

**PERCEPTIONS OF LITERACY DIFFICULTIES AND THEIR
ASSESSMENT IN A COLLEGE OF FURTHER EDUCATION**

By

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ABSTRACT

Educational psychologist's (EPs) employed in England have, since 1992, had a limited remit in post-16 settings such as further education (FE) colleges. Recent legislative changes have extended the age range of young people with which EPs work, to between the ages of 0 and 25, raising the potential for collaborative work between EPs and further education (FE) colleges. One potential area is in supporting young people with literacy difficulties, however, little is known about the viewpoints and practices that exist within FE colleges. This study employs a case study design in exploring the perceptions of literacy difficulties and their assessment among a small group of participants within a learning support department of a FE college, and also within an assessment centre who had a working relationship with the college. Both the college and assessment centre are located in the West Midlands of England. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis and data from participants in the college was analysed separately from data from the assessment centre. Processes in the college related to assessment of literacy difficulties are also outlined. General findings included the prevalence of the use of the term dyslexia, and similarities and differences in the way the term was constructed, as well as the impact of literacy difficulties and perceptions of the nature of support that is required. Other findings include conflicting perceptions between participants in the college and the assessment centre, especially in relation to the role of intelligence in dyslexia assessments, and how the college could provide support within the college without a student needing an assessment of dyslexia. The implications of these findings for EPs,

particularly in relation to EP-FE college collaboration are discussed, along with ideas for future research.

Dedication

To my parents, for your support throughout the doctorate, and for allowing me to spend so many study breaks up in Scotland! I hope I didn't outstay my welcome! Thank you.

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Chapter One: introduction and literature review

1.1. Introduction

The Special Education Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice (SEND COP) (Department for Education/Department of Health, 2015) has mandated that educational psychologists (EPs) should work with young people between the ages of 0 and 25. In addition, the SEND COP has recommended that further education (FE) colleges draw on outside agencies to support young people within their settings. This raises the potential for joint work between EPs and FE colleges. One area that EPs could contribute is in supporting young people with literacy difficulties, however, due to a paucity of research, it is unclear how this might occur, whether FE colleges share similar views on the nature of literacy difficulties, and how processes and procedures in colleges operate. The aim of this research is to explore perceptions of literacy difficulties and their assessment in an FE college to help EPs better understand viewpoints and practices in this setting, and to examine the extent to which there might be inconsistencies or differences in views between an FE college, and the research literature/professional guidance upon which EPs should be basing their practice. It is hoped that a greater understanding of these issues may aid any future collaborative work between EPs and FE colleges in the future.

1.2. Structure of the Literature Review

This chapter considers the relevant research to provide a context for this research study. The first part of the literature review explores the relationship between EPs and the post-16 sector, providing some necessary historical context. It then moves on to discuss further education colleges, including briefly exploring their historical origins and the impact of current financial issues. The chapter then discusses the term dyslexia by providing historical contextualisation and modern definitions. It then discusses models for the assessment of dyslexia such as discrepancy models and response to intervention. The chapter then outlines some of the differential models of literacy difficulties and dyslexia, ranging from biological to environmental perspectives. It then explores the implications of the term dyslexia for EPs and the impact that this label may have. Finally, the chapter examines the relevance of dyslexia in FE, before posing the research questions that will be explored in this study.

1.3 A note on terminology

The plethora of terminology in the area of literacy difficulties presents a major obstacle in writing this thesis. Terms such as 'literacy difficulties', 'complex literacy difficulties', 'reading disability' and 'dyslexia' are all commonly found in the research literature, yet definitions of these terms often vary and are poorly demarcated, creating the potential for confusion. The term dyslexia is also particularly problematic since it contains within it, a particular set of

assumptions, which will be explored more fully in this chapter. Nevertheless, dyslexia, as a term, will be used in this thesis for a number of reasons: firstly, it has become firmly engrained in discourses (particularly public and media ones) in relation to literacy difficulties (Frederickson, 2008); secondly, it is a term that is widely used and recognised in FE settings (Baxter, 2013); and thirdly, it is a term that has gained acceptance in government policy and legislative contexts, such as in the SEND COP (Department for Education/Department of Health, 2015), which defines it as a 'specific learning difficulty'. When the term dyslexia is employed however, it is with a tacit acceptance that its precise meaning is disputed, and that it has emerged from a process of social and historical discourse around the nature of literacy difficulties. Its use in this thesis is therefore not intended to endorse, either the use of medical labelling, or indeed, the notion that literacy difficulties are primarily a biologically based, within-person deficit.

1.4 Literature review: Educational psychology and the post-16 sector

EPs employed in England have, since 1992, had a limited remit in post-16 settings such as FE colleges (Guishard, 2000; Allen and Hardy, 2013). This was due to changes in legislation following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, whereby FE colleges were taken outside of local authority control (Simmons, 2008). This meant that EPs, who tended to be employed by local authorities (Hymans, 2013), had little reason to involve themselves in the affairs of FE colleges who had, by this stage, become largely autonomous institutions responsible for their own strategy, staff and financial affairs

(Simmons, 2008). Lunt and Majors (2000), note how EPs are affected by legislative changes, and how this can place limitations on their delivery of services to particular groups of society.

Despite these changes, there have been repeated calls from EPs and FE colleges for greater collaborative working (e.g. Mitchell, 1997; Guishard, 2000). In 1997, the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) released a position statement expressing the need for EPs to be involved in FE to better meet the needs of young people with special education needs (SEN) (AEP (1997) (cited in Mitchell, 1997, p. 27). Similarly, within the educational psychology profession, this interest in FE continued to grow (Guishard, 2000), and articles relating to FE began to appear in educational psychology journals. These included topics such as identifying and supporting those who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) (e.g. Arnold and Baker, 2012), supporting transitions from school to college (e.g. Craig 2009; Mallinson, 2009; Bradley, 2012) and work to support the development of sexual identity (e.g. Robinson, 2010).

Alongside these developments, a national legislative context was emerging that aimed to have more young people stay in education until at least the age of 18 (e.g. Spielhofer et al., 2007; Department for Education, 2014). In parallel, it was again suggested that EPs were ideally placed to support young people in FE. Indeed, Hayton (2009, p.60), a trainee EP, wrote about how EPs were “uniquely positioned to help young people and emerging adults to

develop personal skills which they can carry with them beyond the classroom”.

The advent of the SEND COP (Department for Education/Department of Health, 2015), and the subsequent Children and Families Act, has been one of the most significant developments for the EP profession, since it has extended their statutory duties to working with young people from birth, up to the age of twenty-five. The new requirements of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), which replaced statements of special education needs, also required that EPs contribute towards the assessment and writing of advice for young people within this extended age range. In addition, the SEND COP contained a chapter on how these changes should affect FE settings, and suggested that FE colleges draw on the skills and expertise of outside agencies, specifically citing EPs (Department for Education/Department of Health, 2015, p. 117):

“ Colleges should ensure they have access to external specialist services and expertise. These can include, for example, educational psychologists, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), specialist teachers and support services, supported employment services and therapists.”

Given the lack of previous collaboration between EPs and FE colleges, this suggests a shift in the remit of EPs’ work. Also, it is notable that these changes emerged only shortly after many educational psychology services

had experienced a period of considerable flux, in the form of changes from services which were provided free at the point of delivery by local authorities, to traded models where educational settings were required to purchase educational psychology services (Allen and Hardy, 2013). These changes have implications for the way that EPs and FE colleges work together, since there are likely to be financial considerations to navigate before collaborative work can take place.

1.5 Challenges of collaborative working: insights from Scotland

An examination of the literature related to the development of post-16 services in Scotland highlights some of the challenges that might be expected for educational psychology services in delivering this collaborative work. Indeed, the situation in Scotland is distinct from that of England since post-school psychological services have been in development since the advent of the Beattie Report (Scottish Executive, 1999), which proposed that young people in the 16 – 24 age range with SEN should have access to educational psychology services. MacKay and Boyle (2013) describe some of the challenges that occurred in Scotland, such as the increased workload due to demands from new sectors of education, the need for further professional development for EPs to cater for this new age group, and the requirement for university training courses to begin to incorporate these new developments. In addition, MacKay and Boyle (2013) suggest that providing services to young people who are effectively adults has raised some fundamental questions about the nature of educational psychology as a profession, since, with these

changes comes a shift in focus from developmental perspectives of children and adolescents, towards the inclusion of previously unfamiliar age spans. Arnett (2004), for example, describes a period of 'emerging adulthood', which she sees as a unique period of development between the ages of 18 and 24.

1.6 Further Education Colleges

The FE sector has its origins in the 19th century, during which time mechanics institutes began providing a range of technical and vocational educational courses in engineering. In addition, various voluntary groups and societies sought to provide education and cultural enrichment to those in society unable to access education from the state (examples of these groups included the Chartists, Owenites and Christian Socialists) (Hyland and Merrill, 2003). At this time, this type of predominantly adult-centred education was considered "essentially voluntarist, *ad hoc* and fragmented" (Hyland and Merrill, 2003, p. 7) and led to concerns that the UK was falling behind other industrialised nations in relation to having workers who had the necessary technical expertise and skills to develop the nation's economy (Huddleston and Unwin, 2013). In 1890, taxation on beer and spirits was raised to provide funds for local councils to improve the state of technical education, which resulted in technical colleges becoming established (Bailey, 1983). Green and Lucas (1999), however, note that the educational status of these colleges remained low, describing them as "intellectually narrow and institutionally marooned between school and work" (Green and Lucas, 1999, p. 14).

The 20th century marked a period of continuing expansion of the FE sector. From 1902 to 1944 students in technical and commercial education doubled, partly due to these institutions offering publically recognised qualifications such as National Certificates (Hyland and Merrill, 2003). The 1960s saw further expansion as academic and professional courses began to appear alongside the more 'traditional' technical and vocational options, many of which were offered on a full-time basis as an alternative to school 6th forms (Huddleston and Unwin, 2013). The late 70s and early 80s also saw a greater role for FE colleges in alleviating youth unemployment through work experience and youth training schemes (Huddleston and Unwin, 2013).

FE colleges are now the largest providers of post-16 education in the UK and as of 2013, there were 222 colleges in England (Huddleston and Unwin, 2013). The majority of students attending these colleges are over the age of 16, however, students can start college from the age of 14 (Huddleston and Unwin, 2013). Felstead and Unwin (2001) suggest that there are essentially four aims that FE colleges aspire towards. These include: being able to respond to the government's economic agenda, being able to fulfill their role as providers of 'sub-degree' post-compulsory education, being able to provide a broad range of curriculum subjects (bridging the vocational and non-vocational) and acting as a 'second-chance saloon' (Felstead and Unwin, 2001, p. 107) for YP who had become disengaged from education. FE colleges, also, tend to be distinct from other post-16 educational options such as 6th form colleges and universities in that they take a more inclusive stance by being mainly non-selective (they may also offer courses for those with

disabilities or learning difficulties), and see themselves as offering opportunities for YP who have found education challenging (Huddleston and Unwin, 2013).

Colleges have been subjected to a bewildering array of change in how they are funded, with varying degrees of government control over the sector. Prior to 1992, FE colleges received the bulk of their funding from local authorities, however following the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), colleges were removed from local authority control and became independent self-governing institutions. This marked a period of increasing deregulation, and entrepreneurship, with colleges acquiring a greater degree of financial autonomy, with the power and flexibility to acquire assets, enter contracts and buy external services (Morse, 2015).

Despite this major change to funding, the government maintained its influence on the sector through various funding regimes such as the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) which imposed a strict funding model based on the type of course studied, the progress made, and whether the student has achieved their intended outcome. In this way, the FEFC introduced the principle that funds should follow the learner that continues to this day (Huddleston and Unwin, 2013). The FEFC was later superseded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the Skills Funding by (SFA) / Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA), and in 2012, the Education Funding Agency (EFA). The current funding methodology is based on the FEFCs, yet more complex, since it takes into account a total of seven factors that include

aspects as diverse as student retention rates, running costs of the programme and the extent of social disadvantage of a college's locale (Education Funding Agency, 2016).

Morse (2015) reports on the declining health of the FE sector since 2010, due to reductions in public funding, falling numbers of 16 – 18 year olds, and increased competition from schools and universities (Morse, 2015). Following the financial crisis in 2008, the conservative government announced a series of measures to cut funding to FE colleges in 2010, amounting to a cut of 25% in cash terms and 32% in real terms (Buttle, 2010). This led many FE colleges to make savings by reducing the number of courses offered and making redundancies (Stoten, 2011). The deterioration in financial health of FE colleges has implications for EPs: due to the traded nature of most educational psychology services, FE colleges may find it more difficult to access funds to buy in the services of EPs. In addition, the lack of previous collaboration may mean they know little about what EPs do or can offer within their settings (Mitchell, 1997).

1.7 Areas of potential partnership: literacy difficulties

Despite these difficulties, there has been growing interest in how EPs and FE colleges might fruitfully collaborate. One area of potential joint involvement is in the area of assessment and intervention for students with literacy difficulties or those who might be described as having dyslexia. This area, as will be explained, is somewhat contentious, and at the time of writing, the

assessment of dyslexia in young people aged 16 – 25 has been the focus of a Division of Educational and Child Psychology Working Group (British Psychological Society, 2015). In addition, the usefulness of the term dyslexia has been debated, with critics of the term arguing that it lacks scientific credibility and should be substituted for a less ideologically-loaded word or phrase, such as ‘reading difficulty’ or ‘reading disability’ (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014). Many EPs have also avoided the term, due to the labels implicit supposition that literacy difficulties are due to within-person factors, rather than instructional circumstances (Reason, 2001), a concern over the detrimental effects of labelling children (Pavey, 2007), and also due to the risk that the term elicits beliefs that little can be done to intervene effectively (Gibbs and Elliott, 2015).

1.8 Dyslexia: historical contextualisation

The word dyslexia comes from Greek and is translated as ‘difficulty with words’ (Frederickson, 2008). It was first used in 1862 by Rudolph Berlin, an ophthalmologist, to account for a form of ‘word blindness’ found among adults, which, he suggested, was due to brain lesions (Soler, 2009; Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014). The terms ‘developmental dyslexia’ and ‘congenital word blindness’ were coined and developed in the UK around this time, and a number of academic articles, mainly in the fields of medicine and ophthalmology, were published that debated these terms (Soler, 2009). One key article by Pringle-Morgan (1896) (cited in Soler, 2009, p. 41) in the late 19th century described a boy who had:

“...always been a bright intelligent boy, quick at games, and in no way inferior to others of his age. His great difficulty has been – and is now – his inability to learn to read. This inability is so remarkable, and so pronounced, that I have no doubt it is due to some congenital defect...In spite of...laborious and persistent training, he can only with difficulty spell out words of one syllable”.

From the 1860s to the 1960s, the way in which dyslexia was constructed moved from the discipline of medicine to psychology, and from the 1970s to the 1980s forged greater links with linguistics and neurobiology (Soler, 2009). However, the description by Pringle-Morgan above, despite being published at the end of the 19th century, is arguably a view of dyslexia that persists today (Frederickson, 2008). Stanovich (1991, p. 10) for example, describes the popular conceptualisation of the ‘media dyslexic’, who is “almost always a very bright child who is deeply troubled in school because of a ‘glitch’ that prevents him or her from reading”. Elliott and Grigorenko (2014) note that conceptions of dyslexia have been heavily influenced by historical and cultural factors, while Frederickson (2008) adds that many of these popular conceptualisations represent an understanding of dyslexia that should be considered oversimplified or out-dated. Indeed, the very concept of dyslexia has been criticized because it is said to import the medical model of diagnosis and treatment into the sphere of learning difficulties, which affirms a focus on the individual as the problem holder, while simultaneously ignoring a range of other factors that might be contributing towards the difficulty (Solvang, 2007).

1.9 Dyslexia: modern definitions

There exist a number of modern definitions of dyslexia, however, no one definition is considered exemplary or definitive (Snowling, 2012). There is widespread agreement that the core feature of dyslexia is a problem with word decoding, which can affect the development of spelling and reading fluency (Snowling, 2013). This is described in the British Psychological Society (BPS) (1999, p. 18) definition as follows:

“ Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling is learnt very incompletely or with great difficulty. This focuses on literacy learning at the “word level” and implied that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities. It provides the basis for a staged process of assessment through teaching.”

Many other definitions share aspects of the BPS definition, such as the Rose review (Rose, 2009), which agrees that difficulties exist at the whole word level. Other definitions reflect the “severe and persistent” claim, such as the British Dyslexia Association’s (BDAs) (2007) definition, which states that dyslexia “tends to be resistant to conventional teaching methods”.

When comparing definitions, however, it becomes clear that there is little consensus regarding inclusionary and exclusionary criteria. Some definitions,

for example, are relatively descriptive (e.g. BPS, 1999) while others also contain explanatory elements, such as on the BDA's website (2007), which states that "it is likely to be present at birth and to be life-long in its effects." In addition, definitions with narrow and wider foci have attracted criticism from opposing camps: the BPS definition, for example, has been accused of excluding those whose reading is less problematic, but who may struggle with skills related to literacy that might be subsumed within a definition of dyslexia, such as organisational skills, filling in forms correctly or with mathematical or musical notation (Cooke, 2001). On the other hand, the Rose Review definition (Rose, 2009, p. 10) which states that dyslexia "is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points" has been accused of being "so broad and blurred at the edges that it is difficult to see how it could be useful in any diagnostic sense" (House of Commons, 2009, p. 26).

To make matters more complicated, researchers have used the term dyslexia in relation to other terms that refer to literacy difficulties in an inconsistent manner. Some researchers, for example, do not differentiate between 'dyslexia' and 'reading disability' while others reserve the term dyslexia to refer to a subgroup within a larger overall group of poor decoders (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014). Fletcher (2009), for example, maintains that a distinction should be made between dyslexia, which he considers as a difficulty with decoding single words, and other types of reading difficulty related to reading fluency and comprehension.

Other issues include whether difficulties in reading comprehension should be considered 'traits' of dyslexia. Reading comprehension is not mentioned in definitions of dyslexia, however, some researchers consider impaired reading comprehension to be a factor in dyslexia, due to the extra effort involved in the decoding process, which detracts from understanding (Stuart, Stainthorp, and Snowling, 2008). Others consider poor working memory to be a more important in reading comprehension process (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014), although its precise role is not fully understood, since the relationship between working memory and reading comprehension involves a complex array of factors operating at a number of levels (Laasonen et al., 2012).

In order to further explore the role of reading comprehension, it is useful to examine the Simple View of Reading (SVR; Gough and Tunmer, 1986). The SVR proposes that reading comprehension involves two basic components: word recognition (or decoding) and language comprehension. Gough and Tunmer (1986) suggested that this can be presented as: Reading Comprehension (RC) = Decoding (D) x Language Comprehension (LC). This equation suggests that RC cannot occur unless both D and LC are strong, and therefore proposes that both of these factors are highly significant in the process of reading comprehension (Kendeou, Savage and Van Den Broek, 2009). Research has generally supported the validity of the SVR, and found that D and LC can account for approximately 40% - 80% of the variance in RC for readers 8 – 16 years of age (Kendeou, Savage and Van Den Broek, 2009). The SVR has also been highly influential, and was adopted by the Rose Report (Rose, 2006) and has become a central part of the Primary

National Strategy's (DfES, 2006) emphasis on synthetic phonics approaches to word recognition as a key building block of fluent reading.

Nevertheless, there are also some researchers who claim that the SVR represents a simplified view of reading comprehension. Georgiou, Das and Hayward (2009), question whether the relationship between RC, D and LC is represented adequately through this equation. In addition, they state that because the equation only explains a portion of the variance of RC that other factors must also be involved in addition to D and LC. Dombey (2016) also suggests that the complexity of English orthography undermines the simplistic relationships in the equation since spoken language and the rules governing written language are not regular. She therefore cautions that D should not be equated with synthetic phonics only, but rather with the identification of irregularly pronounced words as well.

