**Self-esteem and growth mindset in**

**sixth form college students: comparing student**

**differences in those**

**with and without dyslexia**

**Masters by Research**

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**Self-esteem and growth mindset in sixth form college students: comparing student differences in those with and without dyslexia**

**Abstract**

Prior research indicates dyslexia leads to low self-esteem (Glazzard, 2010; Snowling et al., 2020) and that a fixed mindset is a predictor of low academic achievement (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). However, there is little or no research on how these two parts of the self interact with each other in dyslexic nor non-dyslexic students. The aim of this research was to investigate scores of self-esteem among dyslexic and non-dyslexic sixth form students using Rosenberg’s scale. It also measured the mindset scores of these participants also using Dweck’s mindset scale. Semi structured interviews were used to delve deeper into the experiences of dyslexic and non-dyslexic students and a thematic analysis was used to analyse the results. Quantitative results indicate a significant result for dyslexic students, not only in terms of mindset but in having low self-esteem also. Interviews reveal little evidence of fixed mindset but much evidence of growth mindset being present in all participants whether dyslexic or not. Interviews also reveal a somewhat successful implementation of inclusive education, more so at college than at school as reported. Implications and further research suggestions are discussed.

**Introduction**

In England, dyslexia is often encompassed under the umbrella term of specific learning difficulties (Riddick, 2001). The dominant view regarding dyslexia is, that it is on the whole, a phonological deficit.  That being said it is a complex disorder and so it is no surprise the causes of dyslexia and how to manage the condition are unclear.

Below, various aspects of dyslexia will be discussed, however the focus is not what it is or is not, there is no dispute, as far as this research is concerned, that dyslexia exists in some form or other. The primary concern of this research is people’s experiences of dyslexia, specifically students in further education, and its potential impact on self-esteem and aspirations.

As has been pointed out by Riddick (2001) there is a need to challenge assumptions.  Furthermore, it has been posited dyslexia, in a similar way to autism, should be viewed as a spectrum from mild to severe (Seidenberg, 2017). In addition to this, there has been calls for a more holistic approach to testing and the subsequent supporting of those with SEND, using a 360-degree assessment (Nicolson, 2019).

Armstrong and Humphrey support the notion of dyslexia being viewed as a continuum (Armstrong & Humphrey, 2009). This would be more flexible and therefore not fixed, replacing more rigid definitions, assumptions, and subsequent failings towards those with dyslexia. One could argue it is the rigidity of testing and diagnoses that compartmentalises dyslexics as opposed to exploring their difficulties and recognising the needs of the individual.

Dyslexia, its definition, and diagnosis has long been debated (Collinson, 2018) with many authors writing from different standpoints (Alexander-Passe, 2015). With some suggesting much of the British public don’t understand dyslexia (Thomson, 2009) and that the term dyslexia is problematic (Gibbs & Elliott, 2020). Thus leading to prolific dyslexia researchers such as Miles calling for a taxonomy (Miles, 2004). Similar to others discussed above and the suggestion of a continuum approach (Seidenberg, 2017). For clarity the British Dyslexia Association (BDA) adopts the definition of dyslexia from the Rose report (Rose, 2004), which reads:

*Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory, and verbal processing speed. Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities. It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points. Co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor coordination, mental calculation, concentration, and personal organisation, but these are not by themselves, markers of dyslexia. A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds or has responded to well-founded intervention.*

In addition to the above definition, the BDA also includes acknowledgement of:

*The visual and auditory processing difficulties that some individuals with dyslexia can experience and points out that dyslexic readers can show a combination of abilities and difficulties that affect the learning process. Some also have strengths in other areas, such as, design, problem solving, creative skills, interactive skills, and oral skills.* (British Dyslexia Association, 2010).

The definition adopted above supports the suggestion of dyslexia being viewed as a continuum where differences are acknowledged in such a way from mild to severe. Furthermore, findings from authors such as Blake (2018) highlight dyslexic students have strengths in other areas.

As mentioned above, definitions of dyslexia have evolved over the years, the Rose report, as quoted above, increased the definitions of dyslexia (McLoughlin & Leather, 2013) thus hoping to provide greater clarification and in turn aid diagnoses and access to support. Authors have also stated there needs to be ‘shift’ in viewpoints from the dominant deficit view to the view that dyslexia exists as a neurodiverse condition in order to aid and support those with dyslexia to thrive (Rappolt-Schlichtmann et al., 2018).

Without clarity and consistency individuals suspected as having dyslexia will find themselves trapped in a system hounded by contradictions and difficulties.

**Disability**

Common misconceptions and stereotypes dominate much of the discourse surrounding disability; the can't do attitude of a disabled person’s limitations or the blatant ignoring of a disabled person to name just two, leads to barriers for those with disability.  Limited access to opportunities or being left out or behind can lead to social and professional isolation.

There have been, and still are varying perceptions of impairment and disability (Barnes, 2010) but in terms of considering attitudes to disability and impairment, culture is key (Barnes et al., 2000; Baum, 2017).

As previously mentioned, over the years various models have been adopted regarding disability, the first being the medical model where disability was viewed as a problem to be fixed.  Linking with this is the personal tragedy model, this is experienced by the individual who needs “charity”, and the medical professionals have all the power.

Political and cultural developments led to a shift and the social models were born.  The social model and then the subsequent rehabilitation model take a more multidisciplinary approach, aiming to empower the individual and subsequently strive for equality.

Various models of disability have been proffered over the years; the personal tragedy model being experienced by the individual affected, the rehabilitation model where the individual needs to readjust whereas the social model seeks empowerment for the individual, striving for equality.

The effect of the developments has led to more equal opportunities and greater recognition of the disabled population.  Bowl highlights that empowerment of individuals is important for feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy (Bowl, 2014).  Feelings of self-worth and having a high self-esteem, under Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, are key for being able to reach self-actualisation; that being the individual reaching their full potential, this will be discussed in more detail later.

Barnes et al. also mention the term oppression in relation to examining attitudes to disability (Barnes et al., 2000), as far back as the 1980s authors have discussed oppression, stating inferiority is embedded in the term impairment (Abberley, 1987). There are various misconceptions surrounding disability, incorporating beliefs as held by the medical and personal tragedy model, such as those affected can’t do anything for themselves, or that they have many limitations. Disabled people experience being infantilised or ignored. These misconceptions or incorrect beliefs then become actions or behaviours such as blocking access to or limiting opportunities.

Further to this, researchers such as Collinson support this notion, with Collinson using the term ‘othering’ to describe attitudes towards what he terms Lexism (Collinson, 2018).

Critical Disability Studies (CDS), is an interdisciplinary field that has welcomed a “smorgasbord” of perspectives, building upon earlier work from disability studies drawn from inside and outside of the disability experience (Goodley et al., 2019), he goes on to ague dominant framings of disability degrade the phenomenon (ibid). Suggesting previous approaches to disability and policies of inclusion have actually done the opposite than their purpose. If we consider the argument that many come to Critical Disability Studies as a result of personal and political “entanglements” with matters of social justice (ibid). This only serves to provide more support for the argument people have felt degraded, oppressed or othered (Collinson, 2018).

Critical Disability Studies has been suggested to be a necessary step in inclusive education (Moore & Slee, 2019) and has given a new force to the theoretical heart of the social model of disability, allowing it to take new directions (Shildrick, 2020).

**Diagnosing dyslexia**

An emotive and contentious subject (Quigley, 2022)already, the next issue being that of obtaining a diagnosis of dyslexia. This should preferably be an early diagnosis (Glazzard, 2010) as this allows people to gain answers to questions such as why they can’t manage things like their peers. It can, however, be a double-edged sword in terms of labelling (Scott, 2004) and studies have highlighted the sometimes-negative outcomes of being labelled as dyslexic (Goulandris & Snowling, 2001). Negative outcomes being such things as lower academic achievements, disengaging with support and education altogether and potentially lower lifelong attainment (Claassens & Lessing, 2015).

Clearly some individuals will feel relief at having a diagnosis, an explanation as to why they encounter difficulties. However, others may struggle with the label, the label of having something wrong, related to the perception of being different or even abnormal, linking with the above discussions of impairment and people’s perceptions of impairment, whether that be someone else’s or indeed their own.

Many clinical and educational models of dyslexia have focused on addressing core issues or deficits such as poor phonological skills. However, from the perspective of the social model of disability, the above clinical and educational models inadequately cover other issues such as cultural factors and social influences (Riddick, 2001) as supported by comments such as the social model views disability as a socially constructed phenomenon (Glazzard & Dale, 2013). In addition to this, authors have stated a shift in mindset is necessary in order to truly support those with dyslexia, they pose the dominant deficit view must be replaced by the neurodiverse view of the causation of dyslexia (Rappolt-Schlichtmann et al., 2018). Further support for this point can be seen in the work of Murphy (2021) arguing dyslexia should be viewed as a difference not a disability and professionals should adopt a neurodiverse approach. Haft et al. (2016) identified students with reading difficulties as being more at risk of poor cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes. This is further supported the work of Wilmot et al (2022) which highlights the importance of support from parents, school and friendships.

Humphrey and Mullins argued children with dyslexia feel isolated and excluded within educational settings (Humphrey & Mullins, 2002), this strongly supports Riddick’s statement and highlights how vital social interactions are when considering aspects of education, and dyslexia. Its worth noting here, many individuals with dyslexia have strengths in other areas such as creativity and visionary thinking (Blake, 2018).

Educational establishments i.e., mainstream, and special schools will be discussed later, but in terms of the point made here, children must be given the opportunity to socialise and interact with their peers. As long as these interactions are in a positive way, where individual differences are supported not as a point of ridicule. This in a large way stems from the culture of the school and of the parents examples to their children, which will be explored throughout. These influences should in no way be underestimated, even the influence of teachers plays a key role in shaping children (Asbury et al., 2016).

It has been argued current approaches fail to serve the needs of many who struggle to read (Gibbs & Elliott, 2020). The dyslexia debate is critical of those who dispute it’s existence, resilient in keeping the debate active (Kirby, 2020).

**Education and inclusive policies**

In order to gain a better understanding of education, particularly relating to educating those with SEN, we must explore the policies behind the current model of inclusive education.

*Early diagnoses and interventions*

The SEND Code of Practice 0-25 years describes the procedures for recognising and supporting individuals with additional needs, also referred to as Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) (DfE, 2015), in accordance with the Equality Act 2010. It has been argued disability legislation only serves to highlight the ‘disabled’ aspect rather than actually promote inclusion (Blouchou & Nicolson, 2020) thus providing support for Scott’s discussions on labelling (Scott, 2004). Support is to integrate and facilitate learning, providing strategies to enable the student to develop their skills and knowledge.  Interventions may also be necessary where some activities may not be suitable or accessible. Snowling highlights the need for early interventions in order to prevent a downward trajectory or spiral towards lowered self-esteem, poor motivation and subsequent under achievement (Snowling et al., 2020).

However, questions must be asked as to the effectiveness of interventions and support, and as to whether the method of inclusion promotes integration, or in fact separation and segregation due to the disabled aspect being emphasised (Blouchou & Nicolson, 2020).

Access to support in educational settings can aid the dyslexic student, in the current method of inclusive education, the hope is to maintain integration of students within mainstream education. It is also to enable those with special educational needs to interact with their peers; both those with and without special educational needs. However, it has been said teachers have an increasing responsibility to constantly develop their skills and demonstrate said development (Hanson et al., 2016). In light of this, the statement teachers are given too many hats to wear and are too overworked, (Kelly & Phillips, 2016) seems fair; however, in addition to the above the, the calls for more training and support for teachers (Forlin, 2012) is even more crucial. Furthermore, there is the concern mainstream education can lead to social isolation (Little & Evans, 2021). This is supported by Humphrey and Mullins as mentioned above (Humphrey & Mullins, 2002), with children feeling isolated within schools, and support for the work of Snowling who advocated the need for early interventions (Snowling et al., 2020). Furthermore, Glazzard saw early diagnosis was essential for creating a positive self-image (Glazzard, 2010). Early diagnoses and interventions will mean a child’s education will take their difficulties into account as soon as possible, and the implementation of support will allow education and opportunities to be maximised.

