"ACCEPT THE IDEA THAT NEURODIVERSE KIDS EXIST": DYSLEXIC NARRATIVES AND NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM VISIONS

Monica van Schaik
vans0150@mylaurier.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.wlu.ca/etd

Part of the Disability and Equity in Education Commons, Disability Studies Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive) by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.
“ACCEPT THE IDEA THAT NEURODIVERSE KIDS EXIST”
DYSLEXIC NARRATIVES AND NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM VISIONS
By
Monica M. van Schaik
B.A., Concordia University, 2012
THESIS
Submitted to the Faculty of Social Work
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Master of Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University

© Monica van Schaik 2021
Abstract

The neurodiversity paradigm has received support from many autistic self-advocates and scholars. Although definitions of neurodiversity are always framed to include dyslexia, research into the neurodiversity paradigm that seeks the perspectives of dyslexic people is limited. This qualitative study sought to fill this gap by asking 12 self-identified dyslexic adults how they imagined their life stories would change within a neurodiversity paradigm. A narrative inquiry methodology was combined with guiding principles of participatory action research and dyslexic methodology. Dyslexic ways of knowing were engaged and illuminated in the research design, writing process and findings. Emergent themes revealed participants’ lived experiences of ableism, hope, help and resistance, and the neurodiversity paradigm inspired visions for systemic change that fosters the wellbeing of dyslexic people and anti-ableist practices to support a paradigm shift. Findings indicate that self-identified dyslexic individuals envision emancipatory potential in the neurodiversity paradigm when implemented alongside an intersectional approach.
Dedication

For all the neurodivergent people forced to hide and blend in rather than let their brilliance be known. May this one-day change.
Acknowledgements

I’m incredibly grateful to my participants. Your stories are the soul of this project. Thank you for sharing them with me, and for your courage, trust and belief in change. I profoundly thank my sister and key informant, Annette, for bringing your heart to this project and for reminding me what was important the whole way through.

My endless gratitude goes to my thesis committee for your guidance, meaningful feedback, commitment and kindness throughout this journey. Dr. Eliana Suarez, thank you for your enthusiasm and belief in my work. Dr. Maryam Khan, your support helped me make this project my own, and from that I have learned so much.

A heartfelt thank you to Lin Haag who dreamed with me over tea about this research and who offered invaluable support with my funding applications. I also want to thank Dr. Nancy Freymond, your early guidance helped me find what I was seeking.

My thesis was supported in part by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. I’m grateful for this funding which helped make this project possible for me.

I’m tremendously grateful for my neurodivergently amazing family! Thank you to my parents for teaching me to value neurodivergent people and for equipping me with some essential skills for this journey — Mom, you have taught me self-compassion and kindness, and Dad, you have taught me to fall in love with the joy and thrill of a good challenge. Thank you to my brothers who have provided me with much needed care, humour and resolve throughout this journey. Andy, for every single ‘thesis life’ text filled with your love and support. Luke, for all the renovation analogies when things got ugly.

My deepest and joyous gratitude goes to Lauren Ramsay. You are my access intimacy embodied and I thank the universe everyday for you! I also want to deeply thank my friends — Jacob Albin Korem Alhassan, for all your compassionate, patient academic and emotional support, and Niomi Cherney, your grounded care supported me tremendously at some pivotal
moments. So much gratitude goes to my many friends and family who have loved and supported me from afar while encouraging me to take the time and space to make this happen.

Thank you to Aimee Louw, Accessibilize Montreal, and the Spellers & Allies Advocacy Network for your badass inspiration and for filling my deviant activist cup with joy, companionship and radical love.

Every fiber of my being rests in gratitude for David Lacalamita, my life partner. Thank you for your continuous, steady love and support throughout this project. Most of all, thank you for being my home.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... i

Dedication .......................................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................ iii

Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................... v

List of Figures ....................................................................................................................................... ix

Chapter 1: Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 1

1.1 Dyslexic Musing: A Transformative Search Begins ................................................................. 1

1.2 Why this Research and What Gaps Does It Fill? .................................................................... 3

1.3 Research Questions .................................................................................................................... 5

1.4 A Note on Identity-First Language ......................................................................................... 6

1.5 Key Concepts ............................................................................................................................. 7

   * Normalcy ...................................................................................................................................... 7

   * Disability ...................................................................................................................................... 8

   * Ableism ........................................................................................................................................ 9

   * Emancipation ............................................................................................................................. 10

   * Neurodiversity .......................................................................................................................... 11

   * Identity ........................................................................................................................................ 11

1.6 Thesis Content Overview ......................................................................................................... 12

Chapter 2: Literature Review .......................................................................................................... 14

2.1 Overview of Current Disability Paradigms ............................................................................. 14

2.2 Neurodiversity Paradigm ......................................................................................................... 16

2.3 Dyslexia ....................................................................................................................................... 19

   * Dyslexic Narratives of Self and Resistance .......................................................................... 20

2.4 Emancipation, the Neurodiversity Paradigm and Dyslexia .................................................... 23

Chapter 3: Epistemology and Research Methods .......................................................................... 26
3.1 Epistemology and Theoretical Frameworks........................................................................................................26
3.2 Research Methodology.............................................................................................................................................28

   *Narrative Inquiry* ..................................................................................................................................................28

   *Participatory Action Research (PAR)* ..................................................................................................................29

   *Dyslexic Methodology* .........................................................................................................................................30