The question of whether it is useful or meaningful to conceive of a dyslexic subgroup has become a key issue in research on dyslexia. Indeed, as Rice and Brooks (2004, p. 33) state: "The critical question in dyslexia research is not whether dyslexic people in particular differ from 'normal' readers. It is whether dyslexic people differ from other poor readers." One of the issues in dyslexia research has been the conceptual and practical difficulty of being able to categorise poor readers into these two groups.

Such difficulties have significant implications for those involved in research, assessment or intervention involving young people who are labelled as having

dyslexia. In terms of research, the absence of a consistent and agreed upon operational definition for the term means that there can be little certainty that researchers are describing or measuring the same thing. In instances where professionals might be asked to assess for dyslexia, such as when colleges or institutes of higher education require an assessment for the identification of a Specific Learning Difficulty of which dyslexia is included (Department for Education, 2005), usually for the purposes of the student being able to access Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), this is problematic, since identifying 'dyslexic' from 'non-dyslexic' readers is theoretically and practically problematic (for the reasons mentioned above). Further, this issue is exacerbated by guidance, which states that "diagnostic reports...are accepted as evidence of dyslexia" (Department for Education, 2005, p. 4) despite the fact that the BPS states that there is no diagnostic assessment or combination of assessments that should be used to identify dyslexia (BPS, 1999).

1.10 Discrepancy models of dyslexia

One attempt to remedy the problem of identification is to define dyslexia in terms of a discrepancy between a young person's score on an intelligence test and a reading test. This is often referred to as the IQ-achievement discrepancy model. By this rationale, when reading achievement is significantly lower than general intelligence, a child could be described as being dyslexic. This view is predicated on the assumption that discrepant poor readers comprise a unique group of children who are different in a number of key ways from non-discrepant poor readers (Gresham and Vellutino, 2010).

This view also accords with the definition above of the 'media dyslexic' and the key article by Pringle-Morgan in the late 19th century featuring the description of the 'bright intelligent boy' with the 'inability to learn to read'.

This approach to identification however has attracted widespread criticism, mainly because the assumption on which it rests - that discrepant poor readers are uniquely different from non-discrepant poor readers – has been shown to have no scientific basis (Frederickson, 1999; Duff, 2008; Gresham and Vellutino, 2010). A meta-analysis by Steubing et al. (2002), which examined 46 studies to assess the validity of classifying poor readers according to these two groups concluded that there were substantial overlaps between them, and little difference in measures of literacy development and phonological processing skills. This conclusion is supported by earlier studies (e.g. Fletcher et al., 1994; Stanovich and Siegal, 1994), which suggest that both groups were highly similar in that they both demonstrated deficits in phonological awareness. In addition, the IQ-achievement discrepancy model was further undermined by the findings that both groups do not differ in their response to evidence-based reading intervention (e.g. Hatcher and Hulme, 1999; Vellutino, Scanlon and Lyon., 2000; Stage et al., 2003).

A further issue with IQ-achievement discrepancy model is its potential to encourage a 'wait to fail' approach to intervention (Stuebing et al, 2002). As Gibbs and Elliott (2015) point out, obtaining the label of dyslexia may, in some educational settings, be a gateway to accessing a reading intervention. A poor reader however, may not initially meet the discrepancy criteria and therefore

may not qualify for any intervention. However, if they continue to struggle with reading and receive no intervention, their reading ability relative to their peers is likely to get worse, until the point when their reading score becomes low enough to be significantly discrepant from their IQ (Frederickson, 2008). Since there is ample evidence that interventions can be effective at remediating reading difficulties in children (e.g. Brooks, 2013), and that early intervention is preferable to later intervention (Stuebing, 2002), it is difficult to justify the 'wait to fail' approach associated with the IQ-achievement discrepancy model.

Other approaches to identifying dyslexia have involved the use of intelligence tests to identify particular subtest combinations. One approach that was popular in the 1980s and 1990s (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014) was the use of the ACID profile on the Wechsler Intelligence Scales for Children (WISC) (Wechsler, 1974, 1991) where low scores on the subtests Arithmetic, Coding, Information and Digit Span were said to be indicative of dyslexia (Vargo et al., 1995; Frederickson, 1999). However, profiling based on IQ subtest scores is generally agreed to be of little value in identifying children with dyslexia for similar reasons as to those mentioned in relation to the IQ-achievement discrepancy model (BPS, 1999; Frederickson, 1999). Indeed, as the BPS (1999, p. 55) states:

“ Assessments referring to cognitive test scores within batteries of tests such as the BAS [British Ability Scales) and WISC can be informative when pointing to strengths and weaknesses in the individual case. However, no particular pattern of test scores can be

regarded as necessary or sufficient in deciding whether and to what extent learning difficulties can be described as dyslexic”

As Stanovich (2005) points out, the main reason that intelligence test scores offer very little useful information is that, simply put, there has been no established correlation between reading difficulties and intelligence.

Nevertheless, it is worthwhile mentioning that despite the scientific evidence against the use of the IQ-achievement discrepancy model, it continues to be used among some school psychologists in the USA (O'Donnell and Miller, 2011) and some specialist teachers or EPs in the UK (Reid, 2009).

1.11 Response to intervention

Due to evidence in favour of rejecting a IQ-achievement discrepancy model, and also due to the questionable value of the contribution of intelligence test profiling, a Response To Intervention (RTI) approach has been advocated (e.g. Vaughn and Fuchs, 2003). This approach eschews a static one-off assessment and instead measures a young person's progress over time in response to an evidence-based intervention. The process of RTI involves a number of discreet stages of intervention, which gradually become more intensive and individualised. The young person is then only identified as having dyslexia based on their failure to respond to these stages (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2009).

The RTI model contains a number of advantages over discrepancy models: it has the potential to identify children with reading difficulties at an earlier stage in their development, and therefore avoids the 'wait to fail' ethos (Duff, 2008). Further, as a means of identification, it is arguably more robust, since it mitigates against the risk of miscategorising children as having dyslexia when their difficulties may be due to inadequate instruction or lack of reading experience (Vellutino et al., 1996). For these reasons, the RTI approach to identification has garnered widespread support: in the USA, the US Department of Education (2002) recommended its use over IQ-achievement discrepancy models (Frederickson, 2008), while in the UK, the Rose Review (2009) recommended RTI as a strategy for the identification and teaching of dyslexia. Many local authorities in the UK have also adopted a RTI approach (e.g. Birmingham City Council, 2015).

Nevertheless, the approach is not without its shortcomings. Firstly, there is no single RTI model that has become accepted as standard. Indeed, Brown Waesche et al. (2011) outline a range of different RTI models that vary according to the way they assess and monitor progress. This is problematic because, as Reynolds and Shaywitz (2009b, p. 131) state, "a lack of procedural guidance creates a guarantee that RTI will lack fidelity of implementation, suffer from inconsistent measurement models, and see enhanced levels of subjectivity in both diagnosis and treatments." Secondly, the assessment process takes longer, since it involves a process of dynamic assessment (Hayes and Frederickson, 2015). Thirdly, RTI has been criticized for lacking an appropriate scientific basis, with critics arguing that its

widespread implementation has been premature (Reynolds and Shaywitz, 2009a; Kavale et al., 2009). Fourthly, it has been argued that RTI ignores any assessment related to cognitive processes that might inform intervention, and therefore contains within it a “one-size-fits-all mentality where it is naively assumed that all children fail for the same reason” (Reynolds and Shaywitz, 2009b). Finally, there is some uncertainty about how the RTI model fits with the concept of dyslexia itself: put simply, is a poor RTI closely related to the cognitive or biological aspects presumed to underpin dyslexia, or does it simply describe treatment resistance, which might actually be something else? (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014)

1.12 Differential models of literacy difficulties / dyslexia

There exist a wide range of explanations for the existence of literacy difficulties. These can be broadly categorised into three areas: cognitive models, neurobiological models and experiential / environmental models. Note that those models mentioned below do not represent a comprehensive picture of all models in existence since the intention here is to provide a brief overview of several of the most well known and currently relevant models,. As such, it will be characterised by some absences.

A) Cognitive models: The phonological deficit hypothesis

The phonological deficit hypothesis has been the dominant cognitive model for literacy difficulties / dyslexia (Vellutino et al., 2004; Ramus, White and

Frith, 2006; Tijms, 2011). According to this perspective, YP have difficulties detecting and manipulating the sounds of spoken language (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014): their mental representation of speech sounds is described as 'fuzzy' or 'noisy' and this hinders their development of a range of phonological skills such as alphabetic mapping, letter-sound decoding and orthographic awareness (Snowling, 2000; Vellutino et al., 2004). This hypothesis has superseded many of the older explanations for literacy difficulties / dyslexia, which had characterised dyslexia as a visual processing problem (e.g. Hinshelwood, 1902; Orton, 1925).

Despite being the dominant and most widely accepted explanation, the notion of a single phonological deficit as responsible for all reading difficulties is seen as overly simplistic (Snowling and Hulme, 2012). Indeed, phonological weakness does not account for all those with word-reading difficulties. In a study by White et al (2006), a significant minority of children categorised as having dyslexia did not have a significant phonological deficit. Conversely, it is possible for children with poor phonological skills to develop good reading skills (Catts and Adlof, 2011). This has led some researchers to propose that reading difficulties in a minority of children may also be associated with 'general language deficits' (e.g. Vellutino et al. 2004) such as semantic, grammatical and morphological language processing difficulties (Siegal and Lipka, 2008). In addition, it has become increasingly accepted that although a phonological deficit is likely to be implicated in the majority of cases, that dyslexia may also be the result of multiple deficits that interact with one

another, although there remains a considerable lack of consensus as to the true nature of these deficits (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014).

Related to the phonological deficit hypothesis is also, arguably, the nature of the English language itself. Goswami (2008), for example, notes that children learning English have to deal with both a high degree of phonological complexity and complex syllable structure that are not present in some of the world's other languages. In relation to the former, Goswami (2008) gives the example of the letter 'a' which is pronounced differently in the following words: 'cat', 'was', 'saw', 'made' and 'car'. As for the latter, she states that most world languages are comprised of consonant-vowel patterns that map directly to syllables, whereas in English, this is not the case (e.g. there are many words beginning with three consonants e.g. 'string', 'sprain' and 'split'). The complex nature of the English language, she states, may at least partly explain why those with a phonological deficit might struggle with English.

B) Neurobiological models

Neurobiological models of literacy difficulties / dyslexia focus on two types of research: research on the genome, and research on the brain (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014). Although genetics has been proposed to be a causal factor, this is an area of the research literature where there is some disagreement: on the one hand, many of the most prominent researchers do propose a strong genetic component. Snowling (2013, p. 7), for example, who used the term dyslexia, states that it has "a probable genetic basis"; Vellutino

et al (2004, p. 25), that it involves “basic cognitive deficits of biological origin”, and Elliott and Grigorenko (2014, p. 4), although they dislike the term dyslexia, are nonetheless “unequivocal” that “biologically-based reading difficulties exist”. In favour of this position, other researchers have noted the strong tendency for dyslexia to be inherited (Pennington and Olson, 2005), and the recognition that dyslexia often co-occurs with other difficulties that are sometimes regarded as constitutional, such as language impairments, motor coordination problems or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (note however that the latter has been fiercely debated (e.g. Saul, 2014)).

In addition to this, genetic imaging has consistently failed to identify any specific biological markers (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014). This may be due to a complex ‘interactional relationship’ between the environment and genes, which is still not fully understood (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014), however it might also be because there is no genetic link present. Pinker (1997) and Gibbs (2015), for example, argue that because the written language system is such a recent human development, that one should not presuppose any relationship with genes. Pinker (1997, p. ix), for example, states that:

“ Language is a human instinct, but written language is not...Writing systems have been invented a small number of times in history...until recently, most children never learned to read or write...children are wired for sound, but print is an optional accessory that must be painstakingly bolted on.”

Research has suggested that there may be some evidence that literacy difficulties have a neurological component (e.g. Richlan, Kronbichler and Wimmer, 2009). Perhaps the most consistent finding in the literature, as discussed in a meta-analysis of 17 original studies (Richlan, Kronbichler and Wimmer, 2009) is that the brains of those who experience reading difficulties (regardless of how the category was defined or quantified) demonstrate under activation in posterior regions of the left hemisphere, compared to activation in skilled readers, as measured through functional neuroimaging. A further consistent finding was that those who experienced reading difficulties also exhibited over activation in the frontal or right hemisphere regions, which, it is hypothesised, may be due to the brain system compensating for the aforementioned under activation in the left hemisphere (Richlan, Kronbichler and Wimmer, 2009).

While this might be viewed as incontrovertible evidence that those categorised as having dyslexia have brains that have neurobiological differences, Elliott and Grigorenko (2014) argue that there needs to be an identification of reading disability (or dyslexia) that can be done in a reliable and valid manner, rather than simply through the preferences of the researcher. Indeed, neuroscience does not assist researchers in identifying those who might then be categorised as 'dyslexic' and 'non-dyslexic'. Furthermore, it cannot distinguish between those who might be described as 'dyslexic' and those who are merely poor readers.

C) Experiential / environmental models

Diametrically opposed to models that see literacy difficulties / dyslexia as a biologically-based deficit, are those that propose difficulties come about through environmental factors, such as lack of exposure to, and experience of print and literacy-related activities, inadequate instruction, or gaps in educational history. Clay (1987) outlines how research into reading difficulties has been compromised by a general failure to control for these factors, given their tendency to mimic the effects of cognitive-based deficits, while Vellutino et al. (2004) note how phonological awareness and letter-sound decoding can be greatly influenced by the kind of reading instruction that a child experiences. Others have highlighted the significance of socio-economic status (SES) such as Tijms (2011), who describes how poor phonetic awareness corresponds with poor reading skills in low SES groups, but not for those in high SES groups. In addition, Hart and Risley (1995) demonstrate the vast differences in attainment between low and high SES groups, and highlight the significance of environmental factors in reading acquisition.

Although experiential/environmental factors are clearly important, their relative role in relation to more within-person explanations remains unclear. Indeed, there is perhaps a tendency for more up to date research to occupy a middle ground, and acknowledge the importance of genetic factors, while also highlighting the significance of the environmental factors. Vellutino et al. (2004, p. 18), for example, state, that dyslexia may be “a complex condition that depends on the dynamic interaction between certain innate susceptibilities as well as home and school environments on the one hand,

and the cultures in which children learn to read on the other”. Meanwhile McCardle and Miller (2012, p. 336) suggest that: “Genes are important, but they are not the whole story; they are not a final determination. The environment in which a child is raised, the parenting, nutrition, healthcare, peer relations and education...can influence the expression of these genes”

In addition, trying to ascertain whether a child’s difficulties is due to constitutional or environmental factors may not only be fruitless, but ultimately harmful. As Elliott and Grigorenko (2014, p. 11) point out: “all too easily a situation could emerge where either biological (dyslexic) or environmental (nondyslexic) explanations are ascribed to an individual on the grounds of their social circumstances.” This could potentially place those who have had a less advantageous social upbringings at risk of not accessing interventions due to them being considered ‘non-dyslexic’, thus reinforcing a cycle of socially oppressive practice.

My own position as researcher

Due to the wide variety, and often contradictory, explanations for literacy difficulties / dyslexia, it is necessary for me to explain my own perspective towards these models as a researcher. This is especially important given an epistemology grounded in social constructionism. As is the case in many areas of psychology, there appears to be a recurring debate around the relative influence and weighting of constitutional compared to environmental factors. My own position is perhaps the most similar to that of Vellutino et al.

(2004), in his use of the term 'dynamic interaction' since this suggests that both biological and environmental aspects are important; neither, in my opinion should be discounted, and the influence of both factors should be carefully considered. Perhaps the least useful approach is one that discounts entirely either the environmental or biological perspective. From my perspective as a trainee EP, I would see an extreme position on either side to pose a high risk of potentially oppressive practice: a perspective wholly embracing the biological risks suggesting to others that little can be done to remedy a YPs difficulties: that they have this 'condition' for life. On the other hand, a perspective wholly embracing the environmental risks ignoring any individual differences in learning that might be present. In addition, it might risk placing blame onto parents or teachers for creating insufficiently enriching home environments or providing inadequate teaching.

For these reasons, I do not favour the use of the term dyslexia, since it implies a within-person deficit placing it firmly in the biological domain, which is not consistent with research evidence. Nevertheless, I have used it in this thesis, for reasons outlined in section 1.3. As an alternative to the term dyslexia, Elliott and Grigorenko (2014) propose the term 'reading disability', however this still strongly implies a within-person deficit. For this reason, I would favour the use of the term 'difficulty' over 'disability', since it implies an issue that is potentially surmountable, rather than immutable.

1.13 Implications for educational psychologists and the ‘difficulty’ of dyslexia

EPs are considered to function as scientist-practitioners, that is, they act as a link between the milieu of academic psychology and the practice in ‘the real world’ (Frederickson and Cline, 2008a). In their analysis of a problem, an Interactive Factors Framework (IFF) (Frederickson and Cline, 2008b) is often used to enable them to see a problem in a multifactorial way with a range of possible problem dimensions, including environmental/management, biological, cognitive, affect and behavioural (Frederickson and Cline, 2008b). The IFF can also aid in the formulation of interventions. The main issue with the use of the label dyslexia is the implication that literacy-related difficulties firmly reside within the ‘biological’ category of the IFF. This means that other potentially contributing factors are ignored. Indeed, there are arguments that other factors in the IFF *are* implicated, for example, the affective factor in studies highlight links to anxiety and depression (Carroll and Iles, 2006); there is evidence that there is a substantial overlap between literacy difficulties and behavioural difficulties (behavioural factor) (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014); and perhaps unsurprisingly, Petrill et al. (2010) outline the extent to which environmental factors influence rates of growth in early reading. Yet, when EPs work within an educational context that uses the term dyslexia, they are already conceding that literacy-related difficulties are something biological, innate and within-person in nature, which has not be conclusively proven.

A further issue for EPs is the assumption that dyslexia is something that a child either has or does not have. The Rose review (Rose, 2009) suggests that dyslexia should be thought of as a continuum, rather than a distinct category, and as noted above, there is little research evidence to suggest that dyslexic readers should be considered in a different category to other poor readers. As also noted by the BPS (1999), there is no diagnostic 'test' for dyslexia, and RTI are models of assessment that are relatively underdeveloped. Additionally, a label of dyslexia does not guide one towards any particular intervention, since struggling readers are a highly heterogeneous category (Vellutino et al.,2004). As Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002, p. 82) also point out, the usefulness of labelling remains highly questionable, and they state that "there is no need to distinguish between 'reading disability' and 'poor reading'. One need only identify problems in reading and treat them accordingly."

In outlining the shortcomings of the term dyslexia, most researchers in the field tend to agree that it is important that persistent reading difficulties are not seen as not existing or as having no consequence. As Elliott and Grigorenko (2014, p. 166) state:

“ what [is] actually being questioned [is] the rigor, utility and added value of a clinical diagnosis of dyslexia, not the existence of the very real underlying problems that those with complex reading difficulties typically encounter.”