As introduced above, inclusion aims to provide a sense of belonging where all students feel respected and valued in order for them to do their best and reach their full potential. Linking this with self-esteem theory, specifically Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, love and belonging is halfway up the pyramid above the sections of basic physiological and safety needs.  Thus highlighting just how vital a part a sense of belonging plays in a person’s ability to reach their full potential.

Humphrey and Mullins’ results indicate there are differences in self-concepts for those with and without dyslexia (Humphrey & Mullins, 2002). In addition to this, Alexander-Passe found female dyslexic students have lower self-esteem than their male counterparts (Alexander-Passe, 2006), and findings by Terras et al. also support the link between dyslexia and self-esteem (Terras et al., 2009). If we view this alongside Glazzard’s findings of early diagnoses and interventions having a positive effect (Glazzard, 2010) and findings of Armstrong and Humphrey also reporting positive effects (Armstrong & Humphrey, 2009), we can see there is a case for early interventions such as testing, diagnosing, and implementing support. However, the interventions must be effective in order to have said positive impact.

Contradictory to this however, findings have argued labels can have a negative impact, and thus definitions are unnecessarily reductive (Shildrick, 2020). With all the debate surrounding this murky subject it can be easy to forget the human subjects at the heart of the issue and it is therefore necessary to remember the humanistic perspective is psychology and take a holistic approach.

*Teacher’s roles*

It has been said that whilst teachers have reasonably positive attitudes towards inclusion (García & González, 2021), there are many obstacles to inclusion including large class sizes, inadequate funding and training, a lack of differentiated teaching methods and negative attitudes (Westwood, 2013).

However, as mentioned above, it has been said teachers are given too many hats to wear and are too overworked (Kelly & Phillips, 2016) thus supporting calls for more training and support for teachers (Forlin, 2012). Other authors such as Glazzard support this (Glazzard, 2010) and argue that SEND needs embedding in teacher training (Webster, 2017). If this is achieved it would mean all new teachers would have SEN training as part of their initial training, this would be more beneficial to the teachers themselves and their future students. Further support for the effect and influence of teachers argues the mindset of the teacher can greatly influence the attitudes they impart on their students (Asbury et al., 2016).

*Children and Families Act 2014*

As a student progresses through their educational career, information sharing between institutions is more widely encouraged. The Children and Families Act 2014 brought the introduction of EHC plans (Children and Families Act 2014), replacing statements, with the aim of providing greater consistency in the clarity of information and the sharing of this information between institutions and other agencies. However, Further Education colleges rely heavily on disclosure from the students themselves of any additional needs. Findings have found FE students with vulnerabilities and negative backgrounds are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural problems (Warwick et al., 2006), emphasising the vital role FE colleges play in promoting mental wellbeing and providing support (DfE, 2015).

*Specialist Provision*

In terms of actually implementing inclusive practice into education, there are even conflicting views on how inclusive education works, some would argue grouping students by ability is wrong (D. Miller & Moran, 2014) yet others would say it is helpful to work with others who share similar difficulties (Burton, 2004).

The premise of inclusive education is to provide a sense of belonging and allow children of all abilities, including those with special educational needs (SEN) to interact together. A positive step, one could argue, given the importance of social interactions. However, there is support for the critique of ability groupings being distressing (Lithari, 2019). Ability groupings meaning when children are ‘set’ by ability, for example, set one is for high achieving students and set five being for those who are struggling, the students themselves are aware of what this means thus leading to ridicule and feelings of shame. We can again return to Cooley’s looking glass self here and identify issues with identity construction as a result of negative experiences.

Special schools aim to provide specialist education to those with additional needs.  Class sizes are smaller, often with one-to-one help where teaching and learning is geared towards the individual needs by staff with the relevant training and knowledge to best support their students.

Mainstream education on the other hand, is as the name suggests, where students of all abilities are grouped together.  Some, if not most schools tend to ‘set’ students by ability in terms of classes but the cohort in general has a wide range of abilities all under one roof.  As such in this type of education, it is far more difficult for schools to provide the expertise a special school may be able to offer.

Mainstream education is based on the premise of inclusion where students should feel respected, valued, and supported in order for them to achieve their full potential. However, there are many and varied criticisms of mainstream education.  Scott highlights the issue of isolation and learned helplessness experienced by dyslexic students in mainstream schools (Scott, 2004).  In addition to this, it has been argued by some the label of being dyslexic correlates with a lowering of academic expectations.  It has been stated that inclusion is not being practised (Webster, 2017) who goes on to state ability groupings have a “corrosive” effect on students confidence.

We must again revisit the work of Riddick and reiterate the importance of challenging assumptions, the assumptions of policy makers, teachers, students, and parents alike (Riddick, 2001).

Findings from an experiment in Macedonia report parents think special schools are better for those with SEN (Dimitrova-Radojicic & Chichevska-Jovanova, 2014) as opposed to mainstream schools. If we refer back to the findings of Terras et al supporting the link between dyslexia and self-esteem (Terras et al., 2009) and those of Riddick, ten years earlier that dyslexia can lower self-esteem we can see the placement of children with SEN, specifically in this case those with dyslexia, plays a key role in their identity construction, self-concept, self-esteem and of course, their achievements (Riddick, 2001).

*Dyslexia and Society*

As already alluded to, schools are social worlds of their own, worlds that are not always supportive of self-esteem and individuality (Ferkany, 2008).  It can be argued, there is a need for a greater understanding of learning cultures and how they can be changed and adapted (James & Biesta, 2007).

Culture, being formed by social norms and values, feeds into how people fit in to a certain culture, or not as the case may be.  According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, a sense of belonging is fundamental to feeling accepted and secure.  If one does not feel accepted it can lead them to question where they fit in society, such questions spiral and can lead to negative feelings and consequences.  As discussed above identity construction and self-esteem have a substantial impact on how people react to situations and how they feel about themselves.

When considering behaviours relating to cultures, stereotypes, and imitation, we must briefly visit the learning process. Bruner’s work in the 1960s encouraged learners to discover things for themselves (Gould, 2012). Since then, Bandura developed Social Cognitive Theory, providing a framework in which to explain how individuals learn and behave (Bandura, 2001 in Hanson et al., 2016). It has long been advocated how influential the social group can be to an individual (Gould, 2012; Hanson et al., 2016).

Similar to Bandura, Vygotsky’s social constructivist learning theory posits cognitive development is a social process (Gross, 2015). Vygotsky and Bandura both demonstrate the importance of social interaction, modelling and dialogue in the process of meaningful learning (Hanson et al., 2016).

Lithari describes self-concept being made up of different selves (Lithari, 2019)and goes further to add that self-development is a social learning activity (Humphrey & Mullins, 2002). Again, returning to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs it has been deemed as a person-centred approach to learning (Gould, 2012).

It is easy to see similarities between social learning theories and self-esteem theories in terms of social cues being responsible for an individual’s self-concept.

Relating this to this to the research being undertaken, it is important to consider all aspects of how identity is constructed, how self-esteem is formed and how behaviours are learned. Behaviour being a process of observation as discussed above, indicates that some of the beliefs and behaviours being studied here may well have been developed through observation; observation of perhaps parents, peers and/or teachers. If students have observed what could be perceived as negative, they are more likely to adapt those beliefs and behaviours themselves, thus perpetuating the negative cycle.

Referring back to cultural influences and relating to disabilities, given culture is how everyday norms and values are shared (Baum, 2017) cultures must therefore view disability differently . The findings of the New Society found as early as 1985 how people reacting negatively to ‘funny looking’ people is learned (New Society 1985, as cited in Abberley, 1987). The medical model of disability allocated the disability as being within the person, thus inducing feelings of blame. It is no surprise then, that this led to isolation and disengagement of those with disabilities. The social model, however, separates disability from impairment; impairment is viewed as a functional limitation and disability as a socially constructed phenomenon (Glazzard & Dale, 2013). In this sense, society is therefore responsible for breaking down barriers and stereotypes and integrating those with impairments into society, just as within educational settings, mainstream education aims to do so also.

**Self-esteem**

Revisiting to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, belonging is in the middle of the pyramid, highlighting how vital a sense of belonging is in allowing someone to reach their full potential.

Bandura’s work on learned imitation and the emphasis on the importance of modelling (Slavin, 2017) can be used in the context of culture. Culture is maintained through customs, ideologies, and institutions such as the mass media and religion (Chorlton, 2010), this could also be extended to include the institution of education.

Alexander-Passe highlights the element of shame for dyslexics (Alexander-Passe, 2006) and authors such as Kirby (2019) state dyslexia has been ignored in terms of learning disabilities. This, added to the fact that the social model of disability neglected those with learning difficulties (Stalker, 2020) then it raises the question, where do they fit? Feelings of shame are an indicator of and/or lead to low self-esteem, with low self-esteem individuals, particularly those with dyslexia, can be detrimental and have various devastating effects on a person’s success. Brunswick & Bargary (2022) highlight the importance of providing psychological support further supporting the work of Terras et al. (2009) who identified high self-esteem can help those with dyslexia.

Self-esteem is argued to be one of the most studied constructs within psychology (Tomás & Oliver, 1999). There are various models of self-esteem and how it is formed. Unidimensional models view self-esteem as a feeling of self-worth, whereas multidimensional models state self-esteem comprises of different elements. Hierarchical models state self-esteem is seen as a collection of judgements of performance in different areas (D. Miller & Moran, 2014), naturally hierarchical models are more complex and but their more holistic approach to self-esteem. Furthermore, these models are not fixed, nor do they apply to people in the same way, meaning individuals may place the needs in a different order to others and within this model this is accepted under the premise that everyone is different.

Diagram

Description automatically generated

(Simply Psychology, 2022)

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, a widely used model of self-esteem, allows for different experiences and factors influencing self-esteem. Family support has been shown to promote self-esteem (Carawan et al., 2016)and social status has a crucial role to play in mental wellbeing (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). It’s worth noting here, the higher up the hierarchy one is able to climb, the more difficult achieving the next need becomes (Gross, 2015) meaning feelings of pride, esteem and reaching one’s full potential will be extremely difficult to achieve even before difficulties such as dyslexia are considered.

However, it has been said that so few will meet Maslow’s definition of self-actualisation it has become diluted in order to be attainable (Frame, 1996). Furthermore, to many self-actualisation and the reaching of one’s full potential is framed as if it a final step in a person’s psychological development (Piedrahita, 2014). If this is so, this becomes akin to the enlightenment sought by the Dalai Lama, where does one go from here?

With there being many facets to self-esteem, it is important to consider the influence of motivation. If a person has low self-esteem, they may be less likely to be highly motivated as the feel low about themselves or they may have low motivation and therefore have low self-esteem. Conversely a person with high self-esteem may be a highly motivated person, or do they have a high level of motivation which leads to high self-esteem?

Considering the point above regarding identity construction, here seems a good point to discuss how a person’s identity is constructed, using Cooley’s 1902 theory of the Looking glass self. Cooley theorised the self is reflected in the reactions of others, therefore in order to understand ourselves we need to see ourselves how others see us. The reflections we receive of judgements and evaluations of our appearance and behaviours evokes some sort of feeling in us, for example, feelings of pride or of shame (Gross, 2015).

It has been suggested research and interest in dyslexia goes up and down (Cameron & Billington, 2015; McLoughlin & Leather, 2013) highlighting the need for further study and evidence on the impact felt by dyslexic students. Perhaps the quote from Lithari sums it up best with their wording that dyslexia has a *“profound”* effect on identity construction (Lithari, 2019).

Linking this with education, it has been found that educational experiences influence self-concept, both positively and negatively (Brunswick & Bargary, 2022). If we consider dyslexia as being an indicator of wider challenges (Leitão et al., 2017) including mental health problems and self-esteem, the issues surrounding self-esteem and those with dyslexia are fundamental to support.

