

# **Making sense of dyslexia**

A life history study with dyslexic adults  
mapping meaning-making and its relationship to the development  
of positive self-perceptions and coping skills

Submitted by Ruth Gwernan-Jones, to the University of Exeter as a thesis  
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For Bill, Edward and Gary,  
without whom I would not have thought of doing this thesis;

and for Alun, Bob, Cheryl and Gert,  
without whose support I would not have finished it.

## ABSTRACT

It has been acknowledged for some time that personal experience, relationship and emotional factors are important aspects of difficulties in learning to read and write; however there is still little research carried out in this area. This thesis explores the way in which eight adults make sense of their difficulties with reading and writing and identification of dyslexia; and their process of developing more positive self-perceptions and coping strategies. The study is guided by standpoint theory, with priority given to participants' perceptions about difficulties in reading and writing rather than to academic and/or practitioner perspectives.

Analysis of interviews is carried out through a life history methodology that identifies discourses of dyslexia in order to situate the way difficulties are understood and addressed. The discourses include four identified by Pollak (2005) and identification of six additional discourses of dyslexia that were present in both the literature review and at least half of the participant interviews. In the analysis, use of these discourses is mapped alongside the life story of each participant using the Model of Vocational Success (MVS) (Gerber *et al.* 1992) as a framework for classifying the development of positive self-perceptions and coping mechanisms.

The participants' life histories reveal that, without identification of dyslexia, difficulties with reading and writing are most often attributed by others such as teachers, peers and/or parents to low intelligence and/or lack of effort. Some participants rejected this understanding and others internalised it. Experience of 'niche' where the participant found themselves to be successful in a specific context best supported the development of positive self-perceptions and coping strategies before identification of dyslexia. Identification of dyslexia provided a means of making sense of difficulties, bolstered self-belief in intelligence, and initiated changes in support and personal motivation which, for the majority of participants, were notably beneficial.

This PhD makes a number of unique contributions to knowledge about dyslexia, particularly through its prioritization of the voice of dyslexic people over professional voices. The identification of six additional discourses of dyslexia contributes to knowledge about the way difficulties with reading and writing can be understood and talked about, and exploration of how these discourses link to the MVS contributes knowledge about the advantages and disadvantages of these discourses to dyslexic people. The discourse 'Hemispherist' (Pollak 2005) was found to offer the most opportunity for dyslexic adults to develop positive self-perceptions and take constructive action to compensate for difficulties.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder
A-level	Advanced Level General Certificate of Education
ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
AS-level	Advanced Subsidiary Level General Certificate of Education
CSE	Certificate of Secondary Education
DSA	Disabled Student's Allowance
FE	Further Education
fMRI	functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HE	Higher Education
LD	Learning Disabilities
LEA	Local Education Authority
MVS	Model of Vocational Success
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
O-level	General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level
PGCE	Post-Graduate Certificate in Education
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SLI	Specific Language Impairment
SpLD	Specific Learning Difficulty