1.14 Dyslexia: Impact of the label

As mentioned, for some special education scholars, the label of dyslexia may be said to endorse a medical model of special education, which may be oppressive for several reasons. Firstly, it places the cause of the problem with the individual and ignores the social and environmental aspects that may be potential contributing factors. Secondly, there is the risk of the label becoming self-fulfilling: Gibbs and Elliott (2015) explored teacher's efficacy beliefs towards the words 'dyslexia' and 'reading difficulties', and found that teachers considered those categorised as having dyslexia, as having difficulties that were more immutable than categorised as having 'reading difficulties'. They then concluded that this could potentially lower teacher's expectations of those labelled as having dyslexia, which risked becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thirdly, the label of dyslexia assumes the existence of pathology, as opposed to normalcy. Thus, rather than seeing everyone as individually different and equally valuable, there is a sense of 'difference' and a view that this difference should be eradicated (Solvang, 2007). This creates a set of educational and societal norms that positions those labelled with dyslexia as outsiders, who are, in some way deviant from the rest of the population (Spenceley, 2014). Finally, Solity (2015) describes how labels such as dyslexia erroneously focus attention on the child, rather than on the system in which they taught, which serve to

“...ignore the crucial information that teachers need to raise attainments – i.e., identifying what students have learned, what they

then need to be taught and the most suitable methods for enabling them to maintain, generalise and apply their skills and knowledge.”

Many researchers however, point out that there are both positive and negative aspects to the label. Riddick (2000) and Riddick, Wolfe and Lumsden (2003), for example, who used qualitative methods to explore perceptions of those labelled as having dyslexia, concluded that the label may be problematic at a ‘public’ level, due to the individual’s perception of the potential for hostility towards the diagnosis, but they also describe the label as positive, since it offers the individual (and trusted friends, teachers and family) an explanation for their difficulties and may counteract other more simplistic and pejorative labels such as ‘thick’ or ‘lazy’. Similarly, Solvang (2007) discussed the positive impact of ‘de-stigmatisation’, which, he suggested, could lead to higher levels of self-confidence and self-esteem. More generally, Conrad and Schneider (1992) discuss some the advantages of medical labelling, which include increased tolerance from others, the removal of blame towards the individual and the potential for exploring positive outcomes.

1.15 The impact of literacy difficulties

As Elliott and Grigorenko (2014) point out, there is a risk that in problematizing the construct of dyslexia, and by suggesting that it is a socially constructed label, that real reading difficulties become trivialised. Indeed, researchers are clear that there are particular groups that experience the reading process as highly problematic (Frederickson, 2008). Mortimore and

Crozier (2006), in a UK study note that students categorised as having dyslexia experienced difficulties organising essays, expressing themselves in writing and finding the main ideas in a text. Brante (2013), in a series of qualitative case studies on students noted the amount of effort and energy required to read, especially when confronted with texts containing longer words that were difficult to decode. In addition, students categorised as having dyslexia experienced higher levels of anxiety when performing literacy tasks (Carroll and Iles, 2006) and were more likely to experience low academic self-esteem (Ingesson, 2007). These findings have led many researchers to conclude that these difficulties should not be trivialised and that there are learners who (whether classified as dyslexic or not) have poorer attainment compared to peers, having to expend greater effort and energy, having to deal with prejudice from others (e.g. teachers), and dealing with anxiety and self-esteem issues (Brante, 2013).

1.16 Dyslexia in Further Education

Despite the conceptual and practical difficulties of the use of the term dyslexia, it remains widely used in FE settings (Baxter, 2013). There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the literature suggests that a label is often a prerequisite to accessing additional support, such as extra time for examinations, equipment such as a laptop, or additional funding through the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) (Reid, 2009; Solvang, 2007). Secondly, many FE colleges perceive disability in terms of the rights of the individual and the support they can be expected to receive, and that this support comes

in the form of accommodation and barrier-removal, rather than cure or rehabilitation (Reid, 2009). A label may therefore acts as a gateway to this entitlement. This may differ significantly from school settings, where resources can often be provided without the requirement of a label.

In addition, much of the legislation that has historically been aimed at post-16 providers uses the term dyslexia in an indiscriminate fashion. The Disability Rights Commission revised Code of Practice for Post-16 Education (Disability Rights Commission, 2007), for example, makes frequent reference to students with dyslexia and outlines the kind of adjustments that are necessary to meet the needs of students who are defined as having dyslexia. The recent SEND COP (Department for Education/Department of Health, 2015) also mentions dyslexia, defining it as a Specific learning difficulty (SpLD).

1.17 The assessment of dyslexia in colleges

Reid (2009) and Pavey et al. (2010) outline how colleges have traditionally identified dyslexia and what tends to happen as a result of this identification. When students enter college, they are usually asked whether they have previously experienced any literacy difficulties and whether they are likely to require any additional support (Reid, 2009). They might also be required to go through a process of initial assessment, where baseline levels of literacy and numeracy are obtained, either through a computer or a pencil and paper assessment (Pavey, 2010), which might then indicate whether any further assessment is required. Throughout their course, it is also usually possible for

students, parent or their tutors at the college to make a referral to the learning support departments if they have any concerns about literacy. At this stage, they may then be referred to either an EP or a specialist teacher for assessment purposes (Reid, 2009). One issue with this approach is that it places little emphasis on a student's educational history and previous schooling, since any previous literacy difficulties are likely to be significant indicator that a student could experience difficulties in FE.

Pavey (2010) states that the purpose of an assessment tends to be to determine whether any accommodations or access arrangements need to be put in place for the student. These might include recommendations to teachers on how to make adaptations to the classroom, or providing students with equipment such as a laptop. It is worth noting that although these might be considered 'typical' ways in which FE colleges operate, since they are standalone organisations, there may be considerable variation in what has been outlined above. In addition, the above authors' publications are over five years old and as mentioned above, the past five years has been a period of considerable change for both FE colleges and the EP profession.

1.18 Summary of main points

To summarise, this literature review has discussed the following:

There is an interest in how EPs and FE colleges might work together.

Statutory changes, such as the SEND COP (Department for

Education/Department of Health, 2015), have also advocated that EPs and FE colleges collaborate. Research on how FE colleges work with and assist student with literacy difficulties exists, yet it is at least five years old and therefore relatively out of date. There is a need to understand the current context given changes to FE and to the educational psychology profession that have occurred over the past five years. An up to date analysis is therefore desirable.

The educational psychology profession has positioned itself towards the label of dyslexia in various specific ways, based on definitions from the BPS (1999), Rose Report (Rose, 2009), and through the processing of the continuously developing research literature. Despite some heterogeneity in approaches (e.g. the continued and erroneous use of the IQ-achievement discrepancy model), there are nonetheless consistencies in the educational psychology profession, such as an IFF approach to problem formulation (Frederickson and Cline, 2008b), which is conceptually dissimilar to the 'medical model' of diagnosis and treatment and a rejection of outmoded means of assessment (e.g. the ability-achievement discrepancy model). The complexity of these issues has been discussed above. There is a lack of clarity as to whether FE colleges share the above views, and whether their practices are reflected by developments in research. If EPs and FE colleges are to work together, a useful starting point is for EPs to understand how FE colleges position themselves in relation to these issues.

1.19 Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research is to explore perceptions of literacy difficulties and the term dyslexia in a Further Education (FE) College. For the reasons mentioned above, it also endeavours to understand the processes involved in an FE College regarding the identification of young people with literacy difficulties and the main purposes of this identification. Since this research considers just one college, its findings are not intended to be generalizable to other colleges, but it might still be considered a starting point for larger-scale research that might endeavour to make broader generalisations.

This research therefore aims to gather information from a FE setting in order to clarify these issues, and to ultimately consider the extent to which the FE college viewpoints and practices align with the views uncovered from the research literature, upon which EPs, as scientific research-practitioners, should be using to guide their own practice. This may aid in any future collaborative work between EPs and FE Colleges.

The following two research questions will be examined:

1. What are the views of key persons in a FE college on the nature of literacy difficulties?

2. What are some of the processes involved in the identification of young people with literacy difficulties, and the main purposes of this identification in this college?

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Epistemology and Ontology

This research adopts a social constructionist perspective reflecting the notion that reality is socially constructed. It also takes a relativist epistemological position which embodies the belief that knowledge is always perspectival and therefore that a single 'absolute truth' is unavailable. As Robson (2002, p.22) states, "philosophical relativism maintains that there is no external reality independent of human consciousness; there are only different sets of meanings and classifications which people attach to the world". This contrasts to a realist position, which carries with it an assumption that knowledge can be accessed in an objective and unbiased manner, and can be seen as divorced from its social, cultural and historical underpinnings (Burr, 2003).

This theoretical position has been adopted, at least partly because it fits with the concept of dyslexia, which has itself been described as being socially constructed, and having its own complex social identity (Pavey, 2007). Indeed, in the literature review, I noted how the concept of dyslexia was originally conceived within the disciplines of medicine and ophthalmology, and that this later shifted towards psychology, neurobiology and linguistics. A relativist perspective allows us to assume that people's knowledge of dyslexia is a socially constructed product of a long history of theorising rather than an independent verifiable fact. It also allows us to conceive of dyslexia as taking on a range of different meanings to different people. Again, this aligns with

discussions in the literature review about different definitions of dyslexia, and the lack of consensus as to inclusionary and exclusionary criteria for the term.

It might be argued that this theoretical position is more relevant to Research Question 1 than Research Question 2. Research Question 1 is concerned with uncovering viewpoints on the nature of literacy difficulties and dyslexia, and these viewpoints are, by their nature, likely to be a reflection of an individual's experience and understanding of the concept, and are extremely unlikely to yield data that could be considered objective, in a positivistic sense. Research Question 2 however is enquiring about the processes involved, and the main purposes of this identification; this could arguably be seen as attempting to uncover a reality that is more objective and real, and therefore acknowledging the existence, to at least some degree, of a pre-social reality. Nevertheless, Research Questions 1 and 2 are related: processes in institutions are influenced by viewpoints about them and vice versa. Therefore the actual processes of which we are trying to explore through Research Question 2 cannot be separated out or distinguished from the set of socially constructed processes said to underpin Research Question 1. Moreover, these processes are unlikely to have remained fixed, but will have evolved from the various perspectives of those working within the context of SEN and literacy difficulties. In short, we cannot easily separate these two research questions, and they are best viewed through the same ontological lens.

2.2 Design frame: case study

This research adopts a single-case study design. Thomas (2011, p. 3) defines the case study as “a kind of research that concentrates on one thing, looking at it in detail [and] not seeking to generalise from it.” Robson (2002) explains that case studies involve looking at a case or a particular phenomenon in its real-life context, from a variety of different angles, and often with the use of different means of data collection. The main advantage of the case study approach is that it provides a richer and more detailed account of a topic than through the use of many other design frames (Thomas, 2011). It is also particularly useful in expounding a case’s ‘uniqueness’ (Thomas, 2011). Yin (2009), however, describes some of the concerns that have been raised in relation to case studies, which include a lack of scientific rigour (not following any systematic procedures or taking on ‘biased’ views), a lack of being able to generalise findings and a lack of readability (case studies have been accused of producing lengthy and cumbersome documents).

It is worthwhile considering the advantages and disadvantages of adopting a case study approach in answering the above research questions, and briefly considering any alternative design frames. Thomas (2011) outlines when a case study would be considered an appropriate design frame, and cites the following key aspects such as: when one case or a small number of cases are being investigated, when the case is ‘naturally occurring’ and where the aim is not to control variables, where quantification is not a priority, where many methods and sources of data may be used, and where the aim is to look at

relationships and processes rather than causation or generalisation. In examining these factors, it appears that a case study design frame is warranted: it seeks to investigate one case; it is concerned, to a reasonable degree, with relationships and processes (Research Question 2); the quantification of data is not a priority; and this is a study of a naturally occurring case where it is not necessary to control variables.

A further way of assessing whether a case study is a suitable design frame is to enquire whether there are the essential components present for the research topic to be considered a case. Thomas (2013) states that a case should be a case *of* something, and that two parts need to be present: the subject and the object. He describes the subject as the case itself, and the object as the analytical frame. In this research, the subject is the learning support department of a FE college (and any agencies that work closely with the department), and the analytical frame would be literacy difficulties and how they are viewed and identified by those from within the department (from multiple perspectives).

It should be acknowledged that case studies do not allow one to generalise from one case to another (Thomas, 2013). If this research were attempting to generalise its findings, for example, if it were attempting to assess how FE colleges throughout the whole of England viewed literacy difficulties and dyslexia, and how FE colleges *collectively* identified literacy difficulties/dyslexia, then a survey method would be the appropriate choice. It

should be noted that a survey was considered in the research, yet discounted for the following reasons:

- Adopting a survey approach would involve a considerable risk. Since I would have no previous relationship with the colleges, staff may feel no obligation to respond. A poor survey response rate is a common problem, and can result in serious data-quality limitations (Robson, 2002).
- This research is partly exploratory; due to a lack of up to date research specifically in FE colleges, it is difficult to anticipate what the research will uncover. This makes a survey approach premature (Robson, 2002)
- Each FE colleges can be considered as 'unique' and distinctive; as mentioned in the Literature Review they have much more financial autonomy than schools, so have a greater degree of freedom in how they choose to operate. There is also evidence that each college offers students a very different range of courses and educational opportunities. The British Council website (British Council, 2015), for example, states that (my italics): "These colleges offer courses and qualifications in a *wide range* of vocational and academic subjects *at many levels*". This 'uniqueness' makes a case study approach a logical one.

It should also be noted that taking a case study approach does not mean one cannot generalise research findings to theory. Indeed, as Yin (2009, p. 15) points out: "...case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes". This is relevant to this research since it also seeks to compare findings from the case study to the research literature.

2.3: What kind of case study?

Over the past several decades there have been various attempts to define different types of case studies, based on factors such as purpose or approach (e.g. Stake, 1995; de Vaus, 2001 and Yin, 2009). Thomas (2011) has reviewed these and suggested four factors that need to be taken into account when deciding on the kind of case study: subject, purpose, approach and process.

In this case study:

- The subject will be considered a key case, as it represents a good example of an FE college.
- The purpose is instrumental, explanatory and exploratory: instrumental because it is done with a purpose in mind – for example, EPs can benefit from a greater understanding of viewpoints and processes within an FE college; explanatory because it attempts to explain a particular phenomenon - that of how literacy difficulties are viewed and

processes involved in identification; exploratory because it involves exploring something about which little is known.

- The approach is, to some degree at least, testing a theory, since the research is concerned with asking how, or to what extent, the findings may differ from the research evidence on literacy difficulties. It is also interpretive, since it seeks to understand a range of perspectives and positions of those people that exist as part of 'the case'.
- The process was a single case study containing a number of units (people) that make up the wider case. The justification for choosing a single rather than multiple case study (two or more learning support departments in different colleges) is that the focus is intended to be on a single unit, with an interest and focus on the way that units fit together, rather than being a comparison of different examples of a single unit. The process is also considered a 'snapshot', since the case is being examined within a specific period of time.

2.4: Settings and participants

Having decided on a single case study approach, it was necessary to choose and then recruit an FE college whose staff agreed to participate in the study, prior to involving college participants in the research. I decided to approach a local FE college for the following reasons:

- It is a 'general' further education college, which met the criteria of it being a 'key case' (rather than it being a 'specialist' college)

- I was aware of a colleague who had a pre-existing relationship with the college and believed that this might help facilitate access.

As Thomas (2011) points out, the construct of a 'sample' is not relevant to a case study, since the word implies examining something that intends to represent the wider population.

Some general details about the college are outlined below (note that these are kept general so that, for ethical reasons, the college cannot be identified):

- Located in the West Midlands area of England
- Serves an area with a high level of social disadvantage
- Offers a wide variety of academic and vocational programmes, both full-time and part-time including apprenticeships, work place learning, courses for unemployed adults and advanced courses for overseas students
- Approximately a third of learners are drawn from minority ethnic backgrounds

(Ofsted, 2014)

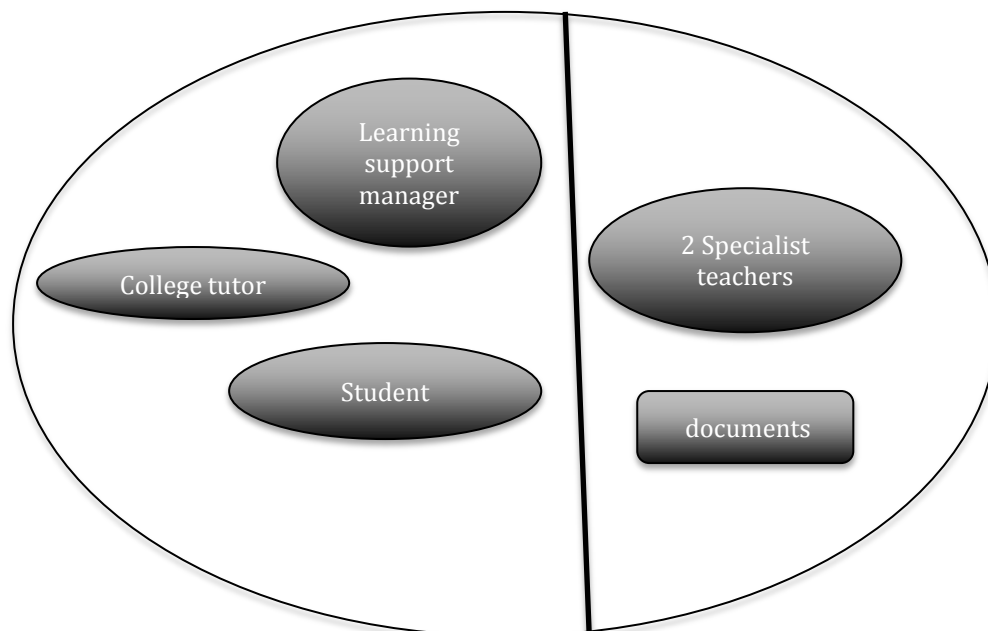
As outlined in the recruitment letter for the Learning Support Manager (Appendix 1), the participants who I sought to recruit included:

- the manager of the learning support team;

- a specialist teacher involved in the assessment of students' literacy difficulties;
- a literacy skills tutor with responsibility for a student with a literacy difficulty;
- a student who has been assessed as having a literacy difficulty such as dyslexia

Figure 2.1 below provides an overview of the case study in a visual format, with the left side representing those people or information within the college and the right side representing people or information outside it. Documents such as assessment reports, also made up part of the case study.

Figure 2.1: the case and its boundaries



My inclusion criteria for the staff members involved in the research were as follows:

- employed by the college within the learning support department or outside the college with a direct relationship with the learning support department
- having a job role as identified above (or similar)

The exclusionary criteria were as follows:

- unable to provide informed consent
- having worked for the college for less than 3 months (since they may lack an understanding of processes at the college)

The inclusion criteria for the student in the research were as follows:

- Identified as having a specific literacy difficulty such as dyslexia while attending the college
- Able and willing to talk about his or her experience of being identified with a specific literacy difficulty such as dyslexia

The exclusion criteria for the student were as follows:

- Age 26 or above (the reason for this is that EPs have a statutory duty to work within the age range of 0 – 25 and it was decided that ages 26 and above could be of less relevance)

2.5 Ethical considerations and the recruitment process

Ethical approval was gained from the Ethics Research Committee at the University of Birmingham prior to the commencement of data collection. This involved outlining the proposed research and explicitly stating how I would approach ethical matters such as recruitment, consent, participant feedback, participant withdrawal etc.

The process of recruiting this college involved sending a letter (see Appendix 1), with an attached information sheet (see Appendix 2) to the Learning Support Manager of the college. The letter outlined the nature of the research and stated that participation was voluntary, and that any participant had the right to withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason (British Psychological Society, 2010). It also explained that the interviews would involve participants being audio recorded, however that data would be stored anonymously and securely, and that neither their name nor the name of the college would appear in the final thesis.