**Mindset**

A students mindset can influence attention and alter behaviours (Martinez-Lincoln et al., 2021). Furthermore, the mindset a student adopts can affect both psychological and behavioural factors (Kapasi & Pei, 2022).

Relating this to education, the interactions between peers and teachers can be argued to be examples of such reflections that would evoke feelings of shame if a child were to have negative experiences in school (Brunswick & Bargary, 2022).

The work of Carol Dweck on mindset theory can be useful here. She posed that a student’s belief about their intelligence changes how they act (Cheng et al., 2021) and influences their achievement goals (Dweck, 2000). The theory shows evidence people have either a fixed or a growth mindset. Those with a fixed mindset believe intelligence is a fixed entity that cannot be changed (Bandura & Dweck, 1985; Dweck & Legget, 1988 in Dweck, 2000). Those with a fixed mindset value the end result over the learning experience and as a result (Dweck, 2017 in Savvides & Bond, 2021) it has been found that this is therefore a predictor of lower achievement (Yeager & Dweck, 2020) and interventions have been suggested in order to reduce this impact, particularly those with SpLD (Kapasi & Pei, 2022).

On the other hand, those with a growth mindset are motivated students (Yeager et al., 2019) they often have greater resilience and academic achievement (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). Other authors who have studied mindset and furthered the theory, claiming the ramifications of having a growth mindset appear to be resilience, grit and persistence (Judd, 2017 in Cheng et al., 2021). Dweck defines grit as being a passionate persistence towards long-term goals (Duckworth & Quinn in D. I. Miller, 2019). It could be argued the resilience demonstrated by some students with dyslexia is a sign of high self-esteem (Goegan et al., 2021; Haft et al., 2016).

As with all theories it is impossible to place individuals into one category or another, there will always be a middle ground where, in this case, people hold beliefs of a somewhat fixed mindset but who also score as having aspects of a growth mindset. Furthermore, mindsets can indeed be situation dependent (Dweck, 2017 in Kapasi & Pei, 2022) in addition to this is the argument it is difficult to define and categorise mindsets (French II, 2016).

Within the two camps, effort has different meanings (Dweck, 2000) such as people with a growth mindset thrive on challenge (Dweck, 2006) meaning they will seek higher grades, which may explain the lower achievement recorded by Yeager & Dweck in fixed mindset students, it’s not that they have lower intelligence, merely that they don’t push themselves to achieve more, thus supporting the above statement regarding effort (Yeager & Dweck, 2020).

It has been found teachers own mindsets can be influential when teaching students (Asbury et al., 2016) highlighting the importance of passing on qualities such as hard work pays off, effort and inspiring motivation in their students. However, this in itself lends support to the argument teachers are already overworked and have to wear too many hats (Kelly & Phillips, 2016).

In terms of linking this with self-esteem, Dweck herself comments on esteem as it often being seen as something a person does or does not have. She prefers to focus on a person’s beliefs and their subsequent impact on personality (Dweck, 2008).

In addition to this, recent findings have shown that having a growth mindset can in fact help with developing low self-esteem into higher self-esteem. This study also advocates the use of mindset lessons, teaching students how to have a growth mindset, subsequent results had improved following this intervention (Gritz, 2020).

Furthermore, a person’s experiences play a vital role in shaping the self (ibid) and from this we can draw links with Vygotsky and Bandura’s work on social learning theory, imitation, and conditioning.

If we then use mindset theory when considering self-esteem, in particular Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and the concept of self-actualisation, we can immediately identify the potential that those with a fixed mindset may never reach self-actualisation due to their lack of motivation and belief their intelligence cannot be changed. On the contrary, those with a growth mindset would be more likely to reach self-actualisation due to them thriving on challenge (Dweck, 2006) and seeking to advance their intelligence pushing them towards their full potential.

Dweck argues self-esteem is different for those with a growth mindset arguing it is a positive experience when a person is using their abilities and engaging themselves to achieve their goal (Dweck, 2000), this could be placed into the self-actualisation stage of Maslow’s hierarchy.

Therefore, if dyslexia leads to negative feelings and consequences for self-development (Burden & Burdett, 2005) the managing of a student with dyslexia from education to diagnosis and subsequent education must be handled carefully.

From the literature discussed above, clear themes and issues can be seen.

There is evidence the existence and diagnosis of dyslexia can be problematic (Gibbs & Elliott, 2020) during formation and maintenance of self-concept and self-esteem.

It is evident there is not enough research on the experiences of students in further education with regards to inclusive education and its implementation.

Whilst there is research stating an early diagnosis is preferable (Glazzard, 2010) and that failure for early diagnosis and subsequent interventions can be detrimental (Goulandris & Snowling, 2001), there is little evidence on the effects of diagnoses later in the educational career of a student, nor indeed later in life. Again, referring to self-concept and self-esteem, one would expect once the identity of the self is already constructed it would be difficult to change it, but such a thing as being diagnosed as dyslexic may have an impact on said self-concept at any age, yet only early years pupils are considered thus far.

There is a building body of evidence relating to disability studies and the emergence of Critical Disability Studies (CDS), documenting how it has added new force to the discourse of disability (Shildrick, 2020) and challenging assumptions. It has long ago been said there is a need to challenge assumptions (Riddick, 2001) and this is true of both disability as a whole and dyslexia in particular.

Furthermore, there is little evidence of models of self-esteem being applied to dyslexia research despite there being many comments on the impact of the Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) on the self-esteem of the individual diagnosed as having dyslexia.

Mindset theory has been shown to aid and inform interventions (Martinez-Lincoln et al., 2021) for students struggling academically in order to see the value of motivation and the application of effort. However, there is little evidence of mindset theory being compared to self-esteem in terms of dyslexic students within further education.

To that end, this research aims to bring together various aspects into one piece of research sampling students from a sixth form college, both with and without a diagnosis of dyslexia and looking to identify any relationships between dyslexia, self-esteem and evidence of mindset theory playing a role in the effort, motivation, and application within their studies. Two hypotheses and two research questions have been posed:

H1. Dyslexic students will score lower than their non-dyslexic counterparts therefore having low self-esteem according to Rosenberg’s scale of self-esteem.

H2. Dyslexic students will score as lower than their non-dyslexic counterparts therefore having a fixed mindset according to Dweck’s scale.

RQ1. Is there evidence of self-esteem issues in dyslexic or non-dyslexic students during interviews?

RQ2. Is there evidence of fixed or growth mindsets in dyslexic or non-dyslexic students during interviews?

**Methodologies**

Psychology, defined by Coolican (2014) as the study of human interest, in the search to illuminate meanings, uses research to look beyond objective measurements (Geertz 1973 as cited in Frost, 2011).

Objective measurements being such things as scientific phenomena or quantifiable entities. However, there are many aspects of psychology that are subjective as opposed to objective. That’s not to say objectivity has no place in psychology, as discussed below.

The way in which psychologists’ study human behaviour can vary dramatically.  As with any area of psychology there have, over time, been various additions, variations, and conflicting approaches to how research should be conducted and under what ideologies this follows.  Quite possibly one of the greatest debates has been that of what defines science, as this is by no means straightforward (Fife-Shaw, 2012).

Science, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022) is

*“Knowledge from the careful study of the structure and behaviour of the physical world, especially by watching, measuring, and doing experiments…”*

The above definition explicitly mentions the physical world, that being something tangible that can be measured and evidenced.

Conversely, the British Psychological Society (British Psychological Society, 2022)define psychology as

*“The scientific study of the mind and how it dictates and influences our behaviour from communication and memory, to thought and emotion.”*

It would, therefore, be fair to argue that psychology by its definition, does not entirely fit under the umbrella term of being a science, given its focus on intangible and somewhat immeasurable phenomena.

Epistemological assumptions (about human knowledge) ontological assumptions (about the realities you encounter) and axiological assumptions (how your values influence your research process) all have a bearing on how you as a researcher understand your research questions, the method you choose and how you interpret your findings (Crotty, 2020). Whilst this does confirm the critique of subjectivity it is naturally always going to be somewhat subjective due research being conducted by human researchers.  Humans will always bring subjective experiences to the table, this in itself adds to the richness of data collection. They provide context and depth to the topic at the heart of the research as well as to the researcher themselves as a professional being. Research is undertaken to obtain knowledge or meaning of a particular phenomenon, and in turn this develops the knowledge and skills of the researcher allowing them to develop, both as an individual and professionally.

There are many various and conflicting research paradigms with different preferred methodologies to achieve their research ends. One such example being the interpretive paradigm; interested in the way we make sense of the world around us (Saunders et al., 2015) preferring methods less restrictive than others, where the researcher is able to observe and interpret the area being studied.

Referring back to the various research philosophies in existence, as alluded to above, each with their specialism and preferred methodologies. It has been stated, research should be able to be replicated, generalisable to other settings and based on some logical rationale, related to theory (Salkind, 2018). The researcher feels that this is a somewhat one-sided and restrictive view of what research should consist of and does not align with the research being conducted, despite it having some merit.

Positivist theories, concentrate on the scientific method of observable and measurable facts and take an objective stance to research. It is therefore fair to say objectivism embraces realism (Saunders et al., 2015). Positivism assumes reality exists independently of humans (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016) and as such, positivist researchers will try to understand the social world as they would the natural world. The positivist approach was not adopted for this research as this type of philosophy does not align with the researcher, or the research questions posited, this is mainly due to the subjective nature of self-esteem and experiences of education, but also as the chosen methodology, based on thematic analysis could not be deemed as a scientific method within the positivist paradigm.

Post-modernism investigates social interactions through a lens of power relations, where some personalities can dominate and silence others (Saunders et al., 2015). Some aspects of the post-modernist approach can be argued to fit within this research due to the dominators being educational policy makers together with those who oppress learners with dyslexia i.e., the silenced.

Social constructivists argue social phenomena are in a constant state of flux (Saunders et al., 2015) therefore supporting the necessity of the researcher embracing reflexivity at every stage of the research process. Given the researcher's role is to gain insight and understanding, they must be prepared to engage with this constant state of flux also.

Ontologically speaking, the world is socially constructed, full of richness and complexities, thus theories and concepts are too simplistic and unnecessarily reductive (Saunders et al., 2015).

Within the interpretive paradigm the researcher is reflexive, and thus subjectively involved in the research. This has therefore been termed as an uncritical form of study (Crotty, 2020). However, it is not the criticality in question within this particular research, the aim is to obtain data i.e. self-esteem and mindset scores, as well as data rich in description and subjective experiences relating to dyslexia and education.

Critical theory takes context into account, and see reality as being shaped by cultural, political, gender, ethnic and religious factors all interacting with each other to create a society (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Critical theory therefore embraces the subjectivity required to conduct research with human participants and understands the researcher themselves has a part to play in the research.

In both the interpretive and post-modernist approaches, reflexivity is key; the researcher will need to be aware of, and sensitive to, engaging with the research. Reflexivity as a process is done at all key points of the research and everywhere in between (Eatough, 2012).

With this research using both surveys, a quantitative method, and a thematic analysis, a qualitative method, it can be termed as a mixed methods piece of research. Until recently mixed methods have been considered incompatible and dichotomous (Mertova & Webster, 2019). Despite this critique, the research will, using mixed methods to enrich data (Frost, 2011), adopt the holistic views as described above, into a reflexive practice in order to answer the research questions posed.

**Ethics**

Courage, respectfulness, sincerity, reflexivity, and humility (Macfarlane, 2009) are characteristics vital to any researcher, especially those conducting research that could be deemed sensitive, whether that be the topic being investigated, or the participants, or indeed both.

Psychologists should aim for their research to be beneficial to others, not detrimental.  They should work with integrity and demonstrate their understanding that they have professional and scientific responsibilities to society (Haslam & McGarty, 2014).