3.3 Role of the Researcher ...........................................................................................................................................32
3.4 Adding a Key Informant .......................................................................................................................................33
3.5 Ethics and Recruitment .........................................................................................................................................34
3.6 Data Collection .......................................................................................................................................................36
3.7 Data Analysis .........................................................................................................................................................38

4.0 Findings .................................................................................................................................................................43

4.1 Participant Portraits ...............................................................................................................................................43

   *Marie* .................................................................................................................................................................43
   *Silas* .................................................................................................................................................................44
   *Qui* .................................................................................................................................................................45
   *James Martin* ....................................................................................................................................................45
   *Jace* .................................................................................................................................................................46
   *Jonah* ...............................................................................................................................................................47
   *Maddy* ...............................................................................................................................................................48
   *Josh* .................................................................................................................................................................48
   *Katie* .................................................................................................................................................................49
   *Alan* .................................................................................................................................................................50
   *Rory* .................................................................................................................................................................51
   *Freeman* ............................................................................................................................................................51

4.2 Intersectional Analysis .........................................................................................................................................52

4.3 Storying Dyslexic Lived Experiences and Re-Storying through Neurodiversity.............................................55
4.3.2 Inscribing Ableism ............................................................................................................. 60
   *Systemic Level* ......................................................................................................................... 61
   *Relational Level* ..................................................................................................................... 64
4.3.3 Internalizing Ableism ....................................................................................................... 68
4.3.4 Finding Hope & Help ......................................................................................................... 71
4.3.5 Resisting Ableism .............................................................................................................. 75
4.3.6 Normalizing Diversity ......................................................................................................... 79
4.3.7 Accessing Self-Understanding ......................................................................................... 83
4.3.8 Redefining Success ............................................................................................................ 87
4.4 Anti-Ableist Practices .......................................................................................................... 90
4.5 Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 94

**5.0 Discussion** .......................................................................................................................... 96

5.1 Key Findings .......................................................................................................................... 96
   *Revealing and Challenging Neuronormativity and Ableism* ................................................. 96
   *Emancipatory Potentials of the Neurodiversity Paradigm* ..................................................... 102
   *Anti-Ableist Practices to Initiate a Paradigm Shift* ................................................................. 108

5.2 Contributions and Implications ............................................................................................. 111
   *Social Work Practice* ............................................................................................................ 111
   *Policy* ...................................................................................................................................... 113
   *Research* ............................................................................................................................... 114
   *Neurodiversity Movement Building* ..................................................................................... 114

5.3 Critical Reflexivity ................................................................................................................ 115
   *Colliding Assumptions* .......................................................................................................... 116
   *Actively Anti-Racist* ............................................................................................................... 117
   *Un/Re/weaving Ableism* ....................................................................................................... 119
   *What I Long to Be Different* ................................................................................................ 121
### 5.4 Limitations

### 5.5 Opportunities for Future Research

### 5.6 Closing

---

**Appendices**

Appendix A: TCPS Certificate

Appendix B: Ethics Approval

Appendix C: Informed Consent

Appendix D: Recruitment Poster

Appendix E: Screening Interview Guide

Appendix F: Interview Guide

Appendix G: Demographic Survey

Appendix H: Virtual Meeting Informed Consent

**References**
List of Figures

Figure 1. Dyslexic Methods ........................................................................................................... 31
Figure 2. Data Analysis .................................................................................................................. 40
Figure 3. Visual Summary of Study Findings: Current Disability Paradigms vs. Neurodiversity
Paradigm ........................................................................................................................................ 57
Figure 4. Identifying Divergence .................................................................................................. 57
Figure 5. Inscribing Ableism ........................................................................................................ 60
Figure 6. Internalizing Ableism .................................................................................................... 68
Figure 7. Finding Hope & Help ...................................................................................................... 71
Figure 8. Resisting Ableism ........................................................................................................... 75
Figure 9. Normalizing Diversity .................................................................................................... 79
Figure 10. Accessing Self-Understanding ....................................................................................... 83
Figure 11. Redefining Success ...................................................................................................... 87
Figure 12. Anti-Ableist Practices .................................................................................................. 90
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Dyslexic Musing: A Transformative Search Begins

I have this vivid memory from my MSW orientation day. An accessible learning advisor is up at the pristine wood podium, slideshow presentation on screen, the feel of welcome, excitement and encouragement in the air. She states, “please remember that we are not counsellors.” The air slices, my heart surges in that way that it does when you are deeply bothered but you need to contain it in your small female frame because it is welcome day and you are trying to look composed, enthusiastic and presentable. Through this half sentence, the wise weathered dyslexic inside me decoded that the currency for accessibility supports would be emotional composition when (not if) the ghosts of ableism and inaccessible education hollowed inside me (Granger, 2010).

Sipping my warm welcome coffee, I soothed my inner dyslexic with protective privileges—financial security unlike during my last degree, a repertoire of study strategies, an ability to run on little sleep, a loving partner and support network. I thought about the less comfortable advantages that ballooned my experience too. There has always been this invisible way I am welcomed by teachers. I think it is some combination of my Belgian-Dutch-settler cultivated whiteness and my cis-female gender colliding. Something in how I carry these that makes me expected and invisibly welcomed in the classroom. In this way, it is rare for me to need to prove myself and teachers are generally pretty supportive and happy to answer my many questions and queries. This has been essential for my success because my dyslexic mind does not learn passively. I often need extensions, exceptions and answers to many big questions before I can settle and do tasks others seem to see as straightforward.