After I sent the initial letter and information sheet I made a follow up call to the learning support manager asking whether he had had a chance to read about the research and whether himself or his colleagues were interested in participating. He agreed to take part and we decided that the best way to proceed was for me to contact each participant individually by email, to ask whether they would like to be involved. He also explained about the assessment centre and suggested I contact them by email to ask for participation, and also said that one of the staff members could recruit a

student on my behalf, rather than my original intention, which had been to recruit through a poster placed in a visible area of the college. Although this presented a possible ethical issue – the student may feel more obliged to take part if a staff member makes the request – I decided that this would be acceptable as I would explain the study and obtain consent prior to the student being interviewed, and the student would be aware of the voluntary nature of the study and the option for him to withdraw.

All participants, both within and outside the college, gave their consent to arrange individual 45-minute interviews (with the exception of the assessment centre who said they could offer a joint interview with two specialist teachers).

2.6 Interview procedure

Data collection involved four semi-structured interviews, three conducted individually and one conducted with two participants. These took place in June and July of 2015. All interviews took place on college premises, in a quiet and private room, with the exception of the interview with the two specialist teachers, which took place at their office. Interviews lasted between 36 and 53 minutes, with an average duration of 45 minutes across the 4 interviews.

2.7 Informed consent

At the beginning of each interview, I attempted, as much as possible, to make the participant feel at ease, by creating a welcoming and relaxed atmosphere (as per recommendations in Robson (2002)). This included offering the participant tea/coffee and a snack. I then asked the participant if they had had the chance to read through the information sheet describing the study, and proceeded to go over some of the main points of the study again, explaining its voluntary nature, the right to withdraw, what would happen to any data and how it would be stored (this is explained in more detail in table 2.1 below). The participant then had an opportunity to ask any questions. Following this, each participant was asked to initial a consent form in 5 places (see Appendix 3) showing that they agreed with each statement and then write their name, the date and their signature at the bottom of the form. The participant was then advised that the interview was semi-structured (and I explained what this meant), and were encouraged to speak freely in response to a series of questions. A semi-structured approach was taken to allow a balance between particular questions and topics that needed to be covered, while also allowing me the freedom to ask follow up questions, and allowing the participant leeway to spend longer on particular questions if required.

2.8 Interview questioning for professionals

Appendix 4 contains a script of questions for the interview, although since interviews were semi-structured, question wording was sometimes changed and some questions were omitted or added based on the responses of the

participant. At the beginning of each interview, I explained that it would be in two parts: in the first part I would ask questions about how things worked at the college, in terms of assessing and providing support for students with literacy difficulties, and in the second part, I would explore their own personal viewpoints on the nature of literacy difficulties more generally.

2.9 Rationale of interview questions

The interview schedule for part 1 was based on the most up to date literature available on the processes and purposes of identification of literacy difficulties in FE colleges. This included information from Reid (2009), Pavey et al. (2010) and Baxter (2013), whose findings are briefly summarised in section 1.17 of the literature review. Table 2.1 below provides a brief rationale for the interview schedule, and often refers back to research or links back to sections of research outlined in the literature review. The interview schedule was also informed by some initial conversations I had had with the Learning Support Manager.

Table 2.1: Rationale for interview schedule – part 1

Question	Rationale (or link to literature)
Can you tell me a little about your role here at the college?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate an understanding the participant's role
What term is generally used to describe students with literacy difficulties? (e.g. dyslexia/reading disability etc.?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify preferred terminology of participant in relation to literacy difficulties
I'd like to understand more about the process involved in the identification of young people with a literacy difficulty/dyslexia. Is there a screening process when students come to college, or is there a system whereby students or staff can flag up difficulties?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pavey (2010) states there is likely to be a process of initial assessment when a student enters college. This question is designed to see whether this is also the case in this college
Who generally would make a request for an assessment of a students' literacy difficulty e.g. teacher/tutor/parent/student etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate greater understanding of the process of assessment
Who undertakes these assessments (I understand it is outsourced to xxxxxx assessment centre)? Is there a reason why this organisation does this?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate greater understanding of the process of assessment • Pavey et al. (2010, p. 17) state that "diagnostic assessments can be carried out only by a specialist teacher or an educational psychologist". The question clarifies who the college might use.

Question	Rationale (or link to literature)
Is assessment for literacy difficulties/dyslexia usually a one-off 'snapshot' approach in terms of information gathering or is it assessment that is done over time?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate greater understanding of the approach to assessment • Related to the literature on discrepancy models and RTI in section 1.10 and 1.11 of the literature review
If a young person or their parents request a dyslexia assessment, how would they get one?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate greater understanding of the process of assessment
What's the purpose of the assessment (e.g. exam concessions, DSA, intervention?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate greater understanding of the purpose of assessment • Pavey et al. (2010) state that the purpose of an assessment tends to be to determine whether any accommodations or access arrangements need to be put in place
Are students who have these difficulties considered to have a disability or a difficulty – are they eligible for DSA?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore the colleges practices in relation to disability entitlements and the new SEND COP (2015)
To what extent is the assessment contextualised to the students' course of study?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reid (2009, p. 268) states "the assessment needs to be contextualised for the course of study and the needs of the student". This question is designed to examine the extent to which this might be true.
Question	Rationale (or link to literature)

<p>Do you know how students are identified as meeting the criteria for having a literacy difficulty/dyslexia?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A question to identify how the assessment discriminates between those who might be 'dyslexic' and 'non-dyslexic', if this kind of labelling is being used
<p>Do you know what components are involved in the assessment? e.g. psychometric testing, information gathering, etc?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A question to gain an understanding of what the assessment is comprised of. • Related to the debates on approaches to identifying dyslexia outlined in section 1.10 of the literature review
<p>If known, is assessment based on a comparison of literacy abilities against IQ, or is IQ irrelevant?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A question to establish the role of intelligence, or IQ, in assessment • Related to the debates explored in section 1.10 of the literature review
<p>Are you aware of response to intervention models of assessment of literacy difficulties, whereby an intervention (usually phonics based) is put into place and progress against this is recorded?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring awareness of non-static RTI assessment approaches in relation to assessment • Related to the debates explored in section 1.11 of the literature review
<p>Do you think the model that exists for students who go to college here is a 'rights' model, in the sense that, this literacy difficulty or disability is identified and that results in extra time in an exam or a laptop?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reid (2009) states that many FE colleges perceive disability in terms of the rights of the individual and the support they can be expected to receive, and that this support comes in the form of accommodation and barrier-removal, rather than cure or rehabilitation

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessing the extent to which assessment results in different types of support
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Rationale and design of interview questions for part 2

The questions in part 2 were designed to answer research question 1 related to the views of key persons on the nature of literacy difficulties. These questions were designed to cover many of the areas of contention debated in the literature. In a similar manner to Table 2.1, Table 2.2 provides a brief rationale for the interview schedule for part 2.

Table 2.2: Rationale for interview schedule – part 2

Question	Rationale
In your experience, what do you consider to be the main characteristics of a literacy difficulty?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Considerable debate around the inclusionary and exclusionary criteria of literacy difficulties and dyslexia (e.g. see section 1.9 of literature review)
Is there a social/emotional component to this?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The literature suggests that literacy difficulties have a marked impact on social and emotional factors (e.g. Carroll and Iles, 2006; Ingesson, 2007; Brante, 2013). This question is designed to explore the extent to which the participant agrees.
Question	Rationale

<p>Do you think there is an overlap with any other conditions (such as ADHD)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reid (2009, p. 291) states that there is an “overlap between the various syndromes that can be associated with learning difficulties”. This question is designed to explore the extent to which the participant might agree.
<p>Do you think dyslexia is a useful term to describe young people with literacy difficulties?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This question aims to assess how the participant constructs literacy difficulties and dyslexia e.g. do they see them as meaning different things or being similar, and what are their views towards dyslexia as a construct (if they use this term)?
<p>Using the term dyslexia, in your opinion, is there a difference between a dyslexic reader and a non-dyslexic poor reader?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the literature review I note that a key issue is whether it is useful or meaningful to conceive of a dyslexic subgroup among poor readers (see section 1.9). • This was also a key question from the study by Regan and Woods (2000) around teachers’ understanding of dyslexia and implications for EP practice.
<p>Question</p>	<p>Rationale</p>

<p>Do you believe that any person who has persistent literacy difficulties should be considered as having dyslexia regardless of their academic abilities or IQ? For example, should they only be considered dyslexic if they have a comparatively high IQ compared to their literacy difficulties?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intelligence has long been regarded as a controversial area in relation to literacy difficulties and dyslexia. This question is designed to elicit views on relationship between intelligence and literacy difficulties/dyslexia.
<p>To what extent do you believe that literacy difficulties/dyslexia are the result of biological differences that are present from birth?</p> <p>To take the other extreme end, to what extent do you believe that literacy difficulties/dyslexia might be the result of environmental circumstances, such as a lack of opportunities at home or school to engage in reading and literacy activities, or a lack of quality teaching/instruction at school?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considerable debate in the literature around literacy difficulties / dyslexia's relationship to biological factors and environmental factors and the relative influence of each (see section 1.12 on differential models). These 2 questions aims to clarify the participants views in relation to the nature / nurture debate.
<p>Do you believe that once a young person has reached the college level, there is anything that can be done to help them improve their literacy skills, or do you think it's unlikely that they would improve further as a result of any kind of intense literacy or phonics intervention? In other words, by this stage, is it mainly about</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This question aims to explore viewpoints related to intervention for students at the college level. Research suggests intervention programs for older children tend to be less successful than for younger children (e.g. Flynn, Zheng and Swanson, 2012). This question explores perceptions of the potential for within-person

making reasonable adjustments to their environment rather than improving their innate abilities?	change.
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2.10 Interview questioning for the student

The interview procedure for the student varied somewhat: rather than section one being about procedures at the college, I enquired about the student’s experience of having a literacy difficulty and also about how he felt the college responded to it. A question script can be found in Appendix 5. It should be noted that the data collected for the student only informed the first research question around perceptions and was not used for the second research question around purposes and processes.

Data collection also involved the collection of any relevant documentation. This comprised a sample report of a complete dyslexia assessment from the assessment centre.

2.11 Ethical issues

Throughout the data collection process, I was careful to abide by all protocols in relation to the Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2010). In addition, at the ethical review stage, I identified 3 potential risks to participants (1) Some staff members of the FE college could feel they are being scrutinised or that any analysis around their policy and practice related to literacy difficulties could potentially portray them in a negative light (2) Discussing literacy

difficulties with a student may raise emotive or distressing issues (3) Various questions during the student interview, especially those trying to ascertain the student's views on the causes of their difficulty, might be construed as implying that they are in some way responsible for their literacy difficulty. These were addressed as follows: (1) In the information sheet (see Appendix 2) I have stated the following: "Please note this research does not intend to evaluate the extent to which the college is adhering to any principles or guidelines related to the assessment of dyslexia or literacy difficulties, and does not intend to place any judgements on the way the college currently supports students with these difficulties." (2) Before interviewing the student, I familiarised myself with the counselling service at the college, so if any issues arose, I could direct them towards this service if necessary. In addition, if the student felt that they had been treated unfairly as a result of having a specific literacy difficulty or disability, then I would discuss this with them, and with their consent would raise the issue with the Learning Support Manager of the college. (3) In order to reduce this risk, questioning was related to cause was kept deliberately open-ended (see Appendix 5) Table 2.1 below outlines some of the other ethical matters that were considered throughout this process.

Table 2.3: ethical considerations and steps taken to address them

Ethical consideration	Further information/steps taken to address
Consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information sheet and letter detailing voluntary nature of study, right to withdraw, what would happen to their data and how it would be stored • ‘Student friendly’ information sheet using simplified language was read aloud to the student • Opportunity to ask questions • Verbal and written consent obtained prior to interviews • All participants were over the age of 18 so parental consent was not required
Participant feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants were offered feedback in the form of a summary report
Participant withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants were made aware of the right to withdraw, and the fact that there would be no consequences if they withdrew. They were given my contact details to withdraw from the study after the interviews if they wished to do so. No participant withdrew from the study however.
Compensation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants were offered, tea, coffee and a donut

Table 2.1 continued: ethical considerations and steps taken to address them

Ethical consideration	Further information/steps taken to address
Confidentiality and anonymity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews took place in a private room that could not be overheard by anyone else • Codes rather than names were used in interview transcripts and in any reporting of the data • Names only appeared on consent forms, which were held in a locked filing cabinet in a council office • The student was informed of the limits of confidentiality, for example, if they said something that might constitute a risk to themselves or someone else • It was not possible to guarantee complete anonymity as other staff members may have seen me interviewing participants
Storage, access and disposal of data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data kept and stored according to the Data Protection Act (1998) • Audio recordings and transcriptions stored in a locked filing cabinet in a council office • Transcription data was stored on 2 password protected USB sticks • Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored for 10 years and then destroyed
Ethical justification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although this is a single case study and not designed to be representative of FE colleges in general, it may still be helpful to EPs, since so little is known about how any college views and responds to literacy difficulties.

2.12 The transcription process

Data from the interviews was transcribed in a style known as orthographic or verbatim transcription (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The aim of the transcription process was to produce a clear and complete rendering of each of the four interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Particular care was taken to differentiate the two specialist teachers, who spoke together in the same interview. After the transcriptions were completed, they were rechecked for accuracy. Any names used in interviews were abbreviated to the first letter of the name to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

2.13 Method of data analysis

Data from the interviews were transcribed and then analysed using a thematic analysis (TA), which combined both inductive and theoretical approaches to TA (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013). This was done due to the nature of the first two research questions: Research Question 1 related closely to the theoretical debates about literacy difficulties and dyslexia and as such, the analysis needed to be guided somewhat by existing theory and theoretical concepts. Research Question 2, on the other hand, was more exploratory, and therefore the aim was to generate an analysis that was more inductive, and less based on theory.

The overall approach to analysis involved following the 6 phases of TA as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) for each of the first two research

questions. Firstly, I familiarised myself with the data through the process of reading and re-reading the transcriptions, and noting down my initial ideas. I then began generating initial codes that identified features of the data relevant to Research Question 1 and Research Question 2. For Research Question 1, these codes tended to relate closely to the terminology and theoretical concepts of literacy difficulties and dyslexia. Next, I began to collate these codes into potential themes by looking across all four transcriptions and finding patterns of similarity in interview responses. For the purposes of the research, themes were defined as “recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question” (King and Horrocks, 2010, p. 150). I then reviewed these themes by generating an initial thematic map for Research Question 1, and a process diagram for Research Question 2. This enabled me to visualise the themes, and processes and see how they related to one another, as well as consider which themes should be considered distinct and whether any needed to be incorporated within others. In addition, I added arrows to the thematic map and process diagram to illustrate the way in which particular themes were related. Finally, I reviewed the themes and refined the naming of each of the individual theme to ensure their appropriateness.

There were a number of other possible approaches to analysing the data, however I decided that a TA combining inductive and theoretical approaches would be the most appropriate. I summarise the reasons for this decision below:

- Although the overall approach is one of social constructionism, there are some elements of this research that incorporate elements of a contextualist approach (Braun and Clarke, 2013), for example, the questions relating to the young person's experience. As such, a flexible method of data analysis was required. One of the main strengths of TA is its flexibility, for example, it can be inductive, theoretical, experiential or constructionist (or a combination of these) (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

- Although there is close relationship between the theoretical position of social constructionism and discourse analysis (DA) (Burr, 2003), DA was not chosen because:
 - DA is better suited to a purely critical orientation whereas this research comprises a combination of experiential and critical orientations
 - DA is often used in relation to analytic constructs such as subjectivity, subject positions, positioning and power (Braun and Clarke, 2013), which are less relevant to this research.
 - DA has a lack of concrete or clear guidelines with which to follow and has been described as a "craft skill" that involves "following hunches" (Potter and Wetherall, 1987).

- DA does not produce analyses that easily translate into 'giving back' to participants, or for use in applied research (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Since a summary report was offered to the college, this was considered to be a potential issue.
- Other qualitative approaches were not chosen as they were inappropriate e.g. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (there is not a principal concern with exploring participants' lived experiences) and Grounded Theory (the analysis does not wholly involve constructing theory from data).

2.14 Reliability and validity

Since this research takes a social constructionist stance, reliability and validity are considered of far less importance compared to research described as being 'realist' or 'positivist' (Burr, 2003; Thomas, 2013). Indeed, Burr (2003, p. 158) states that, "the concepts of reliability and validity, as they are normally understood, are...inappropriate for judging the quality of social constructionist work". Perhaps a more appropriate concept for qualitative research such as this is 'trustworthiness' which is related more to persuading oneself and one's audience that the findings of the research are trustworthy, believable, and worth taking seriously (Robson, 2002). Trustworthiness in this research has been sought in the following ways:

- Being explicit about the research process, including detailing the steps taken and the interview questions asked (see appendices 4 and 5)

- Triangulation (e.g. see Braun and Clarke, 2013): themes in the data have been obtained through looking across the data and observing patterns from multiple perspectives

2.15 After the analysis: consulting participants about their data

Related to the principles of reliability and validity, is the practice of consulting participants about their data to establish the trustworthiness or authenticity of the research. However, participants were not consulted about the analysis of their transcripts since, as Oliver (2008) suggests, this can be counterproductive. Oliver (2008) states that although consulting participants may appear to be motivated by a sound ethical principle – for participants to be able to check that any data collected is a true and accurate reflection of what they had said – the reality can be much more complex. This is particularly the case if a participant is asked to comment on any inference or analysis made by the researcher, since, if they were to disagree on any conclusions drawn, the researcher is then presented with the dilemma of whether to make changes: if the former, reworking the thesis could result in a loss of coherence; if the latter, there is a risk that the respondent may feel antagonised. Oliver (2008, p.120) ultimately advises that, “at some stage the researcher has to take over complete responsibility for the data and the analysis, and beyond that point respondents are no longer consulted.” Due to the risk of these ethical issues, I decided it would be more appropriate not to consult participants about their data after data collection.

Chapter Three: Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Analysis and discussion of Research Question 1: What are the views of key persons in a FE college on the nature of literacy difficulties? Part A: data from college staff and student.