The importance of acting ethically is widely recognised (Macfarlane, 2009) however it has been argued It has been argued that conforming to a code of ethics is no guarantee of ethical practices (Hughes, 2009). However, without ethical guidelines or policies being in existence, research would most definitely be damaging to those involved and therefore detrimental to society. One only need revisit studies such as the Tuskegee syphilis study or the Stanford Prison experiment for countless examples for harmful research.

The basic principles of ethics are protection from harm, maintenance of privacy, coercion, informed consent, confidentiality, and debriefing (Salkind, 2018).

This research was conducted in line with guidelines as set out by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2014)and the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). Research was underpinned by the core values of both bodies, integrity, respect for the individual and minimising harm. Furthermore, ethical approval was sought through the University ethical applications process using Haplo, this thorough process involves including all material shared with participants such as information about the study, samples of questions and the debrief information given once participation had taken place.

Once ethical approval had been granted (see appendix), random sampling was used to approach participants for the quantitative aspect of the research.  There were of course considerations to be made when selecting participants (Oliver, 2011)including suitability to the research. Purposive sampling (Smith, 2003)used due to the need for specific attributes within the participants i.e., a number needed to be dyslexic.

Each participant was given information to enable them to give informed consent, such information will include the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw and assurances of confidentiality in line with General data Protection Regulations (GDPR, 2018). As highlighted by Gross, participants will also be debriefed (Gross, 2015), this will include information on extra help and support for students to access if they feel necessary.

Respect for people’s dignity is paramount; people have different backgrounds that will determine how sensitive they may be to particular practices, and the researcher, as should all, be mindful of this at all stages of the research process. The researcher must be able to competently care for the wellbeing of participants (Haslam & McGarty, 2014).

With the research utilising the mixed method approach outlined above, the results and discussion will be split into study one and study two, before concluding the discussion drawing from both studies.

**Study one**

**Method**

The two hypotheses relating to study one are:

H1. Dyslexic students will score lower than their non-dyslexic counterparts therefore having low self-esteem according to Rosenberg’s scale of self-esteem.

H2. Dyslexic students will score as lower than their non-dyslexic counterparts therefore having a fixed mindset according to Dweck’s scale.

A mindset scale and a self-esteem scale will be used to answer questions one and two. The scales, Rosenberg’s self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965)and Dweck’s mindset scale (C. Dweck, 2006), are established measures and have been chosen due to their reliability and validity including Rosenberg’s scale being the most widely used measure of self-esteem using a self-report design (Tomás & Oliver, 1999).

Rosenberg’s self -esteem scale utilises the method of statements being made and the participant is asked to choose a response that most closely fits their feelings about the statement. For example,

“I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others”. The participant must then choose between “strongly agree”, “agree”, “disagree” or “strongly disagree”.

Scoring for these statements is dependent on whether the statement is positive such as the one above or negative. The scores for the above responses would be “strongly agree” scoring 4, “agree” scoring 3, “disagree” scoring 2 and “strongly disagree” scoring 1. This is to be reflective of the fact high self-esteem would score highly on positive statements.

A statement written to be negative, such as:

“All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.”

Despite the participant choosing between the same statements, the scores a reversed so “strongly agree” scores 1, “agree” scores 2, “disagree” scores 3 and “strongly disagree” scoring 4. This time reflecting low self-esteem will score low on the overall test (Rosenberg, 1965).

Similarly, Dweck’s mindset scale works on the same premise. Statements such as:

“No matter how much intelligence you have, you can always change it a good deal”

Is a positive statement demonstrating a belief in growth mindset, thus the scoring would reflect this. On this scale however, there are more options for the participant; “disagree a lot”, “disagree a little”, “disagree”, “agree”, “agree a little”, “agree a lot”.

For positive statements such as the one above the scores will be “disagree a lot” scoring 1, “disagree a little” scoring 2, “disagree” scoring 3, “agree” scoring 4, “agree a little” scoring 5 and “agree a lot” scoring 6.

Conversely, negative statements such as:

“You can learn new things, but you cannot really change your basic level of intelligence.”

Will score the opposite with “disagree a lot” scoring 6, “disagree a little” scoring 5, “disagree” scoring 4, “agree” scoring 3, “agree a little” scoring 2 and “agree a lot” scoring 1, reflecting that a fixed mindset will score low on the overall test (C. Dweck, 2006).

Whilst it has been argued traditional methods of data collection cannot possibly address complex issues (Mertova & Webster, 2019) quantitative methods allow large amounts of data to be collected in a timely and generally cost-effective manner. The most obvious advantage of this being the sheer volume of data able to be collected in this way, therefore the ability to test the statistical significance of a hypothesis or phenomena.

Dependent on the research question(s) involved, quantitative methods are more suitable methods for gathering data relating to definitive, more black and white phenomena. For example, in order to obtain scores of self-esteem and the presence of fixed mindsets, this research needed to adopt a quantitative approach of data collection. This was necessary to confirm the hypotheses formulated:

H1. Dyslexic students will score lower than their non-dyslexic counterparts therefore having low self-esteem according to Rosenberg’s scale of self-esteem.

H2. Dyslexic students will score as lower than their non-dyslexic counterparts therefore having a fixed mindset according to Dweck’s scale.

**Participants**

Participants were recruited from a sixth form college in the Northwest of England, therefore they were aged 16-19 years old and studying either A levels or vocational qualifications within the further education setting.

Recruitment was undertaken using posters with removal tabs on the bottom with the researchers contact details on i.e., name and email address. The researcher is employed by the college therefore, in line with safeguarding policy, must use the institution’s email address in all correspondence with potential and actual participants.

**Procedure**

When potential participants initiated contact, they were sent the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (see appendix) and invited to ask any questions they may have. Once consent was sought, consent forms was stored electronically, entirely separate from the rest of the data to ensure confidentiality. Participants were then sent the relevant surveys (see appendix) and a completion date was organised to ensure a swift and smooth process for collecting data.

Once the surveys had been completed, participants were sent the Debrief information. The completed surveys, using ID numbers as opposed to names to ensure confidentiality, were scored using the scoring sheets (see appendix) and results were recorded on a spreadsheet using the participant ID numbers as assigned at the time of obtaining consent.

**Results**

Findings showed 70% of the dyslexic participants do in fact show evidence of having a fixed mindset. Comparing this to their non-dyslexic counterparts, who were anticipated to have a growth mindset, it was found 90% of those sampled did show evidence of the growth mindset. Thus, showing support for hypothesis one (H1) and not supporting hypothesis two (H2):

H1. Dyslexic students will score lower than their non-dyslexic counterparts therefore having low self-esteem according to Rosenberg’s scale of self-esteem.

H2. Dyslexic students will score as lower than their non-dyslexic counterparts therefore having a fixed mindset according to Dweck’s scale.

Charts 1 and 2 show visual representations of the data

**Chart 1 – comparative bar chart for self-esteem scores in dyslexic and non-dyslexic students**

This bar chart visually demonstrates the lack of non-dyslexic students scoring as having low self-esteem and therefore highlights the only participants who scored as having low self-esteem were students with dyslexia.

**Chart 2 – a comparative bar chart for mindset scores in dyslexic and non-dyslexic students**

This chart highlights the larger number of dyslexic participants scoring as having a fixed mindset compared to their peers without dyslexia. Thus, highlighting the larger number of non-dyslexic students who scored as having a growth mindset.

Separate one factor analyses of variance, with Group (dyslexia vs. control) as between groups factor, were undertaken for the self-esteem data as well as the mindset data.

Both analyses revealed a highly significant Group effect [F(1,19) = 27.86, mean square = 1022.45, p<.001; F(1,19) = 15.58, mean square = 320.00, p<.001 for self-esteem and mindset respectively].

Inspection of the mean data indicated that the controls had significantly higher ratings on both dependent variables [marginal means 35.10 vs. 20.80 (standard error 1.92) for mindset; marginal means 28.90 vs. 20.90 (standard error 1.43) for self-esteem.

**Chart 3 – a scatterplot of the individual scores showing almost no overlap between the two groups**

A picture containing calendar

Description automatically generated

Furthermore, a one way ANOVA showed the relationship between mindset and self-esteem as highly significant: F(1,19)=37.02, p<.001. This suggests confidence and the desire to challenge oneself and achieve are linked as are the opposite, with beliefs of intelligence being a fixed entity limiting an individual to the position they find themselves in, it would seem plausible they would have low self-esteem and a lack of confidence in their ability.

These statistics support findings as discussed above and strongly support the hypotheses

H1. Dyslexic students will score lower than their non-dyslexic counterparts therefore having low self-esteem according to Rosenberg’s scale of self-esteem.

H2. Dyslexic students will score as lower than their non-dyslexic counterparts therefore having a fixed mindset according to Dweck’s scale.

The findings being that yes dyslexic students do, in this case, appear to score lower than their non-dyslexic counterparts on Rosenberg’s scale of self-esteem. As well as yes according to Dweck’s mindset scale, dyslexic students do, in this case, appear to have a fixed mindset.

Implications of these findings and suggestions for further research are discussed later.

The table below shows the mean scores and standard deviations for both sets of scores.

**Chart 4 – Cronbach’s alpha test for reliability**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Cronbach’s Alpha** | **No. of items** |
| 0.777 | 2 |

Thus showing the reliability of the results, an alpha score of above 0.7 is said to be an acceptable benchmark of reliability, therefore the data obtained here is reliable.

**Discussion**

If we consider the findings of study one as confirming dyslexic students do in fact score as having a lower self-esteem than their non-dyslexic counterparts, it is therefore fair to say the suggestions of authors such as (Lithari, 2019) who state dyslexia has a definite effect on identity construction, is supported here. Furthermore, earlier researchers have identified links between dyslexia and self-esteem (Terras et al., 2009) providing further backing for the above statement.

In terms of being able to offer reasons or explanations for the lower self-esteem scores in dyslexic students we would need to examine the results of study two. One such explanation could be the isolation and exclusion felt by students with dyslexia (Humphrey & Mullins, 2002). Whilst Haft et al. (2016) identified students with reading difficulties as being more at risk of poor cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes, in addition to this Wilmot et al (2022) highlight the importance of support for students with dyslexia both at school and at home. These points together demonstrate the vital importance of support and inclusion for students with dyslexia. Furthermore, authors have suggested an early diagnosis as being crucial to the individual (Glazzard, 2010; Snowling et al., 2020).

It must be noted that not all dyslexic students scored as having low self-esteem, we cannot therefore generalise dyslexia is indicative of low self-esteem only. Support for students with dyslexia having a high self-esteem can be seen in works such as (Blake, 2018) with the possibility they have been given opportunities to seek support for things they find challenging and have also been given the opportunity to explore their strengths in other areas than reading. This point also compliments the point of empowerment made by (Bowl, 2014).

Therefore, leading the discussion into the area of mindset as it is possible the resilience demonstrated by students with dyslexia is an indicator of high self-esteem (Goegan et al., 2021; Haft et al., 2016). A point to consider in terms of the population utilised for this research, participants were recruited from a sixth form college i.e. they are participating in further non-compulsory education, an indicator of growth mindset being present in all students at the college.

Mindset theory posits individuals possess either a fixed or a growth mindset. Those with a fixed mindset, also known as entity theory, hold the view intelligence cannot be changed (Bandura & Dweck, 1985; Dweck & Legget, 1988 in Dweck, 2000). Furthermore, those with a fixed mindset value the end result over the learning experience (Dweck, 2017 in Savvides & Bond, 2021) therefore fixed mindsets are believed to be a predictor of lower achievement (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). With that being said however, interventions have been suggested particularly for those with SpLD with the aim of reducing the impact of this in order to reduce this impact, (Kapasi & Pei, 2022).

If we consider the early diagnosis being a positive step for a dyslexic child (Glazzard, 2010), and the label of being dyslexic as not having a negative impact on them due to this early diagnosis (Goulandris & Snowling, 2001; Scott, 2004) we could consider the interventions mentioned above (Kapasi & Pei, 2022) as being successfully implemented.

**Study two**

**Method**

Two research questions were posed for this study, those questions being:

RQ1. Is there evidence of self-esteem issues in dyslexic or non-dyslexic students during interviews?