Distracted, I looked around at my new classmates, intentionally letting the words of the accessibility advisor fade into the background to give my heart some reprieve. I felt disappointed not to be learning alongside a higher number of people of color and wondered how those who were here felt. Were their hearts surging at the whiteness of our crowd or perhaps at the
accessibility advisor’s words too? I wondered what invisible diversities were hiding under all of our coats of skin? How many ruffled feathers were there, unseen under our professional, casual, comfortable first day of school attire?

Later walking home, my mind kept returning to that phrase “please remember we are not counsellors.” I knew that somehow this statement did not align with the neurodiversity paradigm or disability justice principles I had been reading and exploring. These theories, in their own ways, seek to salve the exclusion and stigma of disabled people while imagining and cultivating new tools that can build collective liberation and access (Sins Invalid, 2015; Walker, 2014). I knew that it was logical not to expect an accessibility advisor to be a counsellor, but what was it that I so intensely longed to be different?

I also wondered what other dyslexics longed for. For decades, Critical Disability Studies scholars and disabled activists have been and continue to campaign for a model of inclusion that confronts ableism (Haney, 2018; Harpur, 2012; Kattari et al., 2018; Withers, 2012). I had friends pulling apart ableism from a cri² autistics and ADHDer² perspective, but I had not found or met any dyslexics. I grew up listening to my Mom’s dyslexic stories of exclusion, resistance and survival. Mom was the first disability activist I ever met. Mom, like other dyslexics I knew, did not spend hours reading theory and I had not taken the time to share what I had been learning.

Adopting a paradigm of neurodiversity on a personal level had been helping me creatively problem solve rather than trudge along in fear of the inevitable moments where I could not blend in. Defiance, one of my favored companions, had already led me to identify as an activist and queer and was helping me embrace my deviant learning ways, slowly exposing

---

1 Many of my disabled friends have taken up the term Crip as an identity. Crip was used as a slur towards disabled people until disability activists in the 1960s reclaimed it in an act of resistance and disability pride. Today it is a critical term that works to unite disability identities and disrupt the normalcy of statistically specific minds and bodies (Cosenza, 2010; McRuer, 2006).

2 ADHDer, a term often used by people who claim a cultural identity rather than a deficit and who are diagnosed or who self-identify with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder.
dyslexic more and more. Every time dyslexia was mentioned in a definition of neurodiversity, the word glared at me, indicating an important and missing voice from the conversation about neurodiversity I was growing to love.

Curious about the experiences and opinions of other dyslexic people, I set out on this research journey for my Master of Social Work thesis to discover whether the neurodiversity paradigm ignited a defiance and vision for a different future similar to how it did in me. I asked 12 self-identified dyslexic adults how they imagined their life stories would change within a neurodiversity paradigm. Longing to uncover the complexity of our collective vision, I sought a diverse sample of participants and used an intersectional approach. I ventured to engage and illuminate dyslexic lived experience and expertise in a search for transformative practices.

1.2 Why this Research and What Gaps Does It Fill?

Neurodiversity and the neurodiversity paradigm propose an alternative to present ways of understanding neurological differences. *Neurodiversity* understands cognitive, developmental, sensory, emotional and learning differences as natural human variances much like the diversity we see in nature’s biodiversity (Singer, 1999). Through the work of autistic activists and scholars, a neurodiversity paradigm is increasingly being proposed. It rejects the idea of a neurological *norm*, values all forms of neurological difference and recognizes that neurodiversity is influenced by social dynamics of power and oppression, similar to race, gender, sexual minorities, among others (Rosqvist et al., 2020a; 2020b; Walker, 2014). Although an emerging field, research documents that the neurodiversity paradigm has fostered a landscape for self-acceptance and self-advocacy amongst autistic people unlike the presently accepted disability paradigms (Batt, 2018; Strand, 2017).

In contrast to the neurodiversity paradigm, a medical model of disability continues to largely guide educational and therapeutic practices today. The medical model of disability defines disability as a deficit, impairment, or disease which occupies an individual (Rosqvist et al., 2020a; Withers, 2012). When a disability is identified, a cure or remediation to disability is
sought and implemented (Rosqvist et al., 2020a; Withers, 2012). Although dyslexics have been supported by remedial and accommodation practices for decades, research continues to document that dyslexic people live with feelings of shame, fear of disclosure, negative self-concepts, low self-esteem, and heightened levels of stress throughout their lives (Cameron & Billington, 2015; Gibby-Leversuch, 2019; Leveroy, 2013; Nalavany et al., 2011). Some researchers conclude that further research is needed to understand how to remediate the negative self-concepts of dyslexics through programming to increase self-esteem (Gibby-Leversuch, 2019). Others have started to critique studies that center the medical model of dyslexia and advocate for research to take up a neurodiversity paradigm and to politicize the category of dyslexia (Cameron & Billington, 2015; Granger, 2010; Rappolt-Schlichtmann et al., 2018; Rosqvist et al., 2020a; Strand, 2017). This study responds to this second gap in the literature and call to action.

A neurodiversity paradigm frames the negative experiences described by dyslexic people as impacts of ableism rather than individual deficits. Lived experiences of ableism intersect with multiple experiences of privilege and oppression and manifest systemically in ways that uphold historic and present-day power relations (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Strand, 2017). Talila Lewis (2020) presents a working definition of ableism as follows:

A system that places value on people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, excellence and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, colonialism and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person’s appearance and/or their ability to satisfactorily (re)produce, excel and “behave.” (Image 1)

The site where the dyslexic mind most often becomes problematic and encounters ableism is in school. School is also a place where white supremacy, heteronormativity, patriarchy and class disparities are upheld and thus racism, colonization, homophobia, sexism,
amongst other structures of oppression manifest in complex ways (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Baglieri et al., 2011; Inman, 2019; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; MacDonald & Deacon, 2019). In imagining a neurodiversity paradigm, it is thus impossible to explore dyslexia alone. I use an intersectional approach to honor the complex and intersecting imaginings of research participants in an attempt to contribute to dismantling, not only ableism, but all systems of oppression.