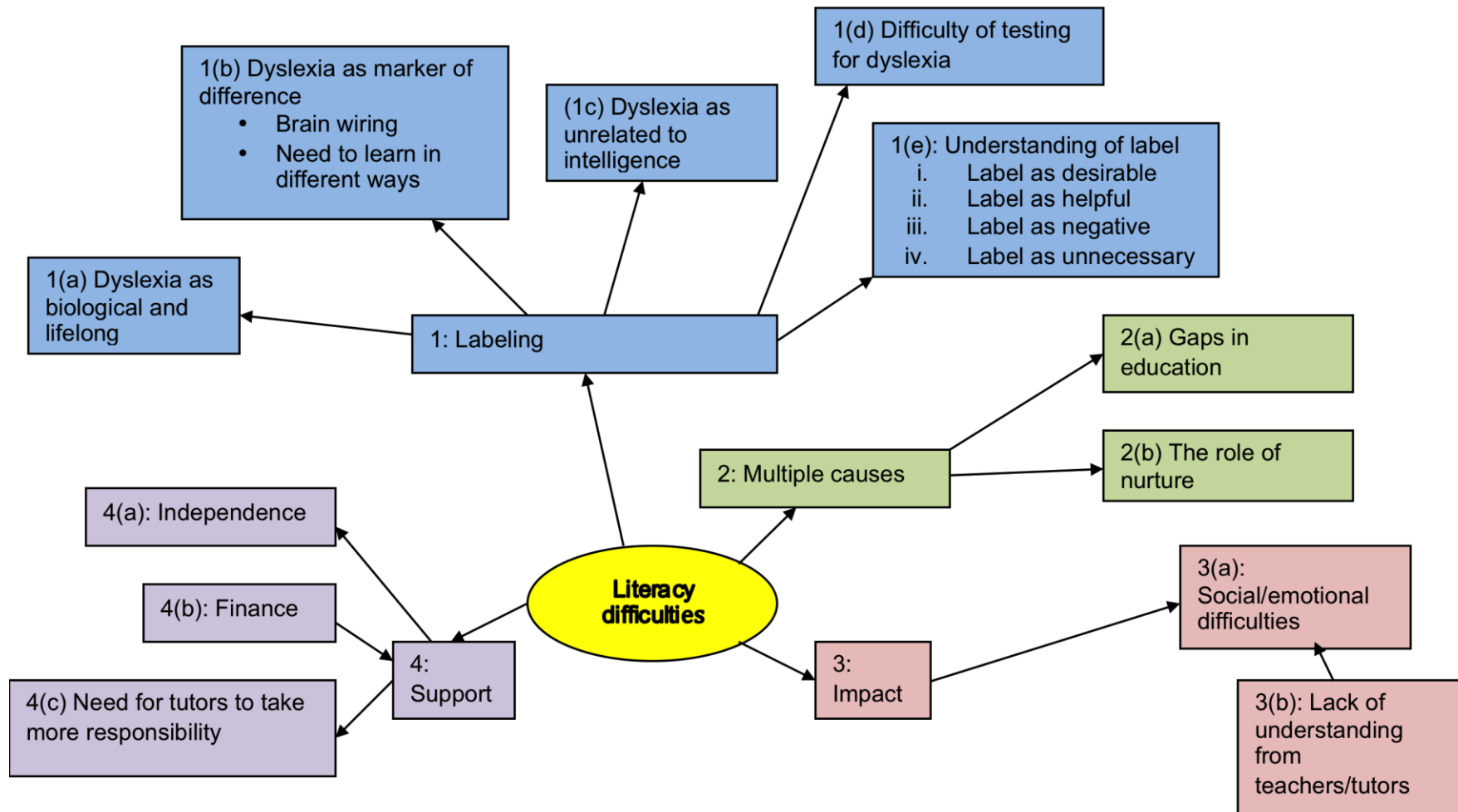
An analysis of the four transcripts revealed a range of themes and sub-themes, which are presented in two thematic maps shown in figures 3.1 and 3.2 below. Data from the specialist teachers and from the other participants has been kept separate to demonstrate the contrast in views between those inside the college and those outside it. In addition, each of the thematic maps contains a different 'central theme': the data from the specialist teachers was concerned with dyslexia, and as such, this is represented as the central theme, whereas, with the data from the other participants, dyslexia was often discussed, but the central theme was presented more broadly as 'literacy difficulties'.

The themes that relate to the literacy skills tutor, the learning support manager and the student are numbered in figure 3.1 as:

1. Labelling
2. Multiple Causes
3. Impact
4. Support

These are further explained over the following pages and a range of extracts has been included below to illustrate each theme. The 'central theme' of these four themes is 'Literacy Difficulties'. In this section, the analysis and discussion has been combined together: the discussion sections aims to expand on the points made by interpreting the data to a greater degree and relating it back to the research literature.

Figure 3.1: Main themes in relation to Research Question 1 (excluding the assessment centre)



3.2 Theme 1: Labelling

The first theme, labelling, is used to refer to the prevalence of the use of the term dyslexia in all interviews. All participants indicated that they were comfortable using the term. As the literacy skills tutor stated: “I think people are quite happy to use that term, dyslexia, and most people have an idea of what it is”. The following subthemes relate to the use of the label dyslexia and are as follows:

1(a) Dyslexia as biological and lifelong

All participants perceived dyslexia as being a biological life-long condition:

“I think it must be something that you’re born with”

(Literacy Skills Tutor)

“If the science is correct and you trust it, then, I would say yes it’s a lifelong condition”

(Learning Support Manager)

Discussion of subtheme 1(a)

As mentioned in the literature review, many researchers have noted the likelihood of a genetic component, however the extent of its importance is debated, and there is also a tendency for researchers to emphasise an interaction between genetic and the environment. In this respect, the Literacy Skills Tutor and Learning Support Manager’s comments are broadly in agreement with the research evidence, since, although they tend to agree that

biological factors are (at least partly) responsible, they also describe the significance of environmental factors.

1(b) Dyslexia as marker of difference

(i) Brain wiring

Related to the above sub-theme, several respondents commented on how dyslexia is related to the brain being wired in a different way:

“Whereas the dyslexic person, for want of a better word, their brain is wired in a certain way and processes information in a certain way”

(Learning Support Manager)

“Something that I’ve come to understand is dyslexia is a broad term for several different ways of having your brain wired differently”

(Student)

Discussion of subtheme 1b (i)

The concept of brain wiring is related to the previous subtheme in the sense that it implies a biological difference between those ‘with dyslexia’ and those ‘without dyslexia’. The emphasis here however is that the focus is on the brain rather than the genome. In the literature review, it was mentioned that there was some evidence for a neurological component to reading difficulties, due to under-activation in posterior regions of the left hemisphere in poor readers (Richlan, Kronbichler and Wimmer, 2009), however it was also noted that

neuroimaging could not identify categories that could be described as either 'dyslexic' or 'non-dyslexic'. There is therefore a great deal of uncertainty as to whether neurobiological factors are implicated in those who might be described as having dyslexia.

1(b) (ii) Need to learn in different ways

Related to this is the notion that students with dyslexia have fundamentally different learning needs and requirements from those of 'non-dyslexic' students:

"I found that if someone said something to me or I'd watch a video on something I would be able to report about that, but if I try and read something I probably won't be able to report [on it]" (Student)

"I would say the person with dyslexia would have to be taught differently to other people in a way that suits the way they learn"

(Learning Support Manager)

Discussion of subtheme 1b(ii)

Advocacy groups such as British Dyslexia Association (BDA) argue for the existence of learning styles that are related to dyslexia. For example, they state on their website that "Dyslexic people tend to be visual and kinaesthetic learners (practical, hands-on) rather than auditory learners and learn more

efficiently if they are using all sensory pathways” (British Dyslexia Association, no date). Claims that specific approaches, such as multisensory ones are particularly beneficial, however, are not supported by research evidence (Moats and Farrell, 2005). Indeed, as Elliott and Grigorenko (2014, p. 136) note in their chapter on intervention, there is no one teaching approach that should be seen as suitable for struggling readers but that rather, “activities need to be tailored to the particular strengths and weaknesses of the student”. This also reflects Solity’s (2015) comments mentioned in the literature review around the benefits of instructional psychology in identifying what students have learned and what they need to be taught, in order for them to make progress.

1(c) Dyslexia as unrelated to intelligence

Staff at the college generally did not perceive intelligence as having a relationship with dyslexia:

“I don’t think that somebody’s IQ has anything to do with their dyslexia, I think people can be very bright and have difficulties, or they can be really sort of struggling with everything and be dyslexic”.

(Literacy Skills Tutor)

The learning support manager was perhaps less sure about the role of intelligence but felt that measuring IQ might itself be problematic:

“I think if you’re saying that if someone has got a high IQ and there’s obviously low literacy and numeracy difficulties, then possibly, it could possibly be an indicator. But I think again it very much depends on how that IQ test would be carried out, what they were looking at in the IQ test and also the other assessments, like the literacy and numeracy and how they were looking at that.”

Discussion of subtheme 1(c)

The views of the staff at the college are generally supportive of research evidence that states there is no established correlation between reading difficulties and intelligence (Stanovich, 2005). It is perhaps reassuring that staff at the college have these perceptions given the media view of dyslexia that conceptualizes it as a condition that predominantly affects ‘bright’ children (Stanovich, 1991).

Subtheme 1(d) Difficulty of testing for dyslexia

Both the staff members in the college described the difficulties of assessing for dyslexia. For example, the learning support manager described what he saw as being a common perception among college tutors:

“We think they might be dyslexic, therefore can you confirm it or deny it and we know it’s not as simplistic as that” (Learning Support Manger)

“What we did used to do up until last year was the dyslexia screening and often that would be inconclusive or sort of middle of the road, they might be or they might not be.” (Literacy Skills Tutor)

They commented that there was often an assumption from tutors that students could be neatly categorized into dyslexic and non-dyslexic categories, which was something that these two participants viewed as being problematic.

Discussion of subtheme 1(d)

The learning support manager and literacy skills tutor’s comments about testing indicate that they understand, to some degree at least, the problematic nature of ‘testing for dyslexia’, which is reflected in BPS guidelines. It also suggests that at least some tutors are constructing dyslexia as a bipolar construct (it either exists or does not exist) with the learning support manager acknowledging (correctly) that it is not as straightforward as this.

Subtheme 1(e) Understanding of label

A key theme emerged around the differences in understanding of the label of dyslexia. These could be further subdivided as follows:

(i) Label as desirable

Those who worked at the college described a tendency for students, parents and tutors to 'latch on' to the concept of dyslexia, as if it was desirable to have this label.

“we'll get parents as well saying I'm dyslexic, I think they're dyslexic, can you diagnose them?” (Learning Support Manager)

“I think the tutors are tending to say, okay well we've got this student, we think they've got dyslexia, therefore they go to the Learning Support Team, they get categorised as dyslexic” (Learning Support Manager)

Much of this desire to be labelled maybe due to a perception that it is beneficial, for example, the literacy skills tutor stated: “I think a lot of students think that if they've got this label of dyslexia that it just solves everything”.

(ii) Label as helpful

The student mentioned that having the label of dyslexia was helpful in him being able to explain his difficulties to his peers. For example, he described how he used to feel self-conscious about his spelling when using social media, however, he stated that “now if I'm talking to someone I'll just say, look I'm dyslexic, I've got really horrible spelling, get used to it”. He therefore found the label to be helpful in explaining his spelling difficulties and gaining acceptance from his peers.

(iii) Label as negative

The literacy skills tutor perceived that the label of dyslexia may be negative in that it gives students an excuse not to try harder:

“[students] can hide behind it [the diagnosis] in some ways”

(Literacy Skills Tutor)

“oh well, I can’t do that exam because I’m dyslexic, or I can’t do that assignment in this amount of time because I’m dyslexic.”

(Literacy Skills Tutor)

(iv) Label as unnecessary

The literacy skills tutor also pointed out that having the label makes little difference to student’s daily life:

“having a diagnosis doesn’t change anything at the end of the day even if they are diagnosed with dyslexia it’s not going to have changed anything in their daily life, they need to have those skills whether it is dyslexia or not”

In addition, the learning support manager pointed out how a label makes little difference to the support a student would actually receive:

“...tutors to a certain extent still believe that you need a dyslexia assessment in order to get support. You don’t, if we think there’s an additional support need we’ll provide support”

He also mentioned how the label actually doesn’t help guide the college towards possible solutions for the student, and that there is a need to identify specific learning needs rather than simply apply a label:

“We want tutors to work with [students] more to identify what their specific learning needs are rather than trying to come up with a nice easy solution: a strategy based on a diagnosis rather than what the student’s actually experiencing.”

Discussion of Subtheme 1e: Understanding of label

These differing perceptions of what the label of dyslexia means to people at a practical level highlights some key differences between two groups at the college: those within the learning support department and those outside of it. Generally, those outside of the department, parents, college tutors and students, perceived the label as conferring some kind of additional benefit, either in the terms of being able to clarify need, or allowing for additional resources. Although it appears that much of literature on dyslexia describes how identification can lead to access to additional resources (e.g. MacDonald, 2009; Reid, 2009; Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014), this did not appear to be the

case at this particular college, since as the Learning Support Manager stated, they could provide support without this identification.

Those inside the learning support department perceived the label of dyslexia as either being unnecessary or actually negative, since they perceived the label as making little difference in terms of being able to provide support, and may even serving to demotivate some students. The comment from the Learning Support Manager is particularly insightful since it reflects research findings (e.g. Sternberg and Grigorenko, 2002; Vellutino et al., 2004; Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014) that highlight the importance of understanding a student's particular needs, rather than applying a label and expecting it to guide intervention.

3.3 Theme 2: Multiple causes

2(a) Gaps in education

While staff in the FE college constructed dyslexia as a predominantly biological construct suggestive of differences from others, this was considered as being distinct from those who had had gaps in their education:

“just because they’ve got literacy and numeracy difficulties doesn’t mean they have dyslexia or dyscalculia”

(Learning Support Manger)

“...often when you go back through their history it’s because they missed school or they moved around a lot or they left school young for various reasons, so it isn’t always the fact that it’s dyslexia”

(Literacy Skills Tutor)

2(b) The role of nurture

Although when discussing dyslexia, staff tended to stress constitutional factors, it is important to note that they considered environmental factors were also important. They also perceived children of parents or families who valued literacy and reading to at a distinct advantage:

” So nurture [is] definitely important because it kind of creates that culture of reading and understanding and improving speech as well I would think.”

(Learning Support Manager)

Discussion of Theme 2

It appeared that both the learning support manager and literacy skills tutor constructed dyslexia as a subset of a broader category of literacy difficulties, with the other subset being those with gaps in their education who were viewed as ‘non-dyslexic’. Although the research evidence is inconclusive, the consensus tends towards the notion that literacy difficulties generally may involve any combination of constitutional and environmental factors (e.g. Vellutino et al., 2004; Petrill et al. 2010). This therefore suggests that this

dichotomisation may represent an oversimplification. The learning support manager's acknowledgement of environmental factors is positive however since it reflects an understanding of literacy difficulties which are not restricted to biological and within-person factors.

3.4 Theme 3: Impact

The next key theme, which was mentioned by all participants, was the impact that literacy difficulties (and by association, dyslexia) had on people's lives. The literacy skills tutor, for example, describes the plethora of ways that literacy difficulties might impact:

“ “[it can] stop people doing what they need to do, so whether it's access a course or be on a course or help their kids with their homework or find a job and sustain a job.”

(Literacy Skills Tutor)

Subtheme 3(a): Social-emotional difficulties

Alongside these practical barriers, staff in the college appeared aware of the social-emotional difficulties that could be the result of literacy difficulties:

“you know it has an effect on how they are with their friends, how they are in class, how they are with speaking aloud in class and they don't want to read out loud because they might make a mistake there.”

(Literacy Skills Tutor)

In addition, the learning support manager talked about how workshop style support tended to be unpopular with students:

“a lot of students didn’t feel comfortable talking about their issues in front of other students...we didn’t have a huge demand and take up on the workshops that we thought we were going to have”

The student also spent a considerable amount of time discussing the social and emotional impact it had on him personally:

“you’re going to end up with people who although they have dyslexia won’t know what to do and you could end up with somebody becoming depressed over it. It did have some effect on my depression over the last year and some of this year, partly because all of my friends were like going to uni and things and I was like, yeah I’m still at college because I’m having to redo a year.”

The literacy skills tutor commented that one of the biggest barriers to helping those with literacy difficulties learn was students’ lack of self-esteem or low perception of their literacy abilities:

“...often when they come to college because they’ve had a bad experience at school or they’ve just got in their head I can’t do it, it’s

often trying to get through that barrier first before you can even start to teach them anything. So a lot of it is confidence and building their motivation.”

Discussion of subtheme 3(a): Social-emotional difficulties

These findings are consistent with the research literature, which noted that students with dyslexia often experienced social-emotional difficulties such as higher levels of anxiety and lower academic self-esteem (e.g. Carroll and Iles, 2006; Mortimore and Crozier, 2006; Ingesson, 2007; Brante, 2013). From the comments made there also appears to be a stigma attached to admitting that one has a difficulty with literacy, as evidenced from the Learning Support Manager’s comment about poor take-up group of group intervention sessions, and students not feeling comfortable in this group environment. There are also the practical implications of poor academic attainment, such as when the student explained that he had to retake a year, and the effect that this had on him.

Subtheme 3(b): Lack of understanding from teachers/tutors

The literacy skills tutor explained how tutors could make assumptions about student’s literacy abilities:

“I think people that aren’t in the know about sort of literacy problems and dyslexia and other learning difficulties, just assume that if you speak English your reading and writing is going to be fine as well.”

The student, when describing his old 6th form, also mentioned the lack of awareness among teachers:

“It was like, okay I’ve got dyslexia and they were like, we don’t know what that is, so I had to try and explain to several teachers, like yes this is why I can’t do this. “

This could also result in teachers thinking that he is lazy:

“One of my teachers at my old sixth form in the first week thought I was just being lazy when I was getting someone to write something down for me and I was like, no I’m dyslexic”

Discussion of Subtheme 3(b): Lack of understanding from teachers/tutors

This subtheme relates to the previous one in that it has the potential to impact upon a student’s social and emotional wellbeing. Here, there is the perception that there may be a lack of awareness from teachers or tutors as to the impact of literacy difficulties. The student’s comment also suggests that having a label of dyslexia may not be useful unless others have an understanding of what it means in terms of the practical difficulties that it poses in the

classroom. This subtheme has also been noted in the literature, for example, Riddell and Weedon (2006) explained how lecturers in higher education stated that they were suspicious of dyslexia being used as a 'smokescreen' for lazy students, and equally students themselves expressed concern that their difficulties might be interpreted as laziness.

Summary of overall findings about theme 3: impact

Whether the term literacy difficulty or dyslexia was employed, all participants agreed that these kinds of difficulties impacted on all areas of a student's life. This is consistent with much of the research evidence that explores the impact of literacy difficulties on students themselves (e.g. Carroll and Iles, 2006; Mortimore and Crozier, 2006; Ingesson, 2007; Brante, 2013). It appears that within FE, there may also be a lack of understanding among tutors or teachers as to the severity of some student's difficulties, and that this risked further demoralising student's who were experiencing difficulties. This finding has also been noted in the research literature (e.g. Riddell and Weedon, 2006). It also appeared that students with literacy difficulties felt uncomfortable or perhaps stigmatised, as evidenced from comments about how they disliked or were reluctant to attend group intervention sessions. The student's comments also highlight the frustration of performing poorly in comparison to peers, and consequently having to stay at college while his friends went to university. This theme highlights the real and tangible impact of literacy difficulties, which can arguably risk being overlooked in

explanations of literacy difficulties (and by association, dyslexia) that come from predominantly sociocultural perspectives (e.g. Soler, 2009).

3.5. Theme 4: Support

The final theme was around the nature of the support that could be offered to young people, and the barriers to being able to provide this support.

Subtheme 4(a) Independence

Participants viewed independence as a key element of providing support:

“...a lot of this is about sort of equipping them with the tools to be more self-sufficient”
(Literacy Skills Tutor)

“...it’s really trying to promote their own strategies and use their own strategies and study skills moving forward”
(Learning Support Manger)

This student also shared this view:

“Yes, it’s more important for people to be aware [of my difficulties], but it’s also more important for me to develop mechanisms where I’m not as reliant on people.”

Discussion of subtheme 4(a) Independence

The importance of being independent was emphasised by both the student and those in the learning support department. There may a suggestion here that providing too much support could create a situation where someone becomes overly dependant and therefore cannot fully develop the skills needed to function independently. An approach to encouraging independence among those considered as having a learning disability is generally supported by research evidence (e.g. Goldberg et al., 2003; Kotzer and Margalit, 2007). There is also evidence that providing a high level of in-class support, such as through the use of teaching assistants, can have a negative impact on young people's academic progress (e.g. Blatchford, Russell and Webster, 2012).

Subtheme 4(b) Financial constraints

Related to support is the sub-theme of financial issues impacting on the kind of support provided.

“additional support isn't just a nice little resource you can tap in to, now funds are getting tighter” (Learning Support Manager)

“we're just trying to justify expenditure of the resources financial implications, but also we don't want to set the student up with support they don't really need and that could be cope in the first place.”