RQ2. Is there evidence of fixed or growth mindsets in dyslexic or non-dyslexic students during interviews?

These questions fitting within the interpretivist paradigm, with its emphasis on humans creating meaning (Saunders et al., 2015) and the purpose of research being conducted to create new and richer understandings of a phenomena, are more suited to a thematic analysis. However, the biggest problem of course being that interpretive methods are largely an uncritical form of study (Crotty, 2020).

Given that qualitative research aims to study human behaviour in the social, cultural and political contexts in which they occur (Salkind, 2018) it is no surprise methods such as observations and interviews are seen here.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) seeks insights into experiences of humans, exploring events and their meanings (Frost, 2011). Narrative techniques can be deemed as similar to an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in that they also explore an individual’s lived experiences. They have therefore been used in many types of psychological research and there have been many interpretations of the term narratives (Esin, 2011). Narrative methods refer to a family of methods and understand complexities (Frost, 2011).

“Narratives are seen as the vehicle through which we talk about our world, lives and selves” (Esin, 2011: 94).

Narrative methods can be complex as there are layers on information coming to the fore, all with the potential to be explored and provide rich data for the researcher (Breakwell, 2012).

“Narrative delves beneath the outward show of behaviour to explore thoughts, feelings and intentions” (Mertova & Webster, 2019:8)

The thematic model of narratives, as posited by (Esin, 2011) focuses on the content of the stories being told, what is said rather than how it is said. Limitations of this model stem from people not necessarily meaning the same thing (ibid) so in order to control for this, coding and thematic analysis, will be necessary when analysing results. Questions will need to be clear, and an adequate depth of understanding must be obtained in order to make this possible. Linking back to research paradigms, postmodernism emphasises the role of language and its demonstration of power relations, and with this research exploring a vital aspect of disability and whether it has merit being regarded as social oppression, the experiences of dyslexics in inclusive education and its impact on their mindset and self-esteem.

In order to answer research questions one and two (RQ1. Is there evidence of self-esteem issues in dyslexic or non-dyslexic students during interviews? RQ2. Is there evidence of fixed or growth mindsets in dyslexic or non-dyslexic students during interviews?) a semi structured interview will be used in order to direct the conversation and allow the researcher to glean the necessary content. This has been chosen in order to provide some level of structure to the interviews but not as to be too restrictive as to allow the participants to feel able to answer how they feel necessary and comfortable in doing so.

The alleged advantages of semi structured interviews are control, reliability and speed and given the interviewer’s role is to facilitate and guide (ibid) it’s obviously necessary to use a semi structured technique. It has been said case studies are a unique way of gaining information about human subjects (Salkind, 2018) and a thematic analysis is not dissimilar to case studies; they also allow a way of gaining information about human subjects, mainly their experiences and interpretations of said experiences and events.

Due to the fact that the methodology selected involves the process of exploring subjective experiences, thus this methodology has been subjected to much scrutiny (Mauthner et al., 2002). As previously discussed, interpretive methodologies have been criticised for their lack of criticality. Furthermore, conflicting paradigms, whose primary focus is objectivity, would not be suitable for this particular research, as evidenced above. Qualitative methodologies have a key focus of people’s take on their world (Eatough, 2012).

**Participants**

Participants were recruited from a sixth form college in the Northwest of England, therefore they were aged 16-19 years old and studying either A levels or vocational qualifications within the further education setting.

Recruitment was undertaken using posters with removal tabs on the bottom with the researchers contact details on i.e., name and email address. The researcher is employed by the college therefore, in line with safeguarding policy, must use the institution’s email address in all correspondence with potential and actual participants.

In terms of recruiting participants for the interviews required for study two of the research, participants who completed the surveys were invited to take part in the interview stage. If some or not enough participants were unable to agree to this, a further poster was used to recruit participants, with removable tabs again with the researchers name and institution email address, as per the college’s safeguarding policy the researcher must abide by as an employee at said college.

**Participant profiles**

In total four participants were recruited to participate in study two; three females and one male. In terms of having dyslexia two of the four participants had dyslexia: one dyslexic participant was male and the other female. The other two participants did not have dyslexia meaning half of the population had dyslexia and half did not.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **001** | **002** | **003** | **004** |
| Gender | Female | Male | Female | Female |
| Age | 18 | 17 | 17 | 17 |
| Dyslexia? | Y  Diagnosed at 7 | Y  Diagnosed at 5 | N | N |
| Studying | Level 2 Art  Functional Skills Maths | Music  GCSE English | Law  Criminology  Politics  Maths | Level 3 Health and Social Care |
| Next steps | Wants to do something to help people | Unsure | University to become a solicitor | Possibly university – nursing or midwifery |

**Procedure**

Semi structured questions were prepared for use within the interview stage and were included in the ethical approval process as documented below (see appendix). This template of questions allowed the researcher to introduce topics the interviews were required to cover and was the basis of the conversation. Further questioning was dependent on the participants responses to these questions and the researchers wishes within the interview.

As the research process was under way, time became an issue due to the Summer term drawing to an end and therefore the ability to access participants would be decreasing as various subjects completed their courses for the Summer. The researcher was able to recruit four participants to interview: two dyslexic students and two students without dyslexia. Whilst this was not ideal, with time pressures the decision was made to continue with the four interviews, the limitations of this small sample size will be discussed later.

**Results**

Semi structured interviews were conducted for the second part of this research and results were interpreted using the model of a thematic analysis.

Interviews were transcribed into a table format with columns for initial annotation. The second annotation was a method of coding in order to simplify annotations into thematic codes. Once this was complete it emerged the codes could be collected into clusters based on the themes of the research such as high self-esteem and growth mindset.

**Table 1** shows the initial set up of the process.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Transcription** | **Annotation/ thematic analysis** | **Thematic coding** |
| *Yeah, I like art, you get to try different things like painting and stuff. I’m doing a clay thing for my final project, I’m hoping it looks good but I like doing it anyway.*  *I liked it at school but in college its even better. My teachers are nice and they get how I am like they don’t nag at me and stuff.*  *I hate maths, I’m so rubbish at it, like this is my second year trying to pass it.* |  |  |

**Table 2** shows the initial annotations process where statements were summarised into short but meaningful statements ready for the next stage of the process, thematic coding.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Transcription** | **Annotation/ thematic analysis** | **Thematic coding** |
| *Yeah, I like art, you get to try different things like painting and stuff. I’m doing a clay thing for my final project, I’m hoping it looks good but I like doing it anyway.*  *I liked it at school but in college its even better. My teachers are nice and they get how I am like they don’t nag at me and stuff.*  *I hate maths, I’m so rubbish at it, like this is my second year trying to pass it.* | Looking for approval “get how I am”  Suggests teachers have been at issue at some point  “so rubbish at it” – no confidence in ability |  |

**Table 3** shows the thematic coding where the initial annotations have been summarised into terms that sum up the overall statements made during the interviews.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Transcription** | **Annotation/ thematic analysis** | **Thematic coding** |
| *Yeah, I like art, you get to try different things like painting and stuff. I’m doing a clay thing for my final project, I’m hoping it looks good but I like doing it anyway.*  *I liked it at school but in college its even better. My teachers are nice and they get how I am like they don’t nag at me and stuff.*  *I hate maths, I’m so rubbish at it, like this is my second year trying to pass it.* | Looking for approval “get how I am”  Suggests teachers have been at issue at some point  “so rubbish at it” – no confidence in ability | Lack of confidence  Lack of confidence in ability  Low self esteem |

Once the thematic coding had been completed, I was able to combine the themes into clusters; where codes or themes had similar meanings or implications, the table below shows the clusters and their associated themes.

**Table 4**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Cluster** | **Themes** |
| **High self esteem** | High confidence, high self-esteem, self-aware, ambition, driven, growth mindset, hardworking, enjoys challenge |
| **Low self-esteem** | Lack of confidence, lack of confidence in ability, trying to meet expectations, uncertainty, low self-esteem, comparing self to others, issues with self-esteem, school has negatively impacted |
| **Growth mindset** | Ambition, driven, open mind, hardworking, established role models, enjoys challenge |
| **Fixed mindset** | Lack of confidence, reacts to stress, fixed mindset |
| **Emotional intelligence** | Compassion, empathy, self-aware, high self-esteem, ambition, established role models, reacts to stress |

There are of course, some overlapping themes that have been allocated to more than one cluster, this is due to the fact they can be interpreted in various ways. For example, being self-aware can be termed as being emotionally intelligent and in touch with oneself, but this can also be a component of having high self-esteem in that the person knows who they are and their capabilities and limits.

In addition, the final cluster, cluster 5 of themes relating to emotional intelligence, was not in the original design or plan for the interviews but the researcher found these themes emerging throughout the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and felt they were too important to not include. This cluster may highlight qualities of the students and potentially indicate career options for the participants. These findings have great importance; highlighting such qualities within the cluster of emotional intelligence could be used as interventions for low self-esteem and fixed mindset, in the hopes of improving their scores and thus reversing the damage of perpetual low self-esteem, low expectations and the subsequent low achievement they could result in.

**Secondary coding check**

Due to the subjectivity of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) I felt it necessary to put a control measure in to check the interpretations, I did this by inviting a secondary checker to read my annotations of the transcriptions and the subsequent thematic coding I applied. I then asked them to check my clusters (table 4).

This was, of course undertaken with complete anonymity for the participants. The secondary check was only given the tables of information on separate pages, it was not necessary for them to know the participant’s ID number or whether they were a dyslexic or non-dyslexic participant, it was only my work they were checking.

**Word cloud**

Participants were asked to describe their experiences of dyslexia. From their descriptions and the interview as a whole a word cloud was created. A word cloud is a visual representation of words or phrases most frequently used; the words appear larger the more they have appeared.

Graphical user interface, text, application

Description automatically generated

Here we can see some words and phrases stand out immediately, such as challenge, individuality and try hard.

***Challenge***

Challenge has been discussed throughout this in relation to mindset: those with a growth mindset thrive on challenge (Dweck, 2006). As discussed, it was difficult to code responses as evidence of a fixed mindset, and so it was decided that to some degree all participants must have some level of a growth mindset. This was anticipated due to the fact the sample for this study was students from a sixth form college, thus showing some degree of effort and work ethic as they had undertaken further education following their GCSE’s and completion of compulsory education (compulsory education being the end of the academic year in which they turn 16).

This is not to decry the challenges people face on a day-to-day basis, dyslexic or non-dyslexic, and this is why the term challenge must always be considered whether discussing student experiences whether they have dyslexia or not.

**Individuality**

There is much research on the advocacy for individuality, self-efficacy, and empowerment, including that of Bowl who spoke of the importance of empowerment for the individual (Bowl, 2014). In addition to this, author such as Cody & McGarry have studied student voice in relation to implementing change (Cody & McGarry, 2012). Student voice has given students of all backgrounds, including those with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD), a platform to share their views on their education and the educational settings they are part of in order to provide feedback and implement change. This is an example of person-centred approaches, such as those that have long been implemented in health care settings, an article by Happell et al., highlights the importance of person-centred approaches in mental health nursing (Happell et al., 2019), such approaches could and should be adopted with education settings also, particularly when dealing with issues surrounding inclusion and SpLD.

**Be successful**

This phrase directly relates to concepts of self and self-actualisation as has been discussed throughout this research. How successful one wants to be or can be is a subjective entity as success means different things to different people. However, the fact this phrase appears large in the word cloud indicates its frequency participants said it, thus highlighting all participants desire to succeed. Furthermore, its more evidence for the argument that all participants possess a growth mindset to some degree or other.

**Help**

This word stood out because it can be interpreted as a cry for help or as a statement; that they have received help or that something has been helpful. It is well documented people with dyslexia will need and are entitled to help and support in order to learn and be involved in education. This is due to their having a defined need according to their diagnosed deficit. Nevertheless, without said help they will struggle and likely fall behind, leading to the predicted low academic achievements (Riddick, 2001). Therefore, the appearance of this word within the word cloud highlights the crucial role support plays in educating students with dyslexia.