I ground this research project in the growing attention on the neurodiversity paradigm and continued calls by researchers and activists to create knowledge about dyslexia differently. In reviewing the literature, research that employs a neurodiversity paradigm focuses on autistic experiences, are autoethnographic in nature focusing on one dyslexic person’s experience, seeks the perspective of teachers of dyslexic students or are theoretical in nature (Agarwal et al., 2015; Armstrong, 2017; Rappolt-Schlichtmann et al., 2018; Rentenbach, et al., 2017). This qualitative narrative research study is among the first to seek the perspective of multiple dyslexic people directly in relation to a neurodiversity paradigm that centers intersectionality. It adds to the growing body of literature that is created by and for dyslexic people and to the new critical paradigm of neurodiversity studies (Rosqvist et al., 2020b).

1.3 Research Questions
The research questions that guided this process were:

- How do self-identified dyslexic people construct their life narrative around the dominant narratives of dyslexia?
- What is the emancipatory potential of the neurodiversity paradigm for self-identified dyslexics?

Throughout this project, I tried to create accessible and anti-oppressive conversations with my research participants about their dyslexic life narratives and the neurodiversity paradigm. The findings presented give insight into the complex steps required for parents, teachers, mental
health practitioners, and researchers to put a neurodiversity paradigm into practice as well as how they can support and influence the personal narratives of dyslexic children and adults.

1.4 A Note on Identity-First Language

My parents taught me to use person-first language. Disability was a spoken part of my life because it was all around me. In addition to my Mom’s dyslexia, I grew up running around L’Arche community meals and meetings and I was the older sister to my brother with Down syndrome and my dyslexic ADDer sister. In fact, the opening line of my Grade 7 speech was “My brother is a person with Down syndrome. Not a Down syndrome person.” After moving to Montreal as a young adult, discovering my own dyslexia as well as the disability justice movement, I began to use identity-first language.

I think the reason I was taught to use person-first language and the reason I now use identity-first language are both political. In both periods of my life, I had an understanding of “ableism, power and privilege” (Mingus, 2011). Today I describe myself as dyslexic, in the footsteps of many disability justice activists, in an act of pride to say that dyslexia is a part of who I am, a part I sometimes have to remind myself to embrace and affirm (Brown, 2011; Clare, 2017; Louw, 2020; Mingus, 2011). I do this as a political act of resistance in connection to my lived experience as dyslexic, in understanding structures of ableism and in solidarity with other disabled people (Mingus, 2011). Throughout this project I use identity-first language in this political sense. Language about disability is a contested topic in my family and in the disability community these days (Brown, 2011; Seale, 2017). I understand that for some people person-first language continues to feel like the right political choice and others do not identify with

---

3 Person-first language is the practice of identifying the person prior to their disability (e.g. my Mom with dyslexia). For advocates of person-first language, this is a way to humanize people with disabilities.
4 L’Arche is a community that seeks to create friendship and belonging with adults with developmental disabilities. Learn more: https://www.larche.ca/
5 Andy requested that I identify him as my brother with Down syndrome who loves people and is an awesome DJ, which is all true.
6 Identity-first language is the practice of naming disability, similar to other descriptors such as woman or queer (e.g. Monica is dyslexic). Advocates for identity-first language do this as a way of stating that disability is not an identity they need to be ashamed of or distance themselves from.
dyslexia because it was a description they did not choose and instead, was forced upon them. Throughout this paper, I honour the complexity of identity and our struggle with it by using the terms and language that each person requested.

1.5 Key Concepts

Some key concepts important to this research study are normalcy, disability, ableism, emancipation, neurodiversity and identity. I intentionally define these concepts here—bolded and in a place that is easy to find. Words like emancipation, that are not used in everyday language and then used to describe dyslexic people in research and theory, can make us feel excluded from knowledge that is being created about us. These words can reinforce that one’s perspective and understanding is only valued when an individual can climb an often inaccessible academic ladder. I hope this bolded, easy-to-find section creates access to the musing and theory that follow.

Normalcy

The concept of normalcy is central to this project as its creation and existence makes room to exclude and state that certain ways of being are abnormal. The development of normal as a category in relation to the human mind began with mandatory education and the statistical analysis of the human brain just over 100 years ago (Baglieri et al., 2011; Waltz, 2020). Combined with the eugenics movement and rise of capitalism, the concept of the ‘normal child’ was spread as both a colonial and economic project arguing for a modern lifestyle and the optimization of the workforce (Waltz, 2020). Conceived within Western, white, upper class, patriarchal, able-bodied knowledge creation, the statistically developed category of normal reinforced the racism, classism and colonization present at that time and that continues to this

---

7 The term Western is understood throughout this project as the ideology that historically and currently creates a binary between “western” and “non-western” political-cultural thought and knowledge and conceives “western” ideology as superior (Horner, 2020; Thobani, 2018). Western ideologies essentialize and simplify our complex political-cultural ideologies and works to erase Canada’s history of Indigenous genocide and Black and immigrant slavery and currently used to justify and maintain power over BIPOC and immigrant communities through policy and institutionalizes practices (Thobani, 2018).
day (Davis, 1995 as cited in Singer, 2017; Waltz, 2020). Normalcy, thus, had and continues to support political agendas that reflect the values of those in power.