(Learning Support Manager)

The student also reported that he felt the financial situation of the college had negatively impacted on the level of support he had received:

“I think that the dyslexic support over the [past] few years has gone downhill but that is from what I can understand linked to funding because no one has the funding for it anymore”

Discussion of subtheme 4(b) Financial constraints

In the literature review, it was noted how the financial health of the FE sector had been declining (e.g. Morse, 2015). The college in this case study also appears to have been affected by this trend. There are two points being made here: one is around the increasing lack of available funds to provide support, and the other is around not putting support in place that it not required. This relates to the subtheme 3(a) in the sense that the aim is to make the student experience independence rather than dependence.

Subtheme 4(c): Need for tutors to take more responsibility

Related to the last subtheme around financial constrains is the view from those in the learning support department that tutors need to take more responsibility for proving support to their students before devolving responsibility to them:

“it’s up to the tutors to really understand the people they’re teaching as individuals ask them what works for them and what doesn’t, and say well if I’m not teaching it right, tell me.” (Literacy Skills Tutor)

“...tutors, have got to do their bit, get to know their learners, work out their strengths, the weaknesses, the learning styles and do what they can first” (Learning Support Manager)

Discussion of Subtheme 4(c): Need for tutors to take more responsibility

This subtheme relates to the previous one but also links to the first theme (1(b) (ii) Need to learn in different ways) in that there is a recognition that different teaching methods may need to be employed to enable some students to access learning to a greater extent in lessons. It also reflects the principles of supporting learners struggling with literacy as outlined in the literature review: for example, being aware of strengths and weaknesses (e.g. Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014) or employing the principles of instructional psychology around understanding what has been learned and therefore what needs to be learned (e.g. Solity, 2015). It’s worth noting that since no tutors were consulted in this research then this might represent a one-sided perspective.

Summary of overall findings about theme 4: support

All participants agreed that support was needed for students with literacy difficulties, but that it needed to encourage independence rather than dependence. They also all agreed that since there were increasing financial pressures that support needed to be carefully considered. Also related to this, was the suggestion from those within the learning support department that tutors needed to do more to support young people with literacy difficulties, and to take responsibility, before attempting to request additional support.

3.6 Analysis and discussion of Research Question 1: What are the views of key persons in a FE college on the nature of literacy difficulties? Part B: data from the assessment centre

As mentioned in section 3.1, data from the specialist teachers was analysed discreetly to highlight the contrast in views between those inside the college and those outside it in order to facilitate a greater understanding of the components of the case and how they relate to one another.

The central theme identified in relation to the specialist teachers was dyslexia rather than literacy difficulties, due to the prevalence of its use by the two participants throughout the interview, and the fact that the assessment centre was focused around assessments of dyslexia.

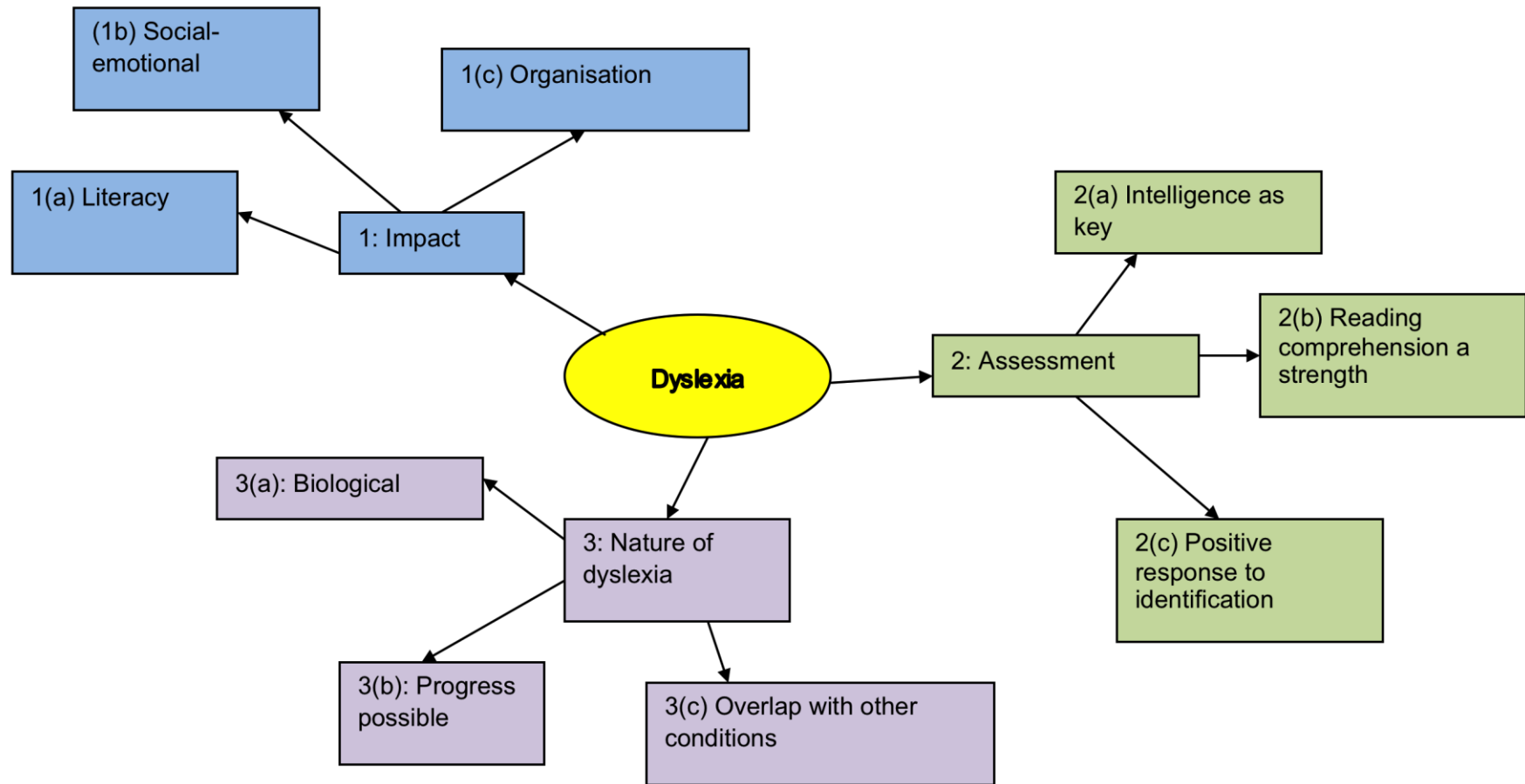
The themes relating to this central theme include:

1. Impact
2. Assessment

3. Nature of dyslexia

In a similar manner to before, themes are presented in a thematic map as shown in figure 3.2 below. This section will also comprise a discussion of each theme and how it might relate to themes already identified in the previous section from participants within the college.

Figure 3.2: Main themes in relation to Research Question 1 (assessment centre only)



3.7. Theme 1: Impact

The specialist teachers frequently made mention of the impact of dyslexia. There were three areas that they mentioned in relation to this impact: the actual literacy difficulties in relation to dyslexia and their perception of the associated cognitive skills involved, their social-emotional impact, and the impact upon organisational skills.

1(a)

“The phonics, the actual breaking down of the sounds, the blending of the sounds, the lack of ability to read unfamiliar words, memory and processing speed” (Specialist teacher 2)

1(b)

“it has a major impact on confidence and we believe that later on in life the adults that we assess with mental health, we think a lot of it links back to their early days and experiences through not being diagnosed early enough” (Specialist teacher 2)

1(c)

“We see people that are so disabled by dyslexia because of their organisation” (Specialist teacher 1)

Discussion of theme 1: Impact

Theme one outlines the three areas that the specialist teachers discuss in relation to the impact of dyslexia. This ranges from the effect on literacy skills, to the impact on more broader-based skills such as organisation, and the social and emotional impact. This theme has a strong link to the theme of the same name identified in part A, and both share the same theme of social/emotional difficulties suggesting that this is a key overarching theme. What is also noticeable from the transcripts is the use of medicalised words such as 'diagnosis', rather than assessment, which is suggestive of an orientation towards literacy difficulties that is based on a more medical model of viewing these difficulties, compared with responses from participants in part A who used these terms to a lesser extent.

3.8 Theme 2: assessment

The second major theme is related to their perception of dyslexia in relation to assessment. Note that this is distinct from uncovering the processes and purposes of assessing for literacy difficulties, which is the scope of Research Question 2.

Subtheme 2(a): Intelligence as key

The specialist teachers were unequivocal about the role of intelligence in the assessment of dyslexia, as demonstrated from the following conversation:

Interviewer: Would you use IQ in a dyslexia assessment?

Specialist Teacher 1: Oh yes.

Specialist Teacher 2: Yes.

Interviewer: You would?

Specialist Teacher 1: Definitely.

Interviewer: And then in a dyslexia assessment are you looking for a discrepancy?

Specialist Teacher 1: Yes, I mean obviously in the right areas, but yes I mean that would be your benchmark, your IQ.

Throughout the interview, it became clear how important intelligence was in the way that they constructed dyslexia:

“the phonics might not be too good but the brain’s really good”

(Specialist Teacher 2)

“they’ve known from age 6 and 7 that they’ve got reasonable intelligence and they’ve just not achieved”

(Specialist Teacher 1)

“what we love to do with full assessments is to tell them how intelligent they are, because the majority will have a good ability”

(Specialist Teacher 1)

Subtheme 2(b) Reading Comprehension a strength

The specialist teachers at the assessment centre also saw reading comprehension to be a strength for those who they considered to have

dyslexia. Indeed, in response to my question about the difference between a dyslexic reader and a non-dyslexic poor reader, they suggested that a greater degree of reading comprehension was the key factor that distinguished 'dyslexic readers' from those who are simply of 'low ability':

“the dyslexic reader might not be able to breakdown the words but they are able to gain an understanding from surrounding text”

(Specialist Teacher 1)

“It’s amazing how few words they have to read and still be able to tell you what the story is about”

(Specialist Teacher 2)

Subtheme 2(c): Positive response to identification

The specialist teachers also mentioned that students often responded positively to an identification of dyslexia.

Interviewer: How do student’s respond to the assessment and having confirmation that they have dyslexia?

Specialist Teacher 1: The majority; I’d say 99.9% is positive...most of it is quite positive, a relief, there’s a lot of tears in the adults isn’t there?

Discussion of theme 2: assessment

The separating out of data between the specialist teachers and other participants allows us to see the extent to which the specialist teachers' views conflict with those in the learning support department at the college. It is perhaps concerning that the specialist teachers considered intelligence so important given what is known about the lack of an established correlation between intelligence and reading ability. As discussed in the literature review, the IQ-achievement discrepancy model has now been discredited (Stanovich, 2005; Frederickson, 2008; Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014), and is not viewed as related to reading ability. Perhaps the specialist teachers' preoccupation with intelligence was due to its intuitive and enduring appeal as related to media perceptions of the 'bright yet frustrated' child or perhaps, due to the specialist teachers' description of how they enjoyed telling students that they were intelligent, that intelligence testing provided a means for them to focus on other cognitive strengths, and that they perceive this as enabling students to have a greater sense of confidence and self-esteem.

Arguably however, this does not necessarily relate to the case study, since the assessment centre only does intelligence testing for *full* dyslexia assessments, while the college only buys into a service that assesses a need for access arrangements and therefore does not adopt the discrepancy model for this purpose. From this perspective, the concern around the assessment centre's view is of far less concern, since it does not directly affect those students who have been referred from the college to the assessment centre.

The perception from the specialist teachers regarding reading comprehension being a specific strength is likely to also related to the previous subtheme around intelligence: it appears that they perceive both intelligence and good reading comprehension as factors that distinguish those with dyslexia against those who are simply of 'low ability'. This is not supported by definitions of dyslexia, particularly that of the Rose Review (Rose, 2009, p. 9) that states that "dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities".

Subtheme 2(c) is related to subtheme 1(e) in part A as both consider the perceptions of other people towards the label of dyslexia. From the perspective of the specialist teachers, this label represents something positive as it provides a sense of relief for the student and an explanation for why literacy has been a particular area of difficulty. This was also mentioned by the student as being positive, since it acted as a means of explaining his difficulties.

3.9 Theme 3: nature of dyslexia

Subtheme 3(a) Biological

Both of the specialist teachers were unequivocal about dyslexia being the result of biological differences:

Interviewer: "To what extent do you believe that dyslexia is the result of biological differences present from birth?"

Specialist Teacher 1: “Completely”
Specialist Teacher 2: “Yes”
Interviewer: “Completely?”
Specialist Teacher 2: “Yes”
Specialist Teacher 1: “Obviously there is acquired dyslexia from brain damage and such like, but yes, in most of the cases yes definitely”

It is notable from the language that they use and the brevity of their responses as to the extent to which they believed this to be true. In addition, the specialist teachers suggested that it was these biological differences that often caused problems in the learning environment:

“we find that a lot of children will say, well I didn’t go to school or I never went much after high school...it’s very often because of dyslexia. So it’s because they were struggling that they hated it”

Discussion of subtheme 3(a) Biological

In a similar manner to Part A’s theme of dyslexia as biological and lifelong, this theme is shared by the specialist teachers, however, they are arguably more one-sided in favour of biological elements, reflected in their comment about students struggling at school *because* of dyslexia, implying the existence of a biological within-child deficit that is at the root cause of the difficulties at school.

Subtheme 3(b): overlap with other 'conditions'

One of the specialist teachers noted that she perceived dyslexia to be associated with other 'conditions':

"it's very rare to only have one disability, so you've got your dyspraxia and your dyscalculia, Asperger's and such like and very often there will be sort of smatterings of those in there as well"

(Specialist Teacher 1)

Discussion of subtheme 3(b): overlap with other 'conditions'

The notion of dyslexia being comorbid with a range of other learning disabilities has been well established in the literature (e.g. Bishop and Snowling, 2004) and Reid (2009) notes there is likely to be the same overlap between other labels such as dyspraxia and ADHD, and labels such as dyslexia. Therefore, the specialist teacher's comments are broadly supported by the research literature. It is notable again, the specialist teachers' use of diagnostic labels which tend towards medical labelling, as also seen in theme 1 ('Impact').

Subtheme 3(c): improvement possible but difficult

Both the specialist teachers thought that both interventions targeted at improving literacy skills, and strategies to manage the impact of dyslexia were required. They suggested that improvements in ability were possible in young people over the age of 16, although they recognised that this became more difficult as YP advanced into adulthood:

R: “yes I do think you can improve. And continue to improve. But I think starting from illiterate at the age of 50 is probably not going to happen”

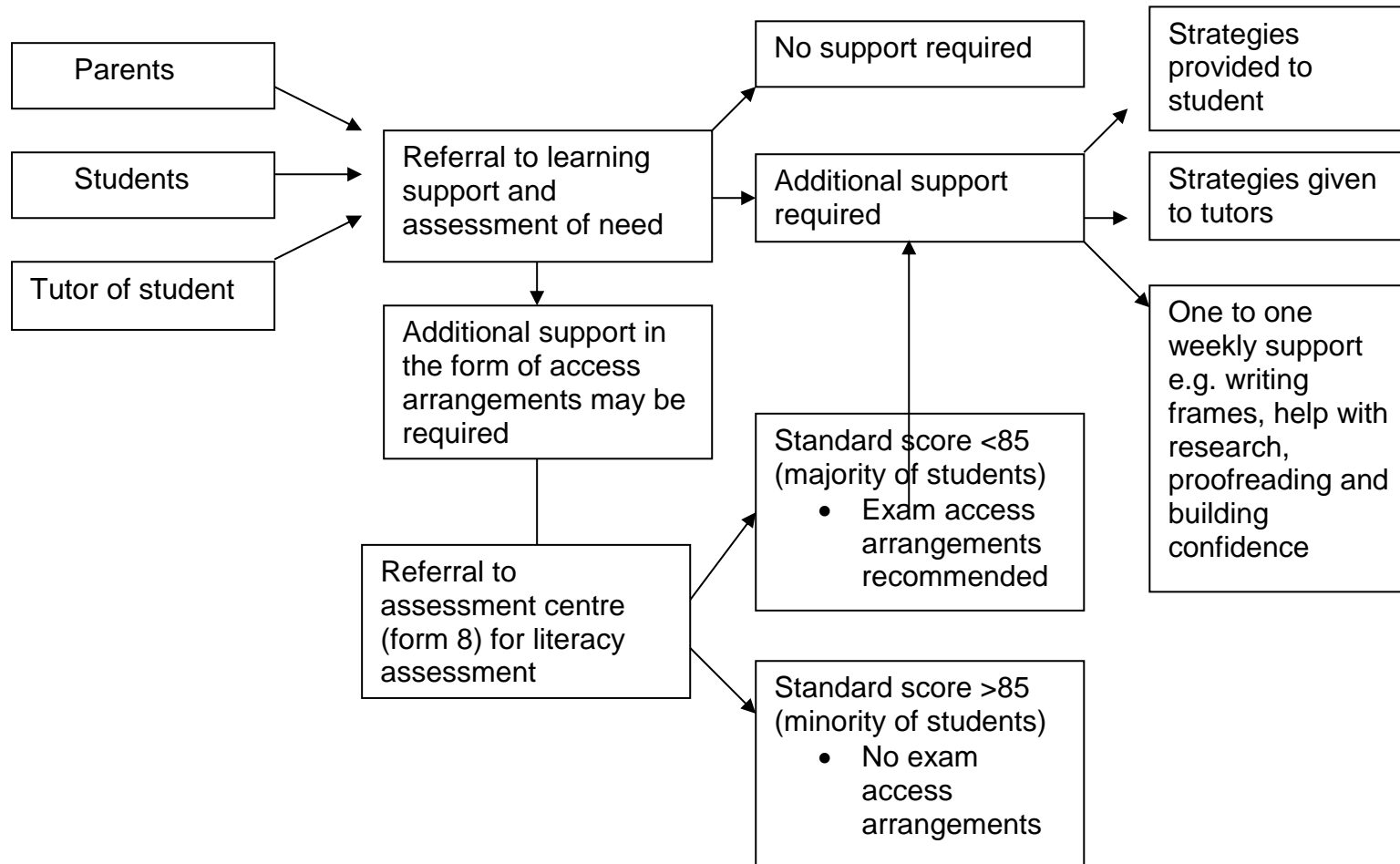
Discussion of subtheme 3(b): Progress possible

One of the criticisms of the use of labels such as dyslexia is that they can change perceptions of efficacy beliefs towards YP (e.g. Gibbs and Elliott, 2015). Here the specialist teachers suggest that they think progress is possible, yet acknowledge that for older learners this may be more problematic. This is broadly supported by the research evidence, which also acknowledges that older YP can make progress with evidenced based interventions, yet finds that these tend to be somewhat less successful with older children compared to younger ones (e.g. Flynn, Zheng and Swanson, 2012).

3.10 Analysis and discussion of Research Question 2 ‘What are the processes involved in the identification of young people with literacy difficulties, and the main purposes of this identification in this college?’

Since Research Question 2 was concerned with the processes involved in the college, I decided that the analysis of the four transcripts would be best represented through a flow diagram. This is shown below in Figure 3.2 below. This section will endeavour to describe the process involved while illustrating each of its points again through the use of a range of extracts.

Figure 3.3: processes involved in the identification of students with literacy difficulties



Part A: the processes and purposes within the college

As can be seen from the diagram, the process of identification of a difficulty can begin with a student, tutor or the parent of a student. This process however, is not automatic, and may involve someone from the learning support department observing the student in a lesson or speaking to the student directly to gain a greater understanding of their difficulties. The Learning Support Manager was also eager for tutors to take the first steps in providing support before referring to the learning support department:

“We want tutors to work with them [students] more to identify what their specific learning needs”

“...moving the ‘what have you done first’ up the priority list for the tutor so that they can look at what they’re doing, look at the differentiation in teaching they need to do first before they consider an additional learning support.”