**Confidence**

Confidence is another term that stood out. Confidence is usually only felt when an individual feels comfortable in a situation, comfortable within themselves and comfortable with the people around them. As such, the fact this term appeared in the word cloud indicates a level of comfort felt by all students, allowing them to feel confident in themselves and their abilities. We can also derive from this the participants feel some level of esteem also. They may not have scored highly on the scale but nevertheless they display characteristics associated with high self-esteem.

**Ambition**

Ambition is another term linked with growth mindset and the ability to self-actualise. The very definition of the word ambition demonstrates the desire to achieve:

“a strong wish to achieve something” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022).

The appearance of this word within the word cloud reinforces the notion of the dyslexic participants having some level of esteem as within Maslow’s hierarchy, without having met the esteem need, it is believed people were unable to reach the next level i.e., self-actualisation.

**Hard**

As with the word challenge, it is natural for the word hard to appear, not everything is easy and certainly not for everyone. But as with challenge, things that are hard can be overcome. The use of this term within the interviews demonstrates the participants resilience.

As previously discussed, one of the attributes evidenced within mindset theory is that those with a growth mindset show greater resilience (Yeager & Dweck, 2020).

The outcomes of the word cloud also support the findings of clusters from the thematic analyses and in particular the emergence of the unexpected cluster of emotional intelligence (cluster 5).

During the interviews all participants were asked where they placed themselves on the pyramid and why. **Table 5** below shows their responses.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participant 001 | Participant 002 | Participant 003 | Participant 004 |
| Diagram  Description automatically generated | Diagram  Description automatically generated | Diagram  Description automatically generated | Diagram  Description automatically generated |
| *I feel like I belong somewhere, like at home I know they’re my family and that. So yeah that 3rd level.* | *I feel like I have achieved some stuff, like the guitar. Does that count?* | *I feel like I belong somewhere and I’m doing good at college so that’s accomplishment, but I don’t think I’ve reached my full potential yet.* | *I feel like I belong, at home with my family and friends, I don’t know if I could say I was any higher.* |

From the responses as shown above, all four participants felt they were at least in the middle of the pyramid feeling a sense of belonging. Two also felt they were in the next stage where they felt accomplished in some way. One of the participants felt their skill at playing guitar made them feel proud and accomplished. This can be interpreted as a marker of high self-esteem as they were able to recognise, they could feel proud of themselves. Another participant felt they belonged because of their family at home indicating feelings of stability have an impact on how a person feels about themselves. One participant, 003 went as far as to say they hadn’t reached their full potential yet. A statement indicative of a growth mindset and their ambition to drive themselves further.

Due to the interesting responses, participants were also asked what would mean they moved up to the next level on the pyramid in order to glean any further insights into self-esteem and/or mindset.

**Table 6** shows their responses

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participant 001 | Participant 002 | Participant 003 | Participant 004 |
| Diagram  Description automatically generated | Diagram  Description automatically generated | Diagram  Description automatically generated | Diagram  Description automatically generated |
| *Passing my art I guess and getting to be a support worker. Then I’d be more up there.* | *Having a mint car and house and that. That’s my dream so I guess that’s kinda my full potential.* | *Pfft …. Long pause… I have no idea \*laughs\* I guess I should start thinking about that* | *Passing my course and getting onto the midwife course maybe. I’m so indecisive about it all, maybe that’s the problem like I just don’t know \*laughs\** |

Participant 001’s response didn’t seem certain as to whether moving up to the next stage was possible for them as opposed to participant 004 who was far more certain of what they need to do to achieve the next stage. This could indicate differences in self-esteem and mindset, with participant 001 displaying signs of a fixed mindset and low self-esteem and 004 showing a growth mindset and high self-esteem.

**Discussion**

The results above paint an interesting picture, but they require further discussion in order to outline the outcomes of this research. Furthermore, findings of this research must be discussed in conjunction with literature in mind.

Interviews with both dyslexic and non-dyslexic students allowed the research to become richer than just mere data and statistics. The use of mixed methods was chosen deliberately for this purpose, whilst quantitative data allows us to collect larger amounts of data and it has its place, in order to gain real understanding of complex issues such as mindset, self-esteem and experiences of dyslexia, it’s necessary to use methods of data collection that facilitate conversations to gain meanings: analysis of the quantitative aspect of the research will be discussed later.

There are many reasons why this may be for example sample size could be a limiting factor. A larger scale sample would possibly allow for more scope in terms of participant variance leading to a greater difference in experiences of education, dyslexia, and geographical location even.

The thematic coding that emerged from the annotations revealed a set of common themes grouped into clusters, as discussed below.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Cluster** | **Themes** |
| **High self esteem** | High confidence, high self-esteem, self-aware, ambition, driven, growth mindset, hardworking, enjoys challenge |
| **Low self-esteem** | Lack of confidence, lack of confidence in ability, trying to meet expectations, uncertainty, low self-esteem, comparing self to others, issues with self-esteem, school has negatively impacted |
| **Growth mindset** | Ambition, driven, open mind, hardworking, established role models, enjoys challenge |
| **Fixed mindset** | Lack of confidence, reacts to stress, fixed mindset |
| **Emotional intelligence** | Compassion, empathy, self-aware, high self-esteem, ambition, established role models, reacts to stress |

**Cluster 1 - High self-esteem**

There were various responses that could be grouped into this heading. During the interviews participants were asked questions directed towards their feelings about themselves related to their studies. Responses that highlighted feelings of confidence, one such example being:

I guess I’ve always known I’m happy in my own skin, confident and that you know” demonstrate a feeling of confidence and being happy in their own skin, a quality synonymous with self-esteem.

Annotations of self-awareness were made from the transcriptions, one interview commented

“When I finish at … I want to go to Uni and hopefully do Criminal Law or something like that. I’ve always wanted to go away to Uni and have the whole student life.”

The level of awareness of what this student wants to do after sixth form demonstrates their ability to identify a goal and work towards it i.e., getting into University and move away from home. there are two aspects to this goal, the academic achievement of getting a place at University and the transition to adulthood goal of moving away from home. This participant demonstrates both high self-esteem and a growth mindset and thus demonstrates the point made earlier about overlapping themes and that individuals cannot be simply placed into one category or another.

*“I’ve always fancied being a midwife and I watch all of them tv shows about it like one born every minute and that. My mates laugh, they’re all watching love island and I’m watching babies being born!”*

Shows a confidence in themselves to do what their peers aren’t, which is a good indicator of high self-esteem. Someone with high self-esteem knows that although there may be some mocking from their friends or peers it’s not something that overly concerns them. This particular participant watches tv shows relating to their possible career aspirations, shows that aren’t necessarily what their friends are watching but they don’t mind, they have a vested interest in the alternatives as it will benefit their future, thus demonstrating a solid sense of self.

**Cluster 2 - Low self-esteem**

Responses grouped under low self-esteem include being coded as having a lack of confidence and a lack of confidence in ability and school has had a negative impact. For example, when asked what they find most difficult, one participant responded with

“I hate maths, I’m so rubbish at it, like this is my second year trying to pass it.”

This statement highlighted the lack of confidence this particular participant had in their ability in maths, but also it implied the possibility that they compare themselves to others, others who don’t take more than one year to pass maths. Thematic coding also grouped comparing self to others under the heading of low self-esteem, this is because those with high self-esteem are comfortable in themselves and compare themselves to others less, their competition is themselves, trying to better their self through challenges.

*“Reading some of them statements was like listening to myself it was mad. Like there was one that said something like I’m no good at all and I’m like yeah that’s so me.”*

Very clearly shows the person holds negative beliefs about themselves and thus has low self-esteem. This participant, in this statement shows no confidence in themselves, yet later in the questions they go on to talk about their guitar skills. This is an example of how it was difficult to categorise participants, in one aspect they demonstrate low self-esteem and potentially a fixed mindset, yet they later to go on to show they have developed and continue to work on skills, thus demonstrating a growth mindset.

**Cluster 3 - Growth mindset**

Within the grouping of growth mindset includes such annotations as hard working, enjoys challenge and established role models. One such statement made during the interviews demonstrates these annotations perfectly and why they were placed under the heading of growth mindset.

“I wouldn’t have thought I was ambitious as such, but I like college and doing my courses.

The one that said something about changing your intelligence stood out because it made me think of my mum, she always tells me how she didn’t do well at school, she had like quite a tough time growing up so she wasn’t really in a good place to do exams. So when she got a bit older she went to college at night to get her qualifications and a better job”

This particular participant explains here how they use their mum as inspiration, her mum went to night school to gain her qualifications and as a result this student works hard and enjoys their studies.

As mentioned above under the subheading of low self-esteem, the participant who mentioned guitar skills later went on to comment:

*“I teach myself bits like off you tube and that.”*

This comment clearly demonstrates the motivation and ambition to develop their skills, not only that they actually have found resources in order to do so. These can be termed as qualities of someone with a growth mindset; they are motivated to develop, they identify a skill they wish to develop, they seek the relevant resources to do this, and they work on said skill.

This comment also shows low self-esteem does not necessarily equate to having a fixed mindset reinforcing the purpose of completing an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, it has allowed a deeper exploration of the participant’s responses.

**Cluster 4 - Fixed mindset**

Examples of a fixed mindset were harder to code during the interviews, as a result there are significantly less under this heading in the table above (see table 4).

When discussing stressful situations within their studies, one participant said

*“Some weeks I couldn’t do it and then you get in trouble. I used to cry a lot and then I just got fed up of trying, like what was the point”*

They were referring to the amount of homework given at school and how they struggled to keep up, so they gave up. Thus, demonstrating an attribute of a fixed mindset when they gave up trying. A growth mindset, thriving on challenge would have carried on attempting, whereas this student found they were struggling, didn’t ask for help and stopped trying with their homework.

**Cluster 5 - Emotional intelligence**

This heading was added as an extra as it was felt they didn’t neatly fit under the other headings. The researcher had not planned for this cluster, these themes emerged from the interviews themselves and are included due to their great significance within this research and its implications.

These findings highlight qualities beyond self-esteem scores and mindsets, qualities that could inform potential career choices. But more importantly than that, they could inform interventions within their education to interrupt the downward spiral of low self-esteem, a fixed mindset and the subsequent low achievement and instead improve students’ self-esteem, change their opinion on intelligence being a fixed entity and transform their lives and creating opportunities.

Furthermore, emotional intelligence should be acknowledged in its own right when discussing self-esteem, self-actualisation, and mindset due it relating to the self and being self-aware.

One such example of interviews being coded in such a way as compassion and empathy is

*“I’d like to help people with problems like I’ve had, I think I could do that well because I’ve been through it”*

This participant demonstrates their compassion and empathy for others and their ambition to work in such a way as to help others. Whilst this can apply to both high and low self-esteem it’s worth noting a person, such as this participant’s ability to have a high level of emotional intelligence regardless of their scores on the self-esteem scale.

*“time management is the hardest thing for me, I’m doing 4 subjects at the moment but I’m dropping maths after the summer, they’ve said 3 A levels will keep me busy enough \*laughs\*”*

Shows a deeper level of self-awareness and understanding. They demonstrate their ability to criticise themselves in a positive way in order to find a solution to the issue at hand, as opposed to the opposite of constantly criticising themselves and telling themselves they are no good, an indicator of low self-esteem.

**Maslow’s hierarchy of needs**

As discussed previously, Maslow’s work on self-esteem involved him formulating a hierarchical model known as the hierarchy of needs. The model was a visual representation of what an individual needs in order to progress and attain the stage of self-actualisation i.e., their full potential. The model is not fixed, some may reach the stages at different rates, the lower stages of the pyramid. Below is a visual representation of Maslow’s hierarchical model.