The concept of the ‘normal child’ became a parental goal during the 20th century, which created two culturally accepted exclusionary practices (Waltz, 2020). First, it provided culturally accepted and encouraged grounds for parents or workers of the state, such as social service workers, to institutionalize neurodivergent children throughout the majority of the 20th century. While in-clinic services were often offered to neurodivergent children of upper and middle class white families, this practice was used to take lower class and ethnic minority children out of their family homes (Waltz, 2020). Second, it gave rise to today’s massive industry dedicated to rearing a ‘normal child’. This includes the ever-growing demands on children’s time, specifically with regard to activities outside of school, as well as remediation programs to bring children closer to the statistically determined ‘normal child’ (Waltz, 2020).

Many dyslexic children experience the normalizing instruments of this continued cultural practice through assessment, monitoring and intervention (Collinson & Penketh, 2010). The creation of the ‘normal child’ therefore legitimizes disciplinary and self-disciplining practices on specific bodies (e.g. dyslexic bodies) while validating and rewarding the natural behaviour of others (e.g. children maintaining statistical standards) (Baglieri et al., 2011; Cosenza, 2014b; Garland-Thompson, 1997; Granger, 2010).

**Disability**

Disability is a highly contested concept that will be explored throughout this project. For the majority, this definition from the Merriam-Webster dictionary is assumed and accepted:

>a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person’s ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions. (Merriam-Webster, 2020)

---

8 Neurodivergent is a term for someone whose brain processes, learns or behaves differently from what is considered ‘typical’ within a given culture and context (e.g. someone who is dyslexic or autistic). The term was coined by Kassiane Asasumasu (Walker, 2014).
Garland-Thompson (1997) counters this conceptualization of disability however with the following, “Disability, then, is the attribution of corporeal deviance not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (p. 6). Neurodivergent theorists have expanded Garland-Thompson’s idea of cultural rules to include rules regarding sensory, emotional and cognitive processing expectations (Rosqvist et al., 2020a). Although disability is often thought of as a static and simple-to-understand concept, such as the stereotypical dyslexic who reverses letters, disability is almost never this simple. Disability is dynamic, fluctuating with external factors and time (Garland-Thompson, 1997) and I would add internal factors. External factors such as curriculum and learning supports and environments contribute to the dynamic nature of dyslexia as well as internal factors such as fatigue, stress and the impacts of past experiences of affirmation and stigmatization.

**Ableism**

Ableism encompasses the systemic oppression that dyslexics and all disabled people experience. Ableism, like other systems of oppression such as sexism or racism, is best understood as an invisible force that establishes taken-for-granted assumptions and practices. An example is the assumption and belief that it is equitable to assign primarily written assignments to evaluate all students in a classroom. Robert McRuer, a queer and crip theorist, describes ableism as follows: “compulsory able-bodiedness [and able-mindedness] functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice...emanat[ing] from everywhere and nowhere,” (2006, p.8). Ableism thus is present in moments when disabled people feel pressure to appear as normal or not disabled. It is also present when spaces, instruction, assignments and jobs are created and developed with a neurotypical person in mind rather than a neurologically diverse population. Ableism can be overt in the form of direct insults or exclusion; however, it is more often covert, as McRuer describes, in invisible pressures to obey and embody a normative standard (2006).
One manifestation of ableism key to my research is internalized ableism. Through repeated and accumulative experiences of ableism in everyday experiences, disabled people begin to internalize ableist beliefs and can unknowingly perpetuate them (Campbell, 2008). Internalized ableism can look like disliking one’s disabled traits, self-policing and self-disciplining to keep up with a normative expectation, using ableist language, distancing disabled people from each other through comparison of disability types and creating a competition for validation and belonging within the disabled community (Campbell, 2008; Kattari et al., 2018). Internalized ableism has been found to be exhausting for disabled individuals and contributes to devaluing disabled identities (Kattari et al., 2018).

**Emancipation**

Emancipation is a concept that plays an important role in my research approach. It is an active process of naming and discussing dominant and oppressive narratives so that we can actively choose to create and tell a different story (Freire, 1970; McCabe & Holmes, 2009). Because we all live in a society and culture that centers and puts importance on neurotypical experiences and perspectives, even neurodivergent people cannot easily see what makes us feel shame, embarrassment, out of place and oppressed (Rosqvist et al., 2020a). Emancipation is the process of naming and discussing these systems of oppressions so that we understand them. Once we understand what is creating our exclusion, our shame, our fear, our exhaustion, we can feel empowered to create our own meanings and imagine new ways of understanding ourselves and living out our dyslexic identities (Freire, 1970; McCabe & Holmes, 2009). Emancipation is the act of freeing ourselves from something that is controlling and oppressing us. My participants often used words and phrases such as “change,” “if school was different” and “being understood” to describe emancipation. In this case, naming and discussing neurodiversity may offer a way to be aware of the oppressive system of ableism and create new, more empowering, more emancipatory, ways of imagining ourselves and the world around us.
**Neurodiversity**