The Learning Support Manager also emphasised that a referral should only be made when a student was perceived to be experiencing “significant difficulties” in comparison with their peers.

One of the key factors about the assessment process is that an assessment of dyslexia is not required in order for the college to provide additional support:

“tutors to a certain extent still believe that you need a dyslexia assessment in order to get support. You don’t, if we think there’s an additional support need we’ll provide support, we don’t have to have a diagnosis.” (Learning Support Manager)

Indeed, the college did not offer assessments for dyslexia:

“the college...it does not do full dyslexia assessments anymore, we want to get away from the assumption that we also diagnose with dyslexia” (Learning Support Manager)

In situations where students were planning to transition to higher education, the college would not automatically fund an assessment for Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), which would enable them to access various types of support at university:

“if students are applying to university and we’ve provided them with some additional support but they need that full assessment to go on to university, we don’t necessarily automatically do that for them. It would be a case of contacting the university they’re applying to, to see what funds they have available, their access to learning funds.”

(Learning Support Manager)

This is also due to universities having different policies around the extent to which they will pay for an assessment for a specific learning difficulty. As the

learning support manager explained: "...all universities have got a different level of contributions, some will pay for all of it, some will pay for none of it and some will pay 50%"

The Learning Support Manager however admitted that he did not fully understand the reasons for the college having stopped providing assessments for dyslexia, since this was something that had been offered in the past:

"...they used to do the full assessment and I still don't know whether we should as a college still be doing full assessments along those lines, whether that's efficient, whether it's benefitting the students or not. The decision was made that we just stick to what's required for the access arrangements."

As can be seen from the diagram, the college might decide to refer the student to an assessment centre if they felt a student might be eligible for, and benefit from access arrangements for examinations, or if further information was needed that might illuminate a student's particular difficulties:

"that's the main purpose, it is access arrangements but also if we do have any initial queries for students who are a bit...you know there is a need but we're not quite sure exactly what."

(Learning Support Manager)

The main purpose of identifying a literacy difficulty was for the college to be able to gain more insight into the nature of student's difficulties, and also be able to provide them with appropriate support. For the college, this involved drawing on the skills of tutors, those in the learning support department and the specialist teachers in the assessment centre. Notably, those at the college stated that they did not use EPs in the process of identifying or supporting those with literacy difficulties, although they had done so in the past:

“We used to have an educational psychologist come into the college and do the assessments then [the specialist teacher's] when they became qualified to do assessments” (Literacy Skills Tutor)

Part B: the processes and purposes within the assessment centre

The specialist teachers at the assessment centre explained that they would need a referral form from the college, as well as background information about the student, and information about the nature of their difficulties. They would then meet with the student and do a series of literacy assessments that would comprise approximately 30% of their full dyslexia assessment. These tests would involve phonics, word reading, sentence comprehension, spelling, processing speed and writing (if they required a scribe).

The specialist teachers stated that for access arrangements to be agreed, the students needed to perform at a level below a standard score of 85:

“the standardised scores need to be below 84 and it’s a very clinical cut-off, they need to have at least one score below 84. So it’s an instant decision of yes you can, or no you can’t [have access arrangements].”

(Specialist teachers)

Access arrangements included support during examinations such as a reader, a scribe, extra time, a prompt, or the use of a computer.

The assessment centre stated that the majority of students who were referred from the college scored under 85 and therefore were eligible for these access arrangements. The student would then be given a ‘Form 8’ (Joint Council for Qualifications, no date), which was required to inform examination boards of their additional requirements and would be valid for two years. The ‘Form 8’ requires section C to be completed by either a “suitably qualified psychologist or a specialist teacher”. As can also be seen from the diagram, the assessment centre might also make recommendations to the college on how best to support the student.

In addition, the specialist teachers at the assessment centre stated they did not draw on the skills of an educational psychologist: “we can do everything that’s needed, we don’t need to bring anybody else on board”.

3.11 Research Question 2: Summary and discussion

The section above aimed to elucidate the main processes involved in the identification of literacy difficulties and the purposes of this identification in this FE college. The key findings of this section can be summarised as follows:

1. Literacy concerns can be raised by anyone at the college

The learning support manager and literacy skills tutor highlighted the fact that difficulties can be raised by students, parents or tutors. With respect to tutors, there was a perception from the Learning Support Manager that tutors needed to take responsibility for ensuring they had attempted to address any issues with students who had literacy difficulties before requesting support from the Learning Support Department.

2. Dyslexia assessments are not a requirement for additional support

Much of the research literature has suggested that a dyslexia assessment is a prerequisite in being able to access additional support (e.g. Solvang, 2007; Reid, 2009; Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014). In this college, this was clearly not the case, despite the widespread use of the term, and the perception among tutors that an assessment was a requirement for additional support or resources. In addition, dyslexia assessments were not automatically offered to students going in to higher education for the purposes of being able to claim

Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), but rather this was dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

3. Entitlement to access arrangements for examinations are based on a student performing 'below average' on one or more literacy assessments

As mentioned, entitlement for access arrangements for examinations can only be granted through student's performing 'below average' on at least one literacy assessment carried out at the assessment centre. 'Below average' is defined as one standard deviation below the mean, or a standard score of less than 85. This raises the issue however, that students might perform deliberately poorly in these tests in order to gain additional support or extra time, affecting the validity of these tests.

4. Additional support comes in a number of different guises

As can be seen from the right side of the diagram, additional support can be offered to students in the college in a number of different forms depending on the student's needs, and might include strategies for the student, strategies for the tutors, or, one to one weekly support sessions. As mentioned earlier, the availability of the one to one sessions has decreased markedly due to the financial climate experienced by the FE sector, and this particular college.

5. Educational psychologists are not involved in either assessment or intervention.

As mentioned in the introduction section, one of the underlying purposes of posing Research Question 2 was to gain a greater understanding of how assessment and intervention for literacy difficulties operates in an FE college, and to see if there is any possibility that EPs could work productively with the college. The literacy skills tutor mentioned that the college previously employed an EP to do assessments at the college, however that the specialist teachers at the assessment centre now carry out the assessments. It was not clear from the interviews as to why the EP ceased his or her involvement; however, it may be that, if the EP was taking a 'diagnostic assessment' approach, that the specialist teachers were able to perform similar tests. In addition, given the deteriorating funding situation in FE, it is likely that the college may have been looking at ways to save money.

One might question the necessity of literacy assessments in a college setting given that colleges are usually provided with data from their previous settings regarding students' attainments and any difficulties. Indeed, there is an argument that because information about literacy difficulties should have been passed on to colleges, there should be no need for students to be assessed at this stage. Reid (2009) however, makes the point about the tendency for colleges to perceive disability in terms of the rights of the individual: there may therefore be an expectation among students, parents, and even staff at the college, that it is a student's right to have a system or process in place to

identify those who are perceived as experiencing difficulties. The recent SEND COP (Department of Education/Department of Health, 2015) also reinforces the sense of FE students as having rights, in terms of its use of terminology, embracing terms such as 'should' and 'must'. FE, also, may be seen as a gateway or 'halfway house' between school and university, and may therefore need to position itself in a more customer-oriented way than schools, with systems in place to reflect 'fair' ways of assessing students' needs.

It is important to keep in mind that the diagram represents the process involved in one FE college only and it cannot be assumed that the same processes operate in other colleges. Indeed, the specialist teachers mentioned at one point in the interview that they were dissatisfied that the FE College only bought into access arrangements and did not buy in the full dyslexia assessments.

3.12 Beliefs, values and agendas: a comparison of college staff and the assessment centre

It is worthwhile taking a step back and examining the reasons behind the conflicting viewpoints that emerged from college staff and the assessment centre and assessing the kind of beliefs, values and agendas that might be driving or influencing the various perceptions and practices taking place.

The assessment centre

The values that underpin the specialist teachers' approach might be described as a medical or clinical approach to literacy difficulties. This is apparent from the medical terminology that they use, and the focus on cognitive impairments as forming the basis for a 'diagnosis'. Here the focus is on identifying a deficit, with the ultimate aim to correct or lessen it (Riddick, 2001). It is important to note however that the influence of dyslexia has come about from a societal need for a high standard of literacy that has only existed since the 1800s, following the institutionalisation of mass education (Soler, 2009). As such, it is a diagnosis that is intrinsically entwined with existing cultural and social norms. In addition, dyslexia lobby groups have put pressure on governments to recognise the label as a disability, which has resulted in dyslexia being accepted as a Specific Learning Difficulty from a legal standpoint (e.g. the SEND COP (DfE/DoH, 2015)). Also notable, is the fact that the assessment centre's dyslexia reports included the British Dyslexia Association's (2007) definition of dyslexia, which emphasises the biological nature of dyslexia and the notion that dyslexia is predicated on literacy skills that are weaker than other cognitive abilities.

From an analysis of the data, it appears that one of the key aims of the specialist teachers is to provide an explanation for difficulties, and to be able to empower those affected by them. As mentioned in the section on intelligence, one of specialist teachers stated that:

“what we love to do with full assessments is to tell them how intelligent they are, because the majority will have a good ability”

(Specialist Teacher 1)

The same specialist teacher then went on to explain enthusiastically:

“That is great, and we even look at the little kiddies don’t we, we had a girl the other day and she was only 8 and she really, really struggles and we just kept telling her that she was well above average and she was so clever and you know it was so nice for her and her mum wasn’t it?”

As mentioned in section 1.14 of the literature review, Riddick (2000) and Solvang (2007) note that the label of dyslexia may offer an explanation for difficulties that can counteract other more simplistic and pejorative labels and that this explanation can result in higher levels of self-confidence and self-esteem. Part of the agenda of the assessment centre appears to be to try to fulfil this aim: in providing a diagnostic label for students who are experiencing literacy difficulties they provide a confirmation that no one is to ‘blame’ for this difficulty, the YP does not have a lack of intelligence or poor motivation, parents or teachers have not provided inadequate instruction, but rather, YPs difficulties are the result of an unavoidable biological condition. As mentioned in the literature review, this explanation can be both positive and negative, since although it may offer this explanation, it also brings with it the possibility of shock of being labelled with a ‘disability’ (Kerr, 2009), the possibility of

reduced expectations from the YP and those around them (Gibbs and Elliott, 2015; Solity, 2015), and less consideration of other more mundane factors (e.g. environmental factors) that might be contributing towards the difficulties (Kerr, 2009).

For the assessment centre, we must also recognise that the specialist teachers continued use and support of the term dyslexia enables them to continue to carry out their activities. As Kerr (2009, p. 281) states “There is an established dyslexia industry, and a very considerable vested interest in it”. In establishing themselves as a dyslexia assessment centre, any questioning of the construct of dyslexia would serve to undermine not only the services that they provide, but their own existence.

The FE college

The values that underpin the perceptions at the FE college, and which also appear also to influence the processes at the college and the way that the assessment centre is utilised, appear to be starkly different. In the college, dyslexia is a label that although widely used, is one that the college is trying to distance itself from. In addition, the college is only using the assessment centre for access arrangements, and not for students to be able to obtain a diagnosis of dyslexia. The primary aim of staff at the college then, appears to be to improve student’s literacy skills, without necessarily needing to provide any kind of explanation, or to necessarily label it in the same way: it appears to be an agenda rooted in the pragmatic and a focus on what works and is

effective for the student. As mentioned in *Subtheme 1(e)(iv) Label as unnecessary*, both the literacy skills tutor and learning support manager saw the label as offering the student very little in practical terms since it did not confer any extra support or resources. In addition, the learning support manager noted that it did little to guide intervention strategies. There was also the recognition that literacy difficulties were unique to the individual student and needed to be perceived from this standpoint.

The social and political beliefs of the college compared to the assessment centre, might be described as closer to a social model of disability rather than a medical model (Oliver and Barnes, 1998). A social model of disability proposes that people are disabled due to prejudice and discrimination rather than their impairments (Riddick, 2001) and contains the assumption that it is society that needs to change rather than the individual. 'Subtheme 4(c): Need for tutors to take more responsibility' in Part A suggests that there is some evidence among staff was trying to encourage this way thinking among tutors:

“it’s up to the tutors to really understand the people they’re teaching as individuals ask them what works for them and what doesn’t, and say well if I’m not teaching it right, tell me.” (Literacy Skills Tutor)

“...tutors, have got to do their bit, get to know their learners, work out their strengths, the weaknesses, the learning styles and do what they can first” (Learning Support Manager)

These comments reflect a concern for changing the environment ('society' in which the student exists) rather than changing the individual.

Chapter Four: summary and reflections

This thesis set out to answer two research questions:

- 1 What are the views of key persons in a FE college on the nature of literacy difficulties?
- 2 What are some of the processes involved in the identification of young people with literacy difficulties, and the main purposes of this identification in this college?

In doing this, it employed a case study design frame, with the case being the learning support department of an FE college, and it being a case of literacy difficulties and how they are viewed and identified by those from within the department. This involved interviews with four key people at (or working with) the college, in order to gain multiple perspectives.

4.1. Summary of main findings of Research Question 1

The main findings of Research Question 1 were as follows:

There were a range of similarities and differences in the way that participants described literacy difficulties. The term dyslexia was used by all participants in relation to literacy difficulties, however it was perceived as something separate and distinct from literacy difficulties more generally, with literacy

difficulties either being perceived as a product of dyslexia, or 'non-dyslexic' environmental factors, such as gaps in education. All participants perceived dyslexia as biological and life-long, and the term tended to be constructed in terms of difference from the norm: for example, those with dyslexia had 'different' brain wiring, or needed to 'learn in different ways'. Although biological factors were seen as most significant, some participants also commented on the significance of environmental factors, particularly those in the college.

The separating out of data from those within and outside the college revealed a disagreement about the role of intelligence in relation to dyslexia: the specialist teachers perceived having intelligence as differentiating 'dyslexic' poor readers from 'non-dyslexic' poor readers. The student also perceived himself as having 'good intelligence' compared to his literacy abilities. Staff in the learning support department either did not see intelligence as related to dyslexia or were uncertain about any such relationship. A further area of disagreement was around the role of reading comprehension, although this may be related to intelligence, as the specialist teachers also perceived this as related to dyslexia.

Staff at the college perceived the label of dyslexia as meaning different things, in terms of utility, to different groups at the college. For example, students and parents saw the label as potentially useful, due to the perception that it might confer additional support or resources, whereas staff in the learning support

department saw it as either negative or unnecessary. The student said he found the label helpful in being able to explain his difficulties to his peers.

All participants perceived literacy difficulties as having a profound impact on an individual's life chances. The student noted the social and emotional difficulties that could be experienced due to a lack of understanding from others. Staff at the college also mentioned that students could feel stigmatised due to their difficulties.

Participants noted the importance of developing independence skills in those with literacy difficulties, rather than making them dependant on support. They also mentioned the implications of budget cuts in FE, and the increasing lack of available resources. Due to this, staff in the learning support department perceived that tutors needed to take more responsibility for ensuring that those who had literacy difficulties were able to learn.

4.2 Summary of main findings of Research Question 2:

The main findings of Research Question 2 were as follows:

Students, parents or tutors could raise literacy concerns with the Learning Support Department of the college. After a concern was raised, there may be a process of initial assessment that could involve observing the student in their classes, or speaking to the student in more detail about their difficulties.

If the student was deemed to be experiencing significant difficulties in relation

to his or her peers, then support could be offered. This could take the form of strategies or advice to the student or to the tutor, or in more severe cases, it might involve individualised weekly support with a literacy skills tutor.

The main purpose of identifying literacy difficulties was to provide students with support, or provide them with access arrangements for examinations. If access arrangements were required, students could be referred to an assessment centre, although they might also be referred if the college required more specific information about the nature of their difficulties. At the assessment centre, specialist teachers collected background information and did standardised literacy assessments. If students performed 'below average' on one of these tests they are eligible for access arrangements for examination purposes. Results from the assessment centre could also inform any support that the college might later offer.

4.3 Implications of findings for educational psychologists

Although this is a case study of a learning support department in one FE college, which limits the extent to which one can generalise, it nonetheless contains a number of implications for EPs. The first implication is the widespread use of the term dyslexia among participants. As mentioned in the literature review, the term is described as problematic for EPs for a number of reasons: it assumes a narrowly-focused deficit that is the product of biological, rather than environmental circumstances; it is a construct that cannot be identified through the use of static assessments; it has questionable validity,

since there exists no way to differentiate between a 'dyslexic' poor readers and other poor readers, and due to its heterogeneity, has not been found to be useful in guiding specific interventions. This research has also suggested that the label of dyslexia not only means different things to different groups of people, but can create confusion and differing expectations when people's perceptions of the label are different. One example of this would be the perception among parents and students, that the label confers additional support, which, in this particular FE college, was not the case. This issue is further complicated by a public discourse around dyslexia that is not supported by research evidence, and by various groups of people or organisations that seek to influence public understanding of the term, or utilise it for their own benefit (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014). For EPs to work in FE, where the label of dyslexia is so prevalent, and where students might be keenly aware of their 'rights', they too, need to be aware of these issues, be able to communicate the complexities of the topic to various groups in the college, and offer assessment, advice and intervention that is based on psychological models and reliable research evidence, and not on serving a narrowly focused agenda concerned with application of labels.

In disputing the usefulness and validity of the term dyslexia, however, EPs also need to be careful that they do not trivialise the significance and impact that literacy difficulties have on students' lives. The theme 'impact' in relation to Research Question 1 highlighted the perception that literacy difficulties had far-reaching effects, in one participant's words that "it affects everything really". EPs should understand the importance of adopting an anti-oppressive

attitude in this area: although they might perceive dyslexia as a problematic construct, they should still see literacy difficulties as being hugely significant in affecting young people's lives among those who struggle.

One positive finding was the fact that the both the Literacy Skills Tutor and Learning Support Manager appeared to understand the complexity of issues related to dyslexia, and that they were able to acknowledge, to a certain extent, the limitations of the label's value. This was particularly the case when the Learning Support Manager described assessment as being something that should involve the individuality and uniqueness of a student's learning profile, rather than a more generalised approach based on a 'diagnosis'. A further positive aspect was the fact that both participants recognised the importance of environmental factors in contributing towards literacy difficulties, and did not limit their view of literacy difficulties to within-person or biological factors. It was also positive that both of these participants did not view intelligence as related to dyslexia, which is supported by the research evidence. These findings are perhaps heartening for EPs, since it might be easy to assume that colleges have an underdeveloped understanding of these issues. It also means that if EPs were to work in colleges such as this, that they would have others who shared some of their perspectives, and they would not therefore have to work too hard to shift erroneous perceptions.

A further positive factor, in practical terms, was that despite the prevalence of the term dyslexia, that these assessments were not required for additional support in this particular college. In this sense, the FE college might be said to

be adopting a similar attitude to schools, in that labels in schools do not generally come with additional support. It is worth mentioning however that EPs will need to be aware of the impact of working with older age groups and they should not necessarily assume that strategies they have used with younger learners will prove effective with older ones. Indeed, as Flynn, Zheng and Swanson (2012) point out, the use of phonics tends to be less effective for older poor readers, and that the addition of sight word reading for this age group may be more appropriate.

A further implication for EPs, if they are to work with colleges, is to be aware of the uniqueness of individual colleges. Indeed, although this research only focused on one college, the assessment centre pointed out that, in many respects, this college was an anomaly because it didn't do dyslexia assessments. This suggested that other colleges may have quite different procedures and practices around literacy difficulties. A greater awareness of differences between colleges would be useful for EPs, since it could enable them to see which systems work better than others, and to provide advice to colleges in situations where systems were perceived to be less than ideal.