The bottom layer/section contains what could be termed as basic human needs in order to survive. Above, safety needs, some would argue are as essential as physiological needs. This is worth noting here, as with any self-esteem measure, there is a certain level of subjectivity as to how the individual themselves classes their needs. To that end, participants were asked about this during their interviews. Their responses will be discussed later. Above feeling safe and secure, Maslow viewed the next need to be that of belonging where an individual has meaningful relationships and friendships – a support network. The highest 2 needs; feelings of accomplishment and reaching one’s full potential may be viewed alongside each other as opposed to one above the other, again an example of the subjective nature of the topic.

During the interviews, participants were shown the above visual representation of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and were asked where they felt they would place themselves at the current time.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participant 001 | Participant 002 | Participant 003 | Participant 004 |
| Diagram  Description automatically generated | Diagram  Description automatically generated | Diagram  Description automatically generated | Diagram  Description automatically generated |
| *I feel like I belong somewhere, like at home I know they’re my family and that. So yeah that 3rd level.* | *I feel like I have achieved some stuff, like the guitar. Does that count?* | *I feel like I belong somewhere and I’m doing good at college so that’s accomplishment, but I don’t think I’ve reached my full potential yet.* | *I feel like I belong, at home with my family and friends, I don’t know if I could say I was any higher.* |

All four participants felt at least a sense of belonging, but two felt accomplished in some way. As one progresses up the pyramid, the more difficult it becomes to meet the next need (Gross, 2015).

As discussed in the introduction, family support has been shown to promote self-esteem (Carawan et al., 2016) furthermore, it’s worth noting here, social status plays a vital role in mental wellbeing (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). These findings are important here to note given all participants felt a sense of belonging, more than likely stemming from family support and a stable home life. They possibly also all feel safe in terms of socially too, giving them a further sense of belonging with their peers.

In view of the literature and the outcomes of the interviews, on this point, there is support for the notion of needing to feel like you belong in order to achieve in life.

Participants were then asked what would allow them to move up to the next level.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participant 001 | Participant 002 | Participant 003 | Participant 004 |
| Diagram  Description automatically generated | Diagram  Description automatically generated | Diagram  Description automatically generated | Diagram  Description automatically generated |
| *Passing my art I guess and getting to be a support worker. Then I’d be more up there.* | *Having a mint car and house and that. That’s my dream so I guess that’s kinda my full potential.* | *Pfft …. Long pause… I have no idea \*laughs\* I guess I should start thinking about that* | *Passing my course and getting onto the midwife course maybe. I’m so indecisive about it all, maybe that’s the problem like I just don’t know \*laughs\** |

Participant 004’s response was possibly the most ambition driven response: they desire to have a career, and this pushes them forward motivating them to continue to work hard. On the other hand, participants 001 and 003 responses indicate they may not feel that level is possible for them at all.

Over the years various models of self-esteem have been posited. Whilst unidimensional models view self-esteem as a feeling of self-worth, multidimensional models state self-esteem is made up of different elements. Conversely hierarchical models state self-esteem is seen as a collection of judgements of performance of various aspects of an individual (D. Miller & Moran, 2014), hierarchical models offer a more holistic approach to self-esteem as they allow for more individuality and subjectivity, however they are more complex.

As mentioned above, these models allow for more individuality and subjectivity as they are not fixed, nor do they apply to people in the same way, meaning individuals may place the needs in a different order to others and within this model this is accepted under the premise that everyone is different.

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, allows for different experiences and factors influencing self-esteem. For instance, family support has been shown to improve and boost self-esteem (Carawan et al., 2016) and social status can influence mental wellbeing (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Feelings of pride, esteem and reaching one’s full potential will be extremely difficult to achieve even before difficulties such as dyslexia are considered, this is because the higher needs in the hierarchy are more difficult to achieve (Gross, 2015).

Participants responses when shown the hierarchical model as posed by Maslow are discussed above, but in relation to inclusive policy and diagnosis of dyslexia the model can be useful. Maslow’s model places physiological needs at the bottom of the pyramid, these are the basic needs one needs to survive, next comes safety needs, which some would argue are basic survival needs also. In the image below the middle section has been replaced to show the importance of feelings of belonginess within an educational setting and the society of the setting.

This visual representation therefore shows how vital a part this need plays. Furthermore, as described above the participants all placed themselves as at least having this middle need of belongingness, indicating the success of their particular college in successfully creating an inclusive space.

There are of course various possible explanations for this, but it could well be related to mindset; their beliefs about their ability, or lack of, and therefore have a fixed mindset. The literature reports fixed mindsets as being a predictor of low academic achievements (Yeager & Dweck, 2020) and so applying the same logic to these findings indicates participants 001 and 003 display attributes relating to a fixed mindset and therefore feel the next level of the hierarchy is unattainable for them as they’re not intelligent enough to reach it, meaning they don’t even try.

(Bowl, 2014) highlights empowerment of individuals is important for feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy. From the interviews we can see evidence of this in practice; when they were asked if they felt they had received more help in college than when they were at school, their response was

*“Yeah I think so, they’ve listened to me more and let me be me”*

This is an interesting response; they clearly demonstrate a knowledge of who they are as an individual. Furthermore, they have felt listened to, like their opinions matter. Placing a person at the centre of their support allows them to feel empowered and in control of what happens to them. When we allow a person to feel this way they engage far more positively in the process, leading to more positive outcomes.

(Lithari, 2019) dyslexia has a “profound” effect on identity construction, and within these interviews this could be argued as true. The above comment made by a participant saying college have allowed them to be themselves and listened to their point of view is a good example of them developing their identity. Perhaps up until college they’ve felt somewhat transient in terms of their identity. Earlier in the interview they discussed the process of their diagnosis of dyslexia. Another participant talked about how they were too young to remember the testing and diagnosis, suggesting they can’t remember a time before that when they noticed something wrong. It is unlikely before the age of 5 they had compared themselves to others, however given the concept of self develops around the age of 4. They did however comment that

*“I know since I’ve sometimes felt rubbish sometimes when I can’t do stuff as easy as my mates”*

Suggesting they have since compared themselves to their peers, thus implying that even after being diagnosed as dyslexic and not remembering struggling beforehand, students still notice a difference between themselves and others. So, one does have to wonder if Lithari’s statement is true in either sense, it can have an effect on how an individual see’s themselves, regardless of when the diagnosis occurs, because they will always notice they are different in some way.

Linking with this (Terras et al., 2009) support the link with dyslexia and self-esteem, whilst it was difficult to categorise responses as being indicators of low self-esteem if we look at the interviews and survey results together, we may be able to gain a clearer picture of whether this comment has merit. Chart 1 shows the frequency of a low score on the self-esteem scale as against a high score on the self-esteem scale for both dyslexic and non-dyslexic participants. There was an equal number of dyslexic and non-dyslexic participants sampled yet the chart shows few scored low on the scale whether they were dyslexic or not.

With that being said, all of the low scores on the self-esteem scale were scored by dyslexic participants, so despite it not being a large majority the results do in fact show dyslexic participants as having low self-esteem scores, but we can’t generalise from this.

Referring back to the statement at hand regarding the link between dyslexia and self-esteem (Lithari, 2019), we can therefore give it some merit but further research with a greater demographic i.e., a larger sample size including a variety of age ranges and backgrounds would be necessary in order to fully corroborate these findings.

Analysing the interviews in terms of diagnosis of dyslexia and its impact we must consider the literature at this point. It has been argued that diagnosis plays a key role in how people with dyslexia feel about their condition and how it shapes their educational experiences. Glazzard advocates an early diagnosis as being vital (Glazzard, 2010) and building upon this, others have argued if early interventions fail to happen it can lead to a downward spiral (Snowling et al., 2020). From the interviews and thematic analysis conducted on the transcriptions there are a few key points to highlight here.

One participant received a diagnosis fairly early on, age 5 whereas the other wasn’t diagnosed they thought until they were around 8. The participant diagnosed earlier reports they do not remember the testing process, or perhaps more importantly, what led to the tests being necessary. In this case this student has only ever known education in light of dyslexia. On the other hand, the other participant has some recollection of their experiences pre and post diagnosis. The comment they

*“knew something was wrong anyway”*

implies their knowledge of being different in some way; that they could identify they were struggling with something their peers were not.

However, age 8 is still not a late diagnosis in reality, some people are not diagnosed as dyslexic until adulthood. We must therefore always be mindful of the context of the meaning of the term ‘early’ in this case as meaning early in the students educational career as opposed to early in their life.

The participant who has no recollection of pre diagnosis could be deemed as ‘better off’ in that they don’t remember any sort of struggles they may have experienced. However, that is not to say they didn’t experience them, nor does it negate the fact they have had negative experiences since being diagnosed. For example,

“*I’ve sometimes felt rubbish sometimes when I can’t do stuff as easy as my mates”*

suggests their struggles have been seeing their peers seemingly finding this easy whereas they do not. Comparing themselves to others has the potential for them to experience low self-esteem if they place a large significance in keeping up with others.

So, referring back to the literature regarding early diagnosis and interventions being key (Glazzard, 2010; Snowling et al., 2020) we can see there is some truth to these findings, whilst both students were diagnosed relatively early if the diagnoses hadn’t happened until later in their lives, they wouldn’t have managed to utilise their education in the same manner. Further research would be helpful in examining experiences of early versus late diagnosis of dyslexia in order to answer this more fully.

Relating to diagnosis and the label of being dyslexic is the connotations of the label itself. It has been discussed how having a diagnosis is the impetus for accessing support and gaining an explanation as to why the individual is struggling. However, people may struggle with the label too, having something wrong or abnormal may cause individuals to feel negatively about themselves causing low self-esteem, low expectations of themselves and therefore low achievement for themselves. Again, there is a level of subjectivity in terminology here, achievement can mean different things to different people so to note, achievement is being referred to here as the achievement to the individual. For example, some may say getting into University is an achievement whereas others see further education as equally high achievement in the context of their academic ability. Furthermore, this research does not identify as any achievement higher or lower than another and accepts the individuality of goals, success, and achievement. Scott highlights the issues of labelling and its negative connotations (Scott, 2004), negative connotations being a person with dyslexia is abnormal, that they have something wrong. This can be seen in one of the interviews, one participant whin discussing their diagnosis said

“*my dad wasn’t happy because he thought I’d have to go to a special school”*

Thus, suggesting their father perceived dyslexia as a negative, such a negative that they would need to change schools from mainstream education into a special school. This should in no way reflect as a negative, yet the participant’s father perceived the diagnosis as to mean a change.

This is also, demonstrative of another issue too, the issue of stereotyping and perceptions of impairment. Luckily for this participant the meetings and implementation of support helped their father change his perception and he was able to continue to support them in accepting the diagnosis of dyslexia.

Feelings of shame can be an indicator of low self-esteem, individuals with low self-esteem, particularly those with dyslexia, can experience negative and detrimental effects on their success.

Feelings of shame in those with dyslexia has been highlighted as an issue that needs addressing (Alexander-Passe, 2006). Furthermore, if we consider that the arguments stating dyslexia has been ignored in terms of being included within learning difficulties (Kirby, 2019), together with the suggestion that the social model of disability inadequately served those with learning difficulties (Stalker, 2020) we must look to the responses from participants to check for evidence of these statements.

With both participants having been diagnosed early (both were in primary school) it doesn’t give much substance to the idea dyslexia has been ignored, as if it were true the participants teachers would possibly not have considered dyslexia as being an explanation of their difficulties.

There were examples of feelings of shame within some responses, for example, when discussing their experiences of bullying, a participant described them faking illness to avoid having to face their tormentor:

*“I got bullied quite a bit around the time we found out I was dyslexic; we were doing a group project about Kings and Queens and this girl always used to tease me for me writing and stuff. I kept telling mum I was ill, so I didn’t have to go to school but then my dad made me go. He told me not to shrink into myself and I see now he was right, but back then I hated him for making me see her.”*

The other participant with dyslexia revealed compared to their siblings

*“I’ve always felt like the stupid one”*

Displaying evidence of comparing themselves to others and feeling ashamed of their lack of ability, in their view.

Authors have stated dyslexic students feel isolated and socially excluded (Humphrey & Mullins, 2002) but there was little evidence of this in the interviews, only one of the two dyslexic participants interviewed reported to have been bullied because of their dyslexia and whilst it was upsetting for them, they have still been able to make friends as opposed to feeling isolated or excluded.

That’s not to say however that others may feel differently, there’s evidence to the contrary, just not in this study.

As discussed in the introduction there have been some research findings suggesting mainstream education leads to social isolation (Little & Evans, 2021) however in the interviews conducted there was no evidence of this with both dyslexic participants stating they have groups of friends and other evidence such as their integration into college life, both reporting they have felt supported and happy at college. As a note to this, the small sample size and given students are at a sixth form college this is not representative of neither mainstream schooling nor all dyslexic sixth form students across the country. Therefore, a larger more representative sample would be recommended in order to make a more generalised statement on this point.

It was identified earlier the purpose of inclusive education and the policy that outlines its implementation. However, there are obstacles to inclusive education including large class sizes and a lack of differentiated teaching (Westwood, 2013).

College lessons are generally different than schools in a number of ways, there are, on the whole, smaller class sizes allowing for more differentiated teaching, but it can still be difficult to meet the needs of all learners at once. In the case of the students interviewed the college in question provides in class support to high funded students. High funded students being those who have a declared need, identified by the local authority and having been awarded extra funding on an individual basis. The in-class support is in place in order to aid inclusive practices and support the student within a mainstream, all ability classrooms. One participant stated they struggle with written tasks, when asked about any help they receive at college they said

*“At college there’s loads of help here, I’ve had in class support which has helped with assignments coz he can see my work and help me work out what to put”*

It is clear this participant has benefitted from the support systems in place in college and has managed to remain in an education setting with their peers, and their dyslexia has not defined them or their academic achievements.

This research looked at mindset as well as self-esteem in dyslexic and non-dyslexic participants, results revealed a more balanced scoring than those of the self-esteem scale; seven of the eight participants who scored as having a fixed mindset were dyslexic participants as hypothesised. However, during the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) it was difficult to code responses as a definitive indicator of a fixed mindset: those with a fixed mindset see intelligence as an entity that cannot be changed (Dweck, 2000). A reason for this may be because the participants were from a sixth form college with reasonably high entry requirements, thus meaning all students who attend said college will have a reasonable background of academic achievement. If the sample were taken from perhaps a vocational college or included sampling from job centres or apprenticeship providers, the results may be more indicative of the general population.

Furthermore, it has been found students with a growth mindset have greater resilience and higher academic achievements (Yeager & Dweck, 2020) this links with the discussion above regarding the participants in this sample. Evidence of growth mindsets were identified throughout the IPA. One participant, with dyslexia, reported how they’ve developed their guitar playing skills and now teach themselves using YouTube tutorials. This is an example of a growth mindset as they have identified a skill they wish to develop, identified a way in order to teach themselves and have done so. Another participant, when asked about career aspirations said

*“I think I’d like to be a solicitor but then I’m not sure, I’ve still got an open mind. I’ve booked in with the careers team in college to talk it through.”*

They demonstrate their ability to set goals and investigate those goals by booking in with the careers advisors within college to discuss their options. Also worth noting here is the fact this participant had booked themselves in with the careers advisor, it wasn’t something compulsory or set up by their teachers, this shows a level of independence in their goal setting, their ability to seek answers for themselves.

When asked about whether they liked to challenge themselves a participant responded:

*“I guess I do like a challenge. On our assignments we have pass, merit and distinction tasks. We have to do the pass ones, but the others are like optional ones I guess you could call them, to get the higher grades. My best mate will only do the pass ones but I do them all. Like I always try and get at least a merit, that way I should be able to get into uni if I decide to. I think my teacher said I’d need like a DMM to get in so I figured if I keep my average marks up I should be ok”*

This statement was found to be very telling of this individual’s drive to achieve, they clearly don’t just want to scrape a pass as implied that their friend does, they always attempt the higher tasks on assignments. More than that they have listened to the advice of their teachers in regard to grade averages and UCAS points and have made it their mission to ensure that, should they choose that path, they will be able to meet the criteria to gain entry to their chosen subject. This participant sums up Dweck’s statement that those with a growth mindset thrive on challenge (Dweck, 2006).

Mindset theory posits students who believe their abilities can be nurtured and grown can therefore adopt beliefs and behaviours more beneficial for future achievements, such as viewing failures as temporary setbacks (D. I. Miller, 2019). There has been work on mindset interventions, encouraging a growth mindset culture (Hanson et al., 2016) with the view organisational variables including encouraging an openness to change, a willingness to participate in self-reflection and taking ownership of one’s own learning contribute to responsive teaching (ibid).

If we consider these points in view of this research, we can see evidence of a growth mindset culture; some participants referred to their in-class support and access to the study base as being a positive influence on their studies in light of their dyslexia. Perhaps these inclusive methods have a more encouraging effect on the students belief system of effort being implemented in exchange for the achievement as the end goal, the process not just the result.

**The dyslexia debate**

As discussed in the introduction there is much debate on the definition of dyslexia, whilst it is encompassed under the umbrella term of specific learning difficulties (Riddick, 2001) there is still much discussion on what quantifies dyslexia. Most definitions agree to some degree it’s a phonological deficit of some sort. Within the interviews the participants with dyslexia were asked if they agreed with the definition as adopted by the researcher for the purpose of this study. They were given the below definition and invited to give their thoughts.

*Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory, and verbal processing speed. Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities. It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points. Co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor coordination, mental calculation, concentration, and personal organisation, but these are not by themselves, markers of dyslexia. A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds or has responded to well-founded intervention.*

In addition to the above definition, the BDA also includes acknowledgement of:

*The visual and auditory processing difficulties that some individuals with dyslexia can experience and points out that dyslexic readers can show a combination of abilities and difficulties that affect the learning process. Some also have strengths in other areas, such as, design, problem solving, creative skills, interactive skills, and oral skills.* (British Dyslexia Association, 2010).

Both participants said it was probably a close definition, but one stated the felt it didn’t do justice to the struggle to create written pieces, the word jumble as they termed it. They described their difficulty with getting words out of their head and onto paper, thus reinforcing the idea it is not that dyslexics don’t know things, they just have trouble showing they know the information.

**Implications for inclusive education**

It has been suggested previous approaches to disability and policies of inclusion have actually done the opposite than their purpose (Goodley et al., 2019). In addition to this it has been argued disability legislation fails to promote inclusion and instead only focuses on the ‘disabled’ element(s) (Blouchou & Nicolson, 2020). If we adopt this standpoint when looking at the responses in the interviews, we can see both sides of the argument. For example, one participant discussed them being taken out of classes in high school occasionally and taken to work in a smaller group, with a member of staff more specialised in Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) one would assume. On the one hand this can be seen as a positive in terms of giving the students with SpLD an opportunity to work in a smaller, more one to one setting however, it also means they have been singled out and separated from their peers. The rest of the class have been made explicitly aware of a difference, and it’s this that can lead to the negative consequences mentioned. There is support for working with others of similar abilities (Burton, 2004) but there are also criticisms of grouping by ability (D. Miller & Moran, 2014), some have even gone so far as to say ability groupings have a “corrosive” effect on students confidence (Webster, 2017).

This therefore gives substance to the comments of Riddick when she discusses clinical and educational models of disability within the social model having inadequately covered social and cultural factors (Riddick, 2001). Other authors have gone further and have claimed disability, within the social model, is a socially constructed phenomenon (Glazzard & Dale, 2013).

As mentioned above, the interviews in this research present both sides of the argument being discussed here relating to inclusion achieving the opposite to what it sets out to do.

Inclusive education and support are implemented to facilitate the integration of those with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) with their peers to allow all students to develop knowledge and skills.

As we have already discussed there have been aspects of the participants education supporting the exclusion side of the debate. However, there is also evidence to the contrary, that their education has been successfully inclusive. When discussing help and support they have received at college, one participant reported

*“At college there’s loads of help here, I’ve had in class support which has helped….”*

Clearly demonstrating a feeling of positivity in relation to the help on offer at college and the inclusive practices they have encountered there.

In addition to this, again when discussing the help and support received at college, another participant said

*“In college its been different, I’ve had what they call in class support here and there’s the study base I use as well”*

The availability of in-class support and the study base the college encourages students to use to aid socialisation amongst students, particularly those with SpLD and/or mental health issues has obviously had a positive effect on this student and demonstrates inclusive policies in practice and working well, in relation to this student in this college at least.

All of the above provides support for the suggestion of the need for early interventions in an attempt to prevent a downward spiral towards low self-esteem, a lack of motivation and under achievement (Snowling et al., 2020).

**Conclusions of study one and study two**

There have been various findings of this research from studies one and two as discussed above.

Both analyses revealed a highly significant Group effect, for the self-esteem data; F(1,19) = 27.86, mean square = 1022.45, p<.001 and for the mindset data F(1,19) = 15.58, mean square = 320.00, p<.001.

The self-esteem measure, using Rosenberg’s scale, revealed few scores indicating low self-esteem, but as was hypothesised, those that did score as having low self-esteem were in fact dyslexic participants.

Qualitative results highlighted the growth mindset and esteem of all participants, dyslexic, and non-dyslexic alike. Discussions of the presence of growth mindset centred around the sample only being from a sixth form college, thus demonstrating their desire, drive and ambition to achieve academically with them being in further education.

Interviews also revealed the somewhat successful implementation of inclusive education, both dyslexic interviewees reported college as having been a more positive experience than that of school.

**Reflexivity**

As has been mentioned earlier, reflexivity is key at all points of the research process (Eatough, 2012). Within this particular research it was necessary for the researcher to conduct a reflexive practice when recruiting participants; the sample used was far smaller than was desired, in both study one and study two.

Despite careful planning of the research schedule to be timely, obtaining ethical approval was severely delayed, therefore delaying the researcher being granted permission by the institution to begin participant recruitment. The result of this meant participant recruitment was delayed by three months. Therefore, the time restraints encountered confined the researcher to having to cut off participant recruitment and work with the sample already obtained; an example of reflexivity in practice.

As a result of this the limitations of being able to generalise from this sample must be emphasised.

**Strengths and limitations**

That being said this research shows findings of great significance, primarily being the first study of its kind to investigate both self-esteem and mindset within dyslexic and non-dyslexic students in further education as well as its adoption of mixed methods; both quantitative and qualitative approaches were combined here (study one and study two).

Furthermore, the study found significant differences in dyslexia and self-esteem and mindset, the implications of this have been discussed.

In addition to this, the thematic analysis revealed an unexpected set of themes, grouped into the cluster of emotional intelligence. These findings are crucial to education; highlighting the importance of such qualities and can be used to inform interventions to better serve our students with dyslexia, and those without dyslexia in fact.

Such interventions being exercises to explore students strengths outside of the classroom including creativity, problem solving, team and leadership tasks, athleticism even. Employers and universities wish to see evidence of well-rounded individuals; therefore the education system should be inclusive of all aspects of learning for life. Inclusive education should not just be to include those with additional needs, whilst this is vital, it should holistically seek to improve each and every student and allow them to reach their full potential.

**Suggestions for further research**

Larger scale studies are a must explore self-esteem and mindset within dyslexic and non-dyslexic students within further education, it is hoped they would support the findings of this research.

Further research would be helpful in providing results more representative of the population. A larger sample size across a wider demographic would allow for a more reliable socio-economic variety.

Furthermore, this research was based on sixth form students, in order to truly understand self-esteem and mindset among students both with and without dyslexia it would be necessary to sample students of varying ages, such as primary and secondary school ages also.

Further research could also look at comparing the age an individual receives a diagnosis of dyslexia; it has already been stated an early diagnosis is preferable (Glazzard, 2010) however, there are many who reach adulthood before they are able to be diagnosed. Further research into the experiences of these individuals and perhaps a comparative analysis with those who received an early diagnosis would reveal the true implications of the timescale of diagnosis.

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