Neurodiversity is a term coined by Judy Singer, an autistic woman, and increasingly used within autistic and disabled communities. Singer created the term as a call for “a politics of the Neurological Diversity, or ‘Neurodiversity’” (Singer, 1998, p.64) to contribute and add to the feminist, gay liberation and disability movements (Singer, 2017). While Singer writes about the political intentions she envisioned for the term, theorists who use the term neurodiversity today understand it in slightly different ways. Most writers agree that neurodiversity is the fact that neurological diversity naturally exists and includes a broad range of sensory, emotional and cognitive processing experiences (Armstrong, 2015; Chapman, 2020a; Rosqvist et al., 2020a; Singer, 2017; Walker, 2014). Some scholars and activists include the need to respect and highly value this diversity within their definition of neurodiversity (Armstrong, 2017; Griffin & Pollack, 2009) while others leave the addition of value to the neurodiversity paradigm and neurodiversity movement (Walker, 2014). Chapman (2020a), Rosqvist et al. (2020b) as well as Singer (2017) herself anticipate that the term neurodiversity will continue to evolve and fluctuate in meaning as required by the communities who utilize it and thus its usefulness to knowledge production and movement building is its most important contribution. I seek to embrace this fluctuation and believe that the term neurodiversity and the established consensus lends sufficient clarity for my project. I will further clarify and examine the neurodiversity paradigm in my literature review.

**Identity**

The conceptualization of identity shapes, determines and stories people’s lived experiences and understandings of dyslexia within their intersectional landscape. Post modern and constructivist theories of identity help me recognize that identity is a cluster of ever shifting understandings of self and other that contain multiple, complex and contradictory fragments (Grossberg, 1986; McCarthy & Moje, 2002). These understandings are produced through how we relate to ourselves, others, discourses, cultures, history, politics amongst other systems of
difference. Furthermore, how we relate to each of these elements are often linked together by our intersecting realities such as class, disability, race, citizenship, etc. (Grossberg, 1986).

McCarthy and Moje (2002) discuss how different parts of our identities can be internalized unconsciously based on the interactions and beliefs surrounding us while other parts can be conscious and strategically emphasized and deemphasized. Furthermore, while identity fluctuates, it also provides stability and belonging (McCarthy & Moje, 2002). For example, I unconsciously started to identify as a girl because my parents and my culture identified me as one, while I consciously started to identify as queer when I came to understand my pansexuality and desired to include myself in queer communities. Pollack (2005) found that individual beliefs about dyslexia have profound effects on dyslexic people’s sense of identity. Conceptualizing identity in these ways, helps me give space for and embrace contradiction, struggle and complexity in this research topic.

Identity is important to this project for reasons beyond how dyslexics understand themselves. Stuart Hall, an identity theorist, emphasized that the importance of identity is not in where it originates but rather in how it gets articulated in structures of power and practice (as cited in Grossberg, 1986). I think that identity as a concept is significant to this project and particularly at this time within neurodivergent and disabled communities as we shift and struggle with what it means to be ourselves. Furthermore, I think identity is important because of how it influences how institutions, schools and structures of power articulate us and put practices into place for and/or with us. What if dyslexia was identified as a diversity rather than a deficit? Would our diagnosis be presented as a negative or a concern? How would this impact when and how supports are given to us? I believe these institutional understandings directly link identity and lived experience.

1.6 Thesis Content Overview

I have organized this thesis into six chapters. Chapter 1 (Introduction), the current chapter, introduces the research topic, questions, motivations and key concepts. Chapter 2
(Literature Review) opens with an overview of current disability paradigms, including neurodiversity and critiques of each. I then define dyslexia and outline literature that explores dyslexics’ lived experiences and strategies of resistance within the current disability paradigms. Finally, I look at research that explores the neurodiversity paradigm, emancipation and dyslexia. Chapter 3 (Theoretical Framework and Methodology) describes the theoretical frameworks guiding this study which include critical theory, emancipation and intersectionality. I then explain my rationale for choosing a narrative inquiry method informed by participatory action research and a dyslexic methodology. I reflect on my role as the researcher and introduce my research key informant. I summarize study recruitment, data collection, analysis, member checking and ethical dilemmas that arose during the research process. Chapter 4 (Findings) I begin with rich descriptions through narrative portraits of each research participant. I then share themes that formed across all 12 interviews as well as thematic tensions and counternarratives. In Chapter 5 (Discussion and Conclusion), my final chapter, I link findings to current literature; outline implications for research, practice and coalition-building; and share reflexive discoveries through the research process To end this chapter, I explore opportunities for future research, provide conclusive thoughts and summarize the research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter explores literature informed by a neurodiversity paradigm and the lived experiences and perspectives of dyslexic people. I outline current disability paradigms including why neurodivergent scholars and activists are critiquing each. Then, I propose the neurodiversity paradigm as an alternative model for understanding disability. I outline critiques of the neurodiversity paradigm as well as the ways that neurodiversity scholars and activists propose addressing them. Following this, I define dyslexia and explore the lived experiences and strategies of resistance of dyslexic people within the current model of disability. Finally, I explore literature that documents the emancipatory potential of the neurodiversity paradigm for neurodivergent people and for dyslexic people specifically.

2.1 Overview of Current Disability Paradigms

Within the disability sector there are three main paradigms through which to understand disability. They include the medical model, the social model and the rights-based model. In the following section, I define each and discuss why neurodivergent people continue to seek a new paradigm to understand and advocate for their wellbeing.