The recent changes to the code of practice to include YP up to the age of 25 have a number of implications for EPs: EPs are now required to contribute towards the creation of an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans for this age range if a request for assessment is approved by the local authority. This means that EPs will be increasingly need to do their consultation and assessment work in these new and unfamiliar environments. This will require

EPs to familiarise themselves with the specific systems that operate around a particular FE college; as stated above, this college appeared to be atypical in that it did not offer students the option of a dyslexia assessment, however, other colleges may operate in different ways. Indeed, in colleges where the dyslexia label is considered indicative of a disability, it could result in an application for an EHCP, since the EHCP might be seen as a means to generate additional funding or provide extra support. Many local authorities however have a stringent set of criteria that they use to determine eligibility for an EHCP, and may not decide not to proceed with an assessment on the basis of this 'diagnosis', especially if they consider the YP to have needs that are not complex, or that might respond to targeted intervention. This may create a set of tensions between colleges and local authorities that could potentially result in tribunals or associated legal action. EPs will need to be aware of these issues and the potential for conflict that could arise from students labelled as having dyslexia.

Alongside the statutory requirements of contributing towards EHCPs, educational psychology services may want to consider ways that they can work with FE colleges as part of their traded services. At a practical level there are a number of barriers to EPs working with FE colleges that are likely to continue into the foreseeable future. The first is the decreasing amount of money available for FE colleges, and the impact that this may have on their ability to utilise educational psychology services, given the fact that the fact that these services now come at a cost to the individual institutions. Despite being mentioned in SEND COP, it appears unlikely, given lack of available

funds, that FE colleges will be proactive in buying in these services, especially if they had not done so in the past. It is likely that if educational psychology services want to be proactive in expanding their remit to FE beyond the boundaries of statutory work, they will need to take the initiative themselves in forging new relationships with colleges, being proactive about marketing their services and clear about their unique contribution. Some services may not see any need to do this if they already have established relationships with schools, however others may see an exciting opportunity to work with different age groups in new contexts, and in doing so, being able to broaden their range of skills and experience.

It is perhaps unfortunate that practical realities may hinder EPs being able to work more extensively in FE colleges. Many of the principles on which EPs work – taking a hypothesis testing approach, applying evidence-based practice – are just as relevant in the college setting as in schools. In addition, EPs could offer assessment and intervention that goes beyond within-person deficit approaches that appear to be characteristic of the assessment centre's approach. They could help shape attitudes based on psychologically sound principles, and offer intervention that focuses on the specific needs of the learner. Naturally, it is not only in the area of literacy difficulties that EPs could potentially add value; literacy is only one area in which they could potentially contribute. Indeed, mental health is one area where colleges are likely to require a high level of support, but where they may have difficulty accessing the appropriate resources (e.g. Allen and Hardy, 2013). This would require

EPs to extend their knowledge of mental health issues that might affect older populations.

4.4 Sharing of the findings

These findings will be presented to a group of EPs in a professional development meeting. The college, and the participants who took part will, if requested, be sent a summary of the research findings.

4.5 Strengths and limitations

There were a number of strengths to this research. Firstly, as mentioned in the literature review, this is area that is likely to be of practical benefit to educational psychology services due to recent legislative changes that have extended the age range in which EPs are expected to work to include young people in post-16 environments such as FE colleges. Since FE colleges are not places within which EPs have typically worked, there is a need to find out more about how these settings operate, and the nature of people's perceptions (in this case, in relation to literacy difficulties). An awareness of these issues is a first step in helping EPs to understand how they might contribute to supporting young people in these contexts.

A second strength of the research was that it endeavoured to understand both perceptions and processes, reflected in the two research questions. This

meant that the research required a flexible approach to data analysis (TA that involved both theoretical and deductive approaches), due to the differing nature of the research questions; Research Question 1 being about understanding and perceptions (arguably a more socially constructed concern) and Research Question 2 being about processes and purposes (a more realist position). Although the differing nature of the research questions required a less conceptually unified approach (e.g. the positing of Research Question 1 could have been well suited to a socially constructivist ontology with discourse analysis as analytical method), the result is arguably one that is broader and more useful than either research question in isolation.

There were a number of limitations to this research. The first major limitation is its lack of generalizability, which is true of the majority of single case study research (Thomas, 2011). Since this research considers just one college, one cannot assume that the same views or processes will necessarily exist in others. This is particularly the case given the autonomous nature of colleges more generally, and also when the assessment centre indicated that this college may not be typical of many other FE colleges, due to the fact it did not buy into their service offering full dyslexia assessments, which is further evidence that it would be unwise to generalise these findings to other colleges. Nevertheless, what this research does do is explore a particular situation in detail, and examine it from different angles. As such, this research could be said to be exploratory, and further research could explore the extent to which these findings might be considered generalizable.

A second limitation of the research was that not all views in the college were represented. Indeed, as mentioned in the analysis and discussion section, the Learning Support Manager and Literacy Skills Tutor both mentioned that tutors needed to do more to support those with literacy difficulties. The inclusion of a college tutor in the research, perhaps one who worked with students with a level of need in literacy, may have added an extra dimension to the research, and enabled this voice to be heard. In addition, the inclusion of a parent of a young person with literacy difficulties might also have provided an additional perspective.

Related to this issue, was the fact that there was only one student categorised as having dyslexia who was represented. The research would have benefitted from the inclusion of another student, perhaps without the label of dyslexia, in order to represent literacy difficulties more generally, since it is possible that without this label, their views would have differed somewhat from those of the student with the label. In addition, the data from this student only informed the first research question, since they were not in a position to comment on college processes. Similarly, the specialist assessors comprised half of the sample of those working (directly or indirectly) with the college. Having a larger sample would have prevented this voice from dominating, however, the disaggregation of the data helped ensure that the voice of the specialist assessors did not distort the overall nature of the data. This was particularly important given the differences in beliefs, values and agendas as discussed in section 3.7.

Only one person (myself) conducted this research and coded the themes and this could also be considered a limitation. Ideally, the process of analysing the data should have utilised more than one coder to ensure that more than one person was identifying similar themes. The data between the coders could then be compared and an acceptable level of agreement ascertained. The fact that one person conducted these interviews however might be seen as conferring certain advantages, such as consistency in the manner in which interviews were conducted, and controlling for possible 'interviewer effects'.

A further limitation was, arguably, the nature of the interview questioning, which, in some instances, may have dictated the emergence of particular themes in the research. Several of the themes were likely to have come from the 'directive' nature of the interview questioning, for example, 'intelligence'. It may have been possible to develop the interview schedule so it was less leading, and contained more open questions. On the other hand, the direct nature of the questioning did ensure that the contentious aspects of the debates around dyslexia could be covered in a systematic manner.

4.6 Reflection on implications for my practice

This research has afforded me greater insight into the complexities of debates around literacy difficulties, and in particular dyslexia. This will impact on my future practice, since I may be able to offer support to schools at a number of different levels (e.g. training, individual casework). In addition, through being able to conduct research within an FE college, I have gained a greater insight,

not only into in which one FE college operates, but also into some of the differences compared with schools of the FE sector more generally. For EPs who might work in FE colleges, there are some considerable challenges to overcome; however, I believe that EPs can play a key role in (tactfully) challenging 'public' perceptions around dyslexia, ensuring colleges adhere to evidenced-based practice approaches, fulfilling their statutory role in respect of recent changes, and acting as a key resource in supporting young people within FE.

4.7 Future research

The limitations of this research provide fertile ground for future research, which could involve a multiple case study approaches to gain wider perspectives, and also potentially survey methods, to make claims which are more generalizable. Thinking more broadly, future research could look at ways that EPs and FE colleges could collaborate outside of literacy difficulties. As mentioned above, EPs could bring their skills to areas as diverse as school-college or college-university transition, mental health and wellbeing, student engagement or sexual identity to name but a few areas.

For services that are interested in proactively developing links with FE colleges, collaborative approaches to research such as action research might prove a fruitful avenue of enquiry since this would enable both EPs and colleges to work closely with one another, and to enter into an on-going evaluation of the benefits of collaborative work. This might not be

straightforward, since colleges may not perceive any need for change; or there may be financial barriers to collaboration taking place. However, I believe EPs have much to offer FE colleges, and if challenges can be overcome, it appears likely that both colleges and EPs have the potential to benefit from collaboration.

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Appendix 1: Recruitment letter for learning support manager

xxx educational psychology service
Educational psychology service
address and contact details

(Name of learning support manager)

Learning Support Manager

(name of college)

(college address)

(date)

Re: research on perceptions of dyslexia/literacy difficulties and the process of assessment in a College of Further Education

Dear (xxxxx),

I am a doctoral researcher at the University of Birmingham and currently work as a trainee educational psychologist at xxxxx Educational Psychology Service. I would like to invite you to participate in research I am undertaking towards a doctoral thesis.

The research will explore perceptions of dyslexia/literacy difficulties in one particular FE setting, and endeavour to understand the processes involved in the identification of these difficulties from a range of perspectives. Please see the enclosed information sheet for further details.

With your permission, I would like to conduct a one-off 45-minute interview with the following people at your college:

- Yourself – the learning support manager

- A specialist teacher (or equivalent person) involved in the assessment of students' literacy difficulties
- A tutor with responsibility for a student with a literacy difficulty (or equivalent person)
- A student who has received a diagnosis of dyslexia/specific literacy difficulty while attending the college

Naturally, these interviews would take place at a time and place of your choosing and involve the individual consent of all persons involved. With your consent, I would endeavour to recruit the student from a poster placed in a visible area in the college.

I would be grateful if you could pass copies of this letter on to any people meeting the description of the job titles mentioned above. In addition, it would be extremely useful if you could email me with their contact details so I can invite them personally to take part in the study.

My email address is xxxxxxx

There is no obligation to take part in this research, however, I hope you will give it your full consideration. Some of the potential benefits of participating are outlined in the information sheet.

Thank you for considering this research.

Yours sincerely,

Xxxx Xxxxx

Appendix 2: Information sheet for staff

Information sheet

Perceptions towards literacy difficulties/dyslexia and their identification in a College of Further Education

This research is part of a doctoral research project at the School of Education within the University of Birmingham. It is being supervised by Dr Xxxx Xxxx.

What is this research about?

The purpose of this research is to explore perceptions towards literacy difficulties and their identification in a further education college. It also endeavours to understand the processes involved in the identification of young people with dyslexia/literacy difficulties and the main purposes of this identification.

Why are you doing this research?

Educational psychologists have traditionally had limited involvement in the post-16 sector. With the advent of the 2014 Special Education Needs and Disability Code of Practice however, this has extended the age range within which educational psychologists are expected to work up to age of 25, and highlighted the need for FE providers to work collaboratively with other agencies including educational psychologists to support the needs of young people.

One area of potential partnership is in the field of literacy difficulties, however, educational psychologists currently lack an understanding of how FE settings currently perceive and understand these difficulties, as well as the practical processes they currently use in their identification. This research therefore aims to enable educational psychology as a field to have a greater understanding of how a particular FE setting operates.

In addition, research suggests that there may be some differences between the way that educational psychologists and FE colleges position themselves in relation to literacy difficulties, and this research also aims to examine some of these issues. Please note this research does not intend to evaluate the extent to which the college is adhering to any principles or guidelines related to the assessment of dyslexia or literacy difficulties, and does not intend to place any judgments on the way the college currently handles students with these difficulties. Rather, it hopes to facilitate a greater two-way understanding between educational psychologists and further education colleges in order to provide support for young people, with a specific focus on literacy difficulties.

What is involved in this research?

I would like to conduct a one-off 45-minute interview with the following people at your college:

- The learning support manager
- a specialist teacher (or equivalent person) involved in the assessment of students' literacy difficulties
- a tutor responsible for a student with a literacy difficulty (or equivalent person)
- a student who has received an identification of dyslexia/specific literacy difficulty while attending the college

During these interviews I will be exploring perceptions of literacy difficulties/dyslexia and asking questions about how the college identifies and supports these students. I will also ask for your consent to audio-record the interview.

Taking part in the project:

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Before being interviewed, you will be asked to sign a consent form to provide a written record of your intention to participate and agreeing to any information you provide being included in the research. However, after you have signed this form, you are free to refuse to answer any question, or are free to withdraw

from the interview at any time if you so wish, and without giving a reason. If, for any reason, you do not wish the information you have provided to be included in the study, you contact me up to a week after the interview has taken place and I can withdraw your interview data from the study.

As the data will be gathered face-to-face, you will not be anonymous to me as the researcher. However, all data in the form of audio or written records will be stored anonymously and securely, and neither your name nor the name of your college will appear in the final thesis.

How will the information be used?

The information you provide will be collated, analysed and discussed as part of a doctoral thesis, which will be published in the e-theses domain of the University of Birmingham library. An anonymised summative report of the research will also be sent to all participants, if they request it. In addition, the [REDACTED] Educational Psychology Service (part of Access to Education, [REDACTED]) will be sent a copy of the summative report.

There is also a possibility that this research may be published in an academic journal. Before this is done, permission will be sought from all participants.

What are the benefits for us of participating?

After the research has been completed, I will send you a summative report of my research findings. Since this research is specific to your college, it may help you to understand the perceptions and practice in your college related to literacy difficulties, how young people with literacy difficulties might be supported through the use of outside agencies such as educational psychology services, and whether there are any issues raised by differences in theory, policy and practice between FE Colleges and educational psychologists in relation to literacy difficulties and their assessment.

What will be the outcomes of this project?

At this stage, the outcomes cannot be predicted. It is hoped that the information will enable [REDACTED] Educational Psychology Service, and

potentially the field of educational psychology to explore how they can contribute towards supporting pupils with literacy difficulties in FE settings given that they are now required to work with young people up to the age of 25.

What can I do if I have any questions or concerns about this project?

Please contact either myself (Xxxx xxxx) or my supervising tutor (Dr Xxxx xxxx) using the contact details below.

How can I take part in this research?

Please send me an email to [Xxxxxx](#) or call me on [redacted] indicating your willingness to participate and we can discuss a convenient day and time for the interview to take place.

Thank you for taking the time to read this and I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Xxxx xxxx
Trainee Educational Psychologist
and Doctoral Researcher
[contact details]

Dr Xxxx xxxx
Academic and professional to
Applied Educational and Child
Psychology Doctorate
[contact details]

Appendix 3: Consent form

Title of study: research on perceptions of dyslexia/literacy difficulties and the process of assessment in a college of further education

Researcher name:

Xxxxx Xxxxx

Trainee Educational Psychologist

[contact details]

Please Initial Box

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason

I agree to take part in the above study

I agree to the interview consultation being audio recorded

I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in the final thesis, which will be published on the e-theses database of the University of Birmingham library services.

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Name of researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix 4: Sample of script used for semi-structured interview with the college tutor.

Can you tell me a little about your role here at the college?

This interview is in 2 parts – in the first part I want to understand how things work at the college, in terms of assessing and providing support for students with literacy difficulties, and in the second part I am going to ask about your own viewpoints on the nature of literacy difficulties.

Firstly, what term is generally used to describe students with literacy difficulties? (e.g. dyslexia or reading disability?)

I'd like to understand more about the process involved in the identification of young people with a literacy difficulty/dyslexia.

Is there a screening process when students come to college, or is there a system whereby students or staff can flag up difficulties?

Who generally would make a request for an assessment of a students' literacy difficulty e.g. teacher/tutor/parent/student etc.

Who undertakes these assessments (I understand it is outsourced to Xxxxxx assessment centre)? Is there a reason why this organisation does this?

Is assessment for literacy difficulties/dyslexia usually a one-off 'snapshot' approach in terms of information gathering or is it assessment that is done over time?

If a young person or their parents request a dyslexia assessment, how would they get one?

What's the purpose of the assessments (e.g. exam concessions, DSA, intervention?)

Are students who have these difficulties considered to have a disability or a difficulty – are they eligible for DSA?

Does anyone do assessment of literacy difficulties in the college – for example, a specialist teacher or educational psychologist?

To what extent is the assessment contextualized to the students' course of study?

Do you know how students are identified as meeting the criteria for having a literacy difficulty/dyslexia?

Do you know what components are involved in the assessment? e.g. psychometric testing, information gathering, etc?

If known, is assessment based on a comparison of literacy abilities against IQ, or is IQ irrelevant?

Are you aware of response to intervention models of assessment of literacy difficulties, whereby an intervention (usually phonics based) is put into place and progress against this is recorded?

Tell me about how you support students who have a literacy difficulty. What kind of work do you do with them? Is the work individual or in groups?

What kind of impact does the literacy difficulty have on the young person, in your opinion?

How often is this support provided? Who else provides the support?

Do you get any assistance or advice from anyone else in the college about how to provide this support?

Do you think that the systems at college work well to support students with literacy difficulties?

Do you think the model that exists for students who go to college here is a 'rights' model, in the sense that, this literacy difficulty or disability is identified and that results in extra time in an exam or a laptop?

Part 2: Your viewpoint on the nature of literacy difficulties

In your experience, what do you consider to be the main characteristics of a literacy difficulty/dyslexia?

Is there a social/emotional component to this?

Do you think there is an overlap with any other conditions such as ADHD?

Do you think dyslexia is a useful term to describe young people with literacy difficulties?

Using the term dyslexia, in your opinion, is there a difference between a dyslexic reader and a non-dyslexic poor reader?

Do you believe that any person who has persistent literacy difficulties should be considered as having dyslexia regardless of their academic abilities or IQ? For example, should they only be considered dyslexic if they have a comparatively high IQ compared to their literacy difficulties?

To what extent do you believe that literacy difficulties/dyslexia are the result of biological differences that are present from birth?

To take the other extreme end, to what extent do you believe that literacy difficulties/dyslexia might be the result of environmental circumstances, such as a lack of opportunities at home or school to engage in reading and literacy activities, or a lack of quality teaching/instruction at school?

Do you believe that once a young person has reached the college level, there is anything that can be done to help them improve their literacy skill, or do you think it's unlikely that they would improve further as a result of any kind of intense literacy or phonics intervention? In other words, by this stage, is it mainly about making reasonable adjustments to their environment rather than improving their innate abilities?

Appendix 5: Sample of script used for semi-structured interview with student.

Questions related to research question 2: the views of the young person on the processes involved in their assessment and its main purposes

First I'm going to ask you some questions about your experience of being assessed as having a literacy difficulty/dyslexia.

1. What would you call your literacy difficulty? E.g. dyslexia. Are you happy for me to refer to it as dyslexia throughout the interview?
2. Tell me about some of the problems you have had with literacy/reading/writing. When did they begin, and how did they affect you?
3. (If applicable) Before you got to college, were you given extra support at school? Was this helpful?
4. What happened when you got to college? Did you get support? What kind?
5. When was your literacy difficulty/dyslexia assessment done at college? What was your experience of this (positive or negative?)
6. Do you remember how your literacy difficulty/dyslexia assessment was done? What kind of tests did they give you? Were your parents or carers involved?
7. What do you think was the main reason that you had a literacy difficulty/dyslexia assessment?
8. What kind of support do you get at the college as a result of having been assessed as having a literacy difficulty/dyslexia?
9. Are you happy with this support? Does it help you?

Questions related to research question 1: the views of the young person on the nature of their own literacy difficulties/dyslexia

1. What does having a literacy difficulty/dyslexia mean to you? For example, does it make you feel you are different from other people?

2. Which parts of literacy – that is, reading, writing, spelling etc. do you have the most difficulty with?
3. What about things not directly to do with literacy or reading, writing, like concentration or organisational skills – are they part of having a literacy difficulty/dyslexia?
4. Has it been helpful for others to know that you have a literacy difficulty/dyslexia? In what way?
5. Where do you think your literacy difficulty/dyslexia comes from? (Note: this is left deliberately open-ended as there is an ethical issue in giving possible suggestions since it may suggest to the young person that they could be responsible for their literacy difficulty/dyslexia)