties, and put in additional effort in order to comply and 'succeed' (e.g. Riccick 2001; Gwernen-Jones 2012).

Self-blame and self-help

S is by no means the only participant who draws upon discourses loyal to individualising and meritocratic ideologies: this ideological backdrop was almost always there in the participants' constructions of themselves, each other, and education. S's identity as the struggling, uncomplaining survivor was mirrored again and again by others in each of the focus groups. For example, D said (focus group one [FG1]) that in the real world 'my feeling is that you just need to compensate by being good at something else', and later, D again, the reality is you just have to work harder, like, cos people can help you, give you Dictaphones and stuff, give you all the help in the world, but in the end you've just got to sit down and work. And here is R later in FG1: 'I don't see it as a disability at all. I just see it as something that I need to know about, to compensate for … so it's more for my understanding than for anyone else's understanding'; and J, focus group two (FG2): 'you just live with it, you compensate, you just kind of find little ways around doing things'. In these lines there appears to be a kind of echo in the phrasing used: 'you just have to', 'you just need to', 'you've just got to', 'you just live with it' in which the 'just' gives the

impression that the action is simple and obvious and should be done without complaint, and the 'you' generalises the obligation to everyone who faces a similar challenge. The generalised advice via 'you' is often paired up with a personalised edge to the speaker's perspective through, for example, 'my feeling is', 'for my understanding', 'personally', 'I just see it as'. The emphasis upon their opinions allows them to escape potential accusation of judging others for weakness, yet the use of generalising 'you' arguably implies that the speakers were constructing broader condemnation of those who 'just' could not deal with it. All of the participants are succeeding academically according to conventional understandings of academic achievement simply because they are students at an elite university; they are running S's race despite their damaged hamstrings and can see the finish line – but there are people behind them, and people who have dropped out of the race who, from a neoliberalist perspective, are not deserving of sympathy; they did not strive hard enough. '[T]hose who are strong in the face of adversity and who work hard will succeed' says the American Dream (McGuinnis 2009, 62). In subscribing to meritocratic beliefs like this one, individuals are more likely to blame those who do not 'succeed' for their own failure, and to give greater respect to those who do 'succeed' (see McCoy and Major 2007, for a summary of the research in this area).

Early in FG2 M implies that focusing upon the organic causes of dyslexia can allow dyslexic people to be distracted from their responsibility for their own success. Finding out what 'causes' dyslexia can make it easier for the 'average' dyslexic person to 'not combat' it; in other words, believing that dyslexia has a particular, internal cause can be used as an excuse not to work hard to overcome one's own weaknesses, or as G says, to 'deal with it, deal with it'.

Extract from FG2: M, G, J and H

M: Now obviously if you are a researcher of dyslexia, it's very interesting to find out what causes [it, but for the] average dyslexic person.
H:                [so what is    ]
M: but it can be useful for the average dyslexic person because it makes it much easier to not combat it, cos, that sounds really aggressive, but if you know how to combat
    [something, to] makes it [easier to ]
J: [to build        ]
M: but if someone could say to me
G: deal with it, deal with it.

M and G together here construct what might be interpreted as a damning judgement upon people who refer to their disability in order to argue for reasonable adjustments and a fair playing field, people for whom an organic 'cause' might be crucial. In M's discourse, the individual is ultimately accountable for their own success, and is to be

blamed for their own failure. 'The assumptions of the ideology are that of the individual as an autonomous self, while education is seen as neutral' (McGinnis 2009, 62); and the institution is absolved of any responsibility.

Instead of encouraging a sense of support and connectedness within the student community, individualising and meritocratic ideologies help to create isolated, competitive individuals who measure their own success through narrow comparison with others (i.e. according to educational institution, level and grade). This encourages overt criticism of peers and creates an atmosphere of judgement and condescension which leaves little room for collaboration and cooperation. Some of the participants found themselves straddling a rigid, dominant individualism and another ideological position which said, in essence, 'it's not fair'. There was at once an impression that all obstacles should be individually overcome without fuss, and the contradictory sense that the educational context was leaving them severely and unacceptably disadvantaged.

Equality versus fairness

The construction of the self in comparison and in competition with others is a strong theme throughout the focus group conversations. This group of constructions appears to straddle the idea that things should be 'fair', and the idea that 'it's all about hard-work, so stop complaining'. Nowhere is the fine balance between egalitarian, democratic, meritocratic, individualistic, and neoliberal ideologies more apparent (in these focus groups) than when participants were discussing the use, or not, or the fairness, or not, of 'reasonable adjustments'. 'Reasonable adjustments' is the term used to refer to institutions' legal obligation to try to create a level playing field for participation; that is, it is required that the university put in place adjustments in assessment and teaching, for example, to reduce the disadvantage minority groups experience during their studies. Dyslexic students are legally 'disabled' and they therefore have the right to adjustments like extra time in exams, considerate marking, a specialist dyslexia tutor, a computer and assistive software, lecture notes before the lecture, and sometimes a proof-reader, scribe or mentor, among other things. In both focus group conversations the use of such adjustments is a topic for heated discussion.

Below is a discussion of the ideological presence in example extracts in which the participants construct the use of adjustments as negative, unfair or dishonourable. First, here is R in the second focus group, responding to a request for clarification about his position on reasonable adjustments:

Extract from FG2: H, R and M


H: OK, I'll ramble on till then [then] but you were saying that you didn't want
M:                                [yeah]
H: anyone to make any adjustments for you. Is that right?
R: yeah. I consider a degree a bit like becoming a medical doctor. If you're, if you don't have that standard, I don't see how I should qualify.
H: ok.


First of all, 'becoming a medical doctor' is upheld as the ultimate in academic and moral achievement (still popularly understood as an occupation of the elites, see Mathers and Parry 2009), and a standard against which other achievements may be measured. The assumption is that one cannot become a doctor without a good deal of individual merit. Furthermore, a 'standard' is something that you 'have'; that is, either it is contained within you, or it is not, and tough luck if it is not. The standard you are set at is understood to be fair and accurate, and conveniently allows comparison between individuals. This may seem democratic, but, argue Carr and Hartnett (1996) is an 'elitist conception of democracy' (171) and one which only imitates egalitarianism. Having a degree is lifted to a similar intellectual and moral status to becoming a medical doctor; it is a symbol of worth that would be tainted if people were to come by such an accolade without the correct 'standard'. My interpretation of R's position here is that making 'adjustments' would lead to just such a taint.
Below is which begins with R talking about the value of rote learning, and continues with J and M affirming his ideological position. It is an important extract to include because it illustrates how ideological assumptions can have implications for identity and action.


Extract from FG2: R, J and M


R: look, I think, [it's not easy] and it's not easy for dyslexics, but I think
J:                 [hhhhh        ]
R: rote-learning does have a place in this in this education that we're doing now. I think it's just a reality that we find hard.
J: I think, cos I wouldn't want to get a first, and know that it was because I had dyslexia, when I [get that] I want to know that it's because I've done it
M:       [mmm   ]
J: and to the same, to like their standard
M: mmm
J: and so like, I agree. [with what you're saying]
M:                       [mmmm you want your ]

J: [yeah you've got a degree and you're dyslexic                    ] or
M: [first to be the same as this person's first or that person's first ]
J: you got it [cos] you're dyslexic, you wanna know that you
M:              [mm]
M: mmm
J: achieved it the same [as]


The phrase R uses – 'I think, it's not easy for dyslexics, but … ' might give the impression of sympathy, but in fact works to set up the idea that dyslexic students should nonetheless get on and cope. And R's introductory 'look' constructs his talk as being frank, honest and straight to the point, and therefore difficult to resist. R does not say that all learning should be rote learning; he says it has 'a place' – once again this is hard to resist because it would be fairly extreme to argue that all rote learning should be outlawed. He then presents rote learning as a 'reality' of university education. Rote learning in educational institutions, argue Carr and Hartnett, was about efficiency in a market-driven system (1996). Under this market hegemony, there was a move towards knowledge transmission over inquiry-based learning (Carr and Hartnett 1996), a move which gave pride of place to memorisation and learning by rote. Moreover, it is common sense that what is 'reality' cannot be changed; so for R, there is no alternative but to fit in with the system as best as you can. If R did not have the dyslexia label, his comment here (in a group of people with the label) might have produced a retort such as 'what would you know?', but as he is dyslexic, R's position is beyond easy criticism. It is interesting that J and M respond immediately with a similar stance to R. J says: I think, cos I wouldn't want to get a first, and know that it was because I had dyslexia, when I get that I want to know that it's because I've done it … and to the same, to like their standard.


From this perspective, reasonable adjustments are considered a threat to the independent success of the dyslexic student and a risk to the worth of their degree. They are also constructed as fundamentally unfair, in line with an understanding that in a 'democracy' everyone should be treated equally (which obviously ignores the fact that 'equal' may not mean 'fair'). This version of democracy again fits with Carr and Hartnett's idea of 'elitist' democracy (1996); one in which it benefits the most privileged in a society to uphold the idea of fair treatment for all, as long as this ignores the disparity in individuals' circumstances and degree of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991). It is also worth noting here the language of 'getting' or 'having' a degree, the idea of a degree as something you possess, and this possession as more valuable than the learning process; 'students seek to "have a degree" rather than "be learners"' (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009, 277; see also Ainley and Weyers 2008).


Although some participants maintained their ideological stance on reasonable adjustments relatively consistently throughout the conversations, individual participants

appeared to be torn upon the issue. Here is C half way through extract 35, talking about how she felt about the 'free stuff' she received after being identified as dyslexic.


Extract from FG1: C, S and H


C: … well, when I was diagnosed, I got all this equipment through and people were like that's ridicu[lous ] like [hh    ] why do you get a
S:                 [mmm]      [mmm]
C: printer just cos you're dyslexic? But it has really helped to like, print out your lecture notes, when you go to the lecture and that, so, [but   ] you do feel
S:                                                                                          [mmm]
C: a bit unfair because I am getting all this stuff for free. But then I guess you do need it, but then I have managed without it, before.
H: yeah.
C: so. I don't know, but. I'm like, well, I'm entitled to it, so I'll have it.
H: yeah.
C: so
H: yeah


In the extract above C tries to manage the connected ideals of fairness and merit, and struggles to reach a conclusion about what these ideals mean for her behaviour. C begins by referring to the response of other people: 'they were like, that's ridiculous like why do you get a printer just cos you're dyslexic?' and so she is under pressure to justify the equipment she was given. '[I]t has really helped' says C 'but you do feel a bit unfair'; 'But then I do need it, but then I have managed without it before'. C repeatedly switches between constructions of entitlement and guilt. This uncomfortable switching is arguably reflective the tensions between egalitarian-democratic and meritocratic ideological positions. The former allows C to justify her adjustments on the grounds that she has a greater need than others, while the latter condemns any means of getting ahead which does not come from an individual's merit or hard work. British Law on 'equality' here is in danger of being eclipsed by the unwritten laws of meritocracy and capitalism. This feeling of discomfort about making use of adjustments and preferring to manage alone is reported elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Mortimore 2012).


Conclusions


In these focus groups, the common sense understanding that success is based upon merit and hard work frequently shut down other ways of constructing achievement and fairness in education. On a number of occasions students in this study found themselves uncomfortably stuck between democratic, social justice, and meritocratic ideals,

and with tension, swung between different social identities which were only acceptable if the conversation were blowing in a particular ideological direction. Moreover, constructions of identity, learning and ability were very readily formed from an individualistic ideological perspective; that is, the individualistic and neoliberal versions of students and education and equality appeared to be the default in these conversations. To resist these constructions involved discursive effort and sometimes meant social discomfort and/ or isolation for the participant introducing such resistance. Part of the power of ideological hegemony at work here is to produce people who cannot see beyond the common sense structures which they draw upon uncritically in their meaning making (Apple 2004, 6). Not only can people not see beyond these structures, but arguably actively reproduce them. In such reproduction, symbols like grades become desirable; according to Deleuze and Guatari, the desire for hierarchical markers is a way of repressing other desires (for freedom, self-determination) which threaten the social structure as is: 'repression, hierarchy, exploitation, and servitude are themselves desired' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 139). Furthermore, the very thing which might arm students against such self-repression, namely, the ability to think critically and to question self-evident 'truths', is arguably itself dulled by the practices of the neoliberal university (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009).


In the introduction to this paper, attention was given to the controversies within the field of dyslexia research and practice, and particularly to Elliott and Grigorenko's (2014) arguments that dyslexia is no longer a useful term in most research and educational contexts. What the current research adds to this argument does not come in the form of an endorsement or a rally against such a position. What it does argue is that no matter what labels we attach to learners in education, no matter how noble the intention, these labels do not stand still. They are pushed into a world of competing discursive constructions and ideological 'common sense' which fragment and hijack intended meanings. Even with a robust and exacting scientific definition, dyslexia (or a replacement term) would still collect socially determined and context-bound meanings (Danermark 2002). Moreover, many of the socially constructed and most disabling aspects of dyslexia would remain, despite a change in definition. For example, those discourses which connect traditional educational achievement and high literacy to 'intellect' would remain (Macdonald 2009). As such, any decision to end its use in education and education should not come from one discursive field alone. Psychology helps us to understand the cognitive dimensions of dyslexia; but it is lacking in the tools to explore the how and why and what of its social and political construction. The position in this paper is that we need to think about what a change in labelling might mean for people (Riddick 2010); how it might impact upon already threatened attempts to equalise the playing field in western education systems; and why, when we look back through a history littered with discarded labels, do we consider that it at this moment science has discovered the correct answer.

To reiterate, then, developing tools to resist potential devaluation of the achievements and participation of students with learning differences is an important part of the fight for fairness within the higher education system. Explicitly encouraging students and educators to recognise the ideological voice in everyday conversation is essential for such a critical education and for a fairer education system. In other words, better understanding of the discourses surrounding dyslexia and of the ideological threads which speak through us when we speak will arguably assist students and teachers in higher education to critically reflect upon the learning identities they take on, or are given. Challenge is only possible if people recognise that they have a degree of choice in the identities they associate with, that the self is constructed 'inside-out' as well as 'outside-in' (Bruner 1990, 108).

References

Ainley, P., and M. Weyers. 2008. "The Variety of Student Experience: Investigating the Complex Dynamics of Undergraduate Learning in Russell and Non-Russell Group Universities in England." In Structure and Agency in the Neoliberal University, edited by J. E. Canaan and W. Shumar, 131–52. New York: Routledge.

Apple, M. W. 2004. Ideology and the Curriculum. New York: Routledge Farmer.

Ball, S. J. 2012. "Performativity, Commodification and Commitment: An I-Spy Guide to the Neoliberal University." British Journal of Educational Studies 60 (1): 17–28.

BDA (British Dyslexia Association). 2015. "BDA Quality Mark Position Statement." http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/services/quality-mark.

Bhaskar, R. 1998. "Societies." In Critical Realism, edited by M. Archer, R. Bhaskar, A. Collier, T. Lawson, and A. Norrie, 206–57. London: Routledge.

Billig, M. 2001. "Discursive, Ideological and Ideological Messages." Reading 15 in Discourse, Theory and Practice: A Reader, edited by M. Wetherell, S. Taylor, and S. Yates, 210–21. London: Sage Publications/The Open University.

Bourdieu, P. 1991. Language and Symbolic Power. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bruner, J. 1990. Acts of Meaning. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Campbell, T. 2013. Dyslexia: The Government of Reading. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Carr, W., and A. Hartnett. 1996. Education and the Struggle for Democracy: The Politics of Educational Ideas. Buckingham, PA: Open University Press.

Collinson, C. 2012. "Dyslexics in Time Machines and Alternate Realities: Thought Experiments on the Existence of Dyslexics, 'Dyslexia' and 'Lexism'." British Journal of Special Education 39: 63–70.

Collinson, C., and C. Penketh. 2009. "'Sit in the Corner and Don't Eat the Crayons': Postgraduates with Dyslexia and the Dominant 'Lexic' Discourse." Disability & Society 25 (1): 7–19.

Danermark, B. 2002. "Interdisciplinary Research and Critical Realism: The Example of Disability Research." Journal of Critical Realism 5 (1): 56–64.

Deleuze, G., and F. Guattari. 2013. Anti-Oedipus. London: Bloomsbury.

Denhart, H. 2008. "Deconstructing Barriers – Perceptions of Students Labelled with Learning Disabilities in Higher Education." Journal of Learning Disabilities 41 (6): 483–42.

Dudley-Marling, C. 2004. "The Social Construction of Learning Disabilities." Journal of Learning Disabilities 37 (6): 482–89.

Duggan, L. 2003. The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Elliott, J., and E. Grigorenko. 2014. The Dyslexia Debate. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ferri, B. A., D. J. Connor, J. Valle, and D. Volpitta. 2005. "Teachers with LD: Ongoing Negotiations with Discourses of Disability." Journal of Learning Disabilities 38: 62–78.

Gee, J. P. 2005. An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

Gee, J. P. 2009. "Discourse Analysis: What Makes it Critical?" Accessed August 16, 2012. http://www.jamespaulgee.com/sites/default/files/pub/CriticalDiscourse.pdf.

Giroux, H. A. 1997. Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope: Theory, Culture and Schooling. Boulder, CO: West View Press.

Greene, W. T. 2008. "Three Ideologies of Individualism: Toward Assimilating a Theory of Individualisms and Their Consequences." Critical Social Psychology 34: 117–137.

Gwernan-Jones, R. 2012. "Socio-Emotional Aspects of Dyslexia: We're all in this Together." Chap. 2 in Supporting Dyslexic Adults in Higher Education and the Workplace, edited by N. Brunswick, 13–21. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

Harré, R. 1991. Physical Being: A Theory for a Corporal Psychology. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hitchens, P. 2014. "Dyslexia is Not a Disease: It's an Excuse for Bad Teachers." Daily Mail Online. Accessed July 3, 2015. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2570977/PETER-HITCHENS-Dyslexia-not-disease-It-excuse-bad-teachers.html

Ho, A. 2004. "To be Labelled, or Not to be Labelled: That is the Question." British Journal of Learning Disabilities 32: 86–92.

Johnson, R. 2008. "Afterward." In Structure and Agency in the Neoliberal University, edited by J. E. Canaan and W. Shumar, 278–98. New York: Routledge.

Latour, B. 1987. Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Latour, B. 1991. We Have Never Been Modern. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Macdonald, S. J. 2009. "Windows of Reflection from Adults with Dyslexia: Conceptualising Dyslexia Using the Social Model of Disability." Dyslexia: An International Journal of Research and Practice 15 (4): 347–62.

Macdonald, S. J. 2010. "Towards a Social Reality of Dyslexia." British Journal of Learning Disabilities 38 (1): 21–34.

Marshall, K., Jr. 2001. "I Will Not Succumb to Obstacles." In Learning Disabilities and Life Stories, edited by P. Rodis, A. Garrod, and M. L. Boscardin. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Mathers, J., and J. Parry. 2009. "Why are There so Few Working-Class Applicants to

Medical Schools? Learning from the Success Stories." Medical Education 43 (3): 219–228.

May, A. 2001. "Figuring Out My World." In Learning Disabilities and Life Stories, edited by P. Rodis, A. Garrod, and M. L. Boscardin. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

McCoy, S. K., and B. Major. 2007. "Priming Meritocracy and the Psychological Justification of Inequality." Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 43 (3): 341–51.

McDermott, R., S. Goldman, and H. Varenne. 2006. "The Cultural Work of Learning Disabilities." Chap. 17 in Understanding Difficulties in Literacy Development: Concepts and Issues (2009), edited by J. Soler, F. Fletcher-Cambell, and G. Reid, 252–260. London: Sage.

McGinnis, T. A. 2009. "Seeing Possible Futures: Khmer Youth and the Discourse of the American Dream." Anthropology & Education Quarterly 40 (1): 62–81.

Molesworth, M., E. Nixon, and R. Scullion. 2009. "Having, Being and Higher Education: The Marketization of the University and the Transformation of the Student Into Consumer." Teaching in Higher Education 14 (3): 277–87.

Mortimore, T. 2012. "Dyslexia in Higher Education: Creating a Fully Inclusive Institution." Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs 13 (1): 38–47.

Nicolson, R. I., and A. Fawcett. 2008. Dyslexia, Learning and the Brain. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Pollack, D. 2005. Dyslexia, the Self and Higher Education: Learning Life Histories of Students Identified as Dyslexic. Stoke on Trent: Trentham.

Rand, A. 1957/1992. Atlas Shrugged. 35th ed. New York: Dutton.

Riddick, B. 1995. "Dyslexia: Dispelling the Myths." Disability and Society 10 (4): 457–74.

Riddick, B. 2001. "Dyslexia and Inclusion: Time for a Social Model of Disability?" International Studies in Sociology of Education 11 (3): 223–36.

Riddick, B. 2010. Living with Dyslexia. London: Routledge.

Runswick-Cole, K. 2014. "'Us' and 'Them': The Limits and Possibilities of a 'Politics of Neurodiversity' in Neoliberal Times." Disability & Society 29 (7): 1117–29.

Stanovich, K. E. 2005. "The Future of a Mistake: Will Discrepancy Measurement Continue to Make the Learning Disabilities Field a Pseudoscience?" Learning Disability Quarterly 28: 103–6.

Van Dijk, T. A. 2006. "Ideology and Discourse Analysis." Journal of Political Ideologies 11 (2): 115–40.

Williams, S. 2001. Emotion and Social Theory. London: Sage.

Williams, J. 2014. "A Critical Exploration of Changing Definitions of Public Good in Relation to Higher Education." Studies in Higher Education. doi:10.1080/03075079.2014.942270.

Willig, C. 2008. Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology. 2nd ed. Berkshire: Open University Press.