The medical model (also known as the individual model, deficit model and pathology paradigm), pathologizes disability by understanding it as a defect, dysfunction or disorder that resides in an individual (Dupré, 2012; Haney, 2018; Harpur, 2012; Campbell, 2008; Chapman, 2020b; Seale, 2017; Walker, 2013; Withers, 2012). In order to determine dysfunction, the medical model relies on statistical measures and cultural ideals of independence, economic productivity and sociability (Chapman, 2020b). Within this model, a just and compassionate society invests resources in a cure, change neurological differences medically or through interventions to improve functioning (Dupré, 2012; Harpur, 2018; Campbell, 2008; Chapman, 2020b; Seale, 2017; Withers, 2012). The medical model of disability is the most widely accepted within settler-Canadian society and is relied upon for understanding and supporting neurodivergent individuals (Cameron & Billington, 2015; Withers, 2012).
Neurodivergent critiques of the medical model question and interrogate the objective perspective that the medical model relies upon (Chapman, 2020b; Collinson, 2012). Statistical norms developed to support it are connected to specific societal, cultural and political ideals that cannot be understood as universal (Withers, 2012; Waltz, 2020). Furthermore, neurodivergent and disability studies scholars argue that the medical model upholds the cultural and societal acceptance of stigmatizing and devaluing neurodivergent and disabled people by defining their bodies and/or minds as inherently problematic and inferior (Campbell, 2008; Clare, 2017; Collinson, 2012; Titchkosky, 2007).

The social model understands disability as a social construct, where environmental, social, and cultural conditions disable people. The efforts of disabled activists are the reason that the social model is enacted in institutions to some extent today (Chapman, 2020b). Within this model, disability is not something inherent within an individual’s mind or body but rather develops from the conditions and structures enacted by an ableist organization of society (Banks, 2017; Chapman, 2020b; Pino & Mortari, 2014; Withers, 2012). Within a social model of disability, accommodations are given to disabled people so that they can participate in society and everyday life in an equal way to non-disabled people (Banks, 2017; Pino & Mortari, 2014; Titchkosky, 2007; Withers, 2012). The social model of disability focuses on improving neurotypical social practices and institutions to increase accessibility and inclusion of neurodivergent people (Jurgens, 2020).

A rights-based model of disability supports and legalizes a social model of disability. The rights-based model emerged after the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Disabled people are understood to deserve the same rights as people who are not defined as disabled (Withers, 2012). Scholars argue that the main limitation of the social and rights-based models is that they continue to rely on a statistically determined and mythical norm as the backbone and basis for gaining supports and access (Withers, 2012; Chapman, 2020b; Singer, 2017). This can create an expectation of neurodivergent people to maintain
cultural norms of productivity, participation and independence if given accommodations (Titchkosky, 2007; Yergeau, 2017; Withers, 2012). It also institutionalizes a process of evaluating neurodivergent people in comparison to a statistical norm and then a continued requirement to prove oneself deserving of supports (Griffin & Pollack, 2009; Kattari et al., 2018; Rosqvist et al., 2020a; Seale, 2017).

Although these models of disability have given disabled people grounds to advocate, acquire services that may give them very desirable relief of symptoms, such as pain, and access to accommodations, such as additional time on exams, I would argue, alongside a growing number of academics and disabled self-advocates, that these models fall short of a solution that legitimizes neurodivergent ways of being and centers wellbeing as defined by neurodivergent people (Chapman, 2020b; Griffin & Pollack, 2009; Kattari et al., 2018; Tichkosky, 2007; Withers, 2012).

2.2 Neurodiversity Paradigm

Critical Disability Studies theorists are searching for a model of disability that sheds light on the fundamental problem in creating and maintaining the binary between disabled and a socially and culturally created normal (Barnes, 2010 as cited in Chapman, 2020b; Singer, 1999; Strand, 2017; Walker, 2014; Withers, 2012). Scholars working within a neurodiversity paradigm orient around the goal of opposing and dismantling the medical model of disability and the systemic ableism that it enacts. This opposition is founded in disproving the existence of a neurological norm and the assertion that neurocognitive diversity itself is the norm (Armstrong, 2015; Bumiller, 2008; Chapman, 2020a; 2020c; Rosqvist et al., 2020a; Walker, 2014; Yergeau, 2017). The neurodiversity paradigm understands that there is nothing inherently

---

9 Walker (2014) establishes a distinction between the term neurodiversity, which refers simply to the fact that diversity in human neurology exists, and the neurodiversity paradigm, which provides the philosophical foundation to employing neurodiversity in advocacy and research. I will employ Walker’s distinction between these terms throughout my project and provide a detailed description of how the neurodiversity paradigm is being understood in academic research.
pathological, tragic, negative or unhealthy about neurodivergence (Chapman, 2020b; Haney, 2018; Walker, 2014). Instead, it takes an affirmative approach to neurodivergence and believes that neurological diversity is valuable, leads to creative potential, may be very important to the survival of human beings and at the very least can be viewed as value neutral (Armstrong, 2015; Chapman, 2020b; Singer, 2017; Silberman, 2015; Walker, 2014).

There are two main aspects that are prioritized within neurodiversity paradigm theorizing and research. In the first, scholars are focused on the strengths and contributions of neurodivergent people (Armstrong, 2010; 2015; Salter, 2010; Silberman, 2015). These researchers employ their analysis to argue for a reformed education system, where the strengths of all neurotypes are centered, (Silberman, 2015; Armstrong, 2010) and support for niche construction, where neurodivergent people modify their surroundings to align with their strengths and needs (Armstrong, 2010). The second main aspect of the neurodiversity paradigm seeks to name and highlight systemic ableism and the ways it advantages neurodominant people while marginalizing, disciplining and oppressing neurodivergent people (Chapman, 2020b; 2020c; Rosqvist et al., 2020a; Walker, 2014; Yergeau, 2017). Within this scholarship, the social and power dynamics of ableism are viewed in parallel to and intertwine with the dynamics of racism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and classism (Bumiller, 2008; Walker, 2014; Yergeau; 2017). Theorists argue for a focus on understanding and defining wellbeing by neurodivergent people through prioritizing research done by and for them (Chapman, 2020a; 2020b; Seale, 2017) and recognizing the resistance and disruption of taken-for-granted norms when neurodivergent people intentionally disclose and show their neurodivergence rather than working to perform and conform to neuronormative standards (Rosqvist et al., 2020a; Walker, 2014; Yergeau, 2017). Yergeau (2017) proposes the term neuroqueering to describe this disruption and argues that neurodivergent people are subverting multiple systems of normalcy through their daily acts of exposing neurodivergence, such as stimming. A neurodiversity paradigm has the potential for emancipation as it interrogates the power relations and social
structure maintained by disability as a category, attempts to confront ableism and unveils a new way of approaching and embracing human diversity.

Scholarship that critiques the neurodiversity paradigm focuses on service allocation and group membership. Some parents of autistic people with significant support needs (sometimes identified as nonspeaking or nonverbal) argue that their children need a cure and fear that a shift towards a neurodiversity paradigm would restrict people's ability to access needed services (Runswick-Cole, 2014; Russell, 2020). Nonspeaking autistic people themselves, however, are increasingly accessing and supporting a neurodiversity paradigm when given sufficient communication supports (Russell, 2020; Savarese, 2010). Opposing cures and interventions that neurodivergent people deem damaging and futile, the neurodiversity paradigm seeks to support wellbeing, interventions and supports that neurodivergent people themselves identify and/or want (Chapman, 2020b; Seale, 2017). Another critique is that the neurodiversity paradigm reinstates a binary between ‘neurodivergent’ and ‘neurotypical’, which continues to ‘other’ disabled people and create group membership based on medical diagnoses (Runswick-Cole, 2014; Russell, 2020). Within the neurodiversity paradigm however, neurotypical people are considered part of the neurodiversity inherent in the human population. Neurodivergent scholars understand neurotypes, such as ‘autistic’ or ‘dyslexic,’ as cultural identities that both allow for useful collective understanding, gathering and resistance, and the dangerous potential to reduce people's complexity to these neurotypes (Chapman, 2020b; Singer, 2017; Walker & Raymaker, 2021). Scholars affirm that group membership should not be limited to medical definitions and diagnoses, and that research and movements need to recognize and value the complexity of individual members (Chapman, 2020b; Walker & Raymaker, 2021).

Based on this literature review of the neurodiversity paradigm, it seems that many scholars and activists are aware of these critiques and making efforts to reduce and shift their impact (Chapman, 2020c; Kapp et al., 2013; Rosqvist et al., 2020a; Walker & Raymaker, 2021). Like neurodivergent scholars and activists, I continue to believe in the usefulness and
emancipatory potential of the neurodiversity paradigm while acknowledging that this struggle and search for solutions is complex, intersectional and multifaceted.

2.3 Dyslexia

Definitions of dyslexia change based on context; societal and cultural expectations; department and language of study; and point in history (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Carter & Sellman, 2013; Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010). Through the dominant and medical lens, dyslexia is widely defined as a cognitive or neurological deficiency that is associated with persistent difficulties with reading, spelling, short-term/working memory, and day-to-day organization (Armstrong, 2010; Carter & Sellman, 2013; Everatt, 1997; Nicolson & Fawcett, 2008 as cited in Cameron & Billinton, 2015; Palmer, 2000). Definitions of dyslexia that align with a neurodiversity paradigm can be found in spheres that utilize a critical and strengths-based perspective. Through this perspective dyslexia is defined by heightened abilities in three dimensional, visual spatial and visual perceptual thinking; interconnected, novel, innovative and dynamic reasoning; as well as narrative and holistic thinking alongside commonly defined deficits (Armstrong, 2010; Eide & Eide, 2011). Granger (2010), a dyslexic scholar, describes dyslexic thinking in the following: “I see ideas taking the shapes of webs, marble sculptures, jigsaw puzzles, and Rubik’s Cubes that are always evolving in their own contexts” (section: New Coloring to Reality).

Critical scholars define dyslexia as a person’s failure to meet socially constructed expectations of timelines, literacy and communication, which are embedded in a broader social and cultural context (Cosenza, 2017; Collinson & Penketh, 2010; Granger, 2010; Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010). The impact of this context is evident as systemic structures converge and determine who is diagnosed as neurologically disabled, what supports they can access, if and what expectations of success are present and whether or not and for how long they are segregated in special education classrooms (Annamma et al., 2013; Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010; Inman, 2019; Iqtadar & Ellison, 2020; Kapp, 2011). For example, learning disabled students of
color are overrepresented and remain in special education classrooms for longer when compared to their white peers (Annamma et al., 2013; Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010). Additionally, people from working-class families struggle to access a diagnosis and believe dyslexia limited their ability to attend college or university education (MacDonald & Deacon, 2019). The multiple definitions of dyslexia across various contexts of scholarship assert that it is a contested term with differing definitions that are dependent on context, political aims, power structures and time in history (Broderick & Leonardo, 2013; Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010). This fluid and dynamic understanding of dyslexia lends itself to multiple narratives of dyslexia, school and learning.

**Dyslexic Narratives of Self and Resistance**

Literature within the field of social work, learning disabilities, education and DisCrit (Disability Studies and Critical Race Studies) has well documented the self-perceptions and self-understandings of dyslexics. Common themes are internalized feelings of shame, pain, and depression; experiences of microaggressions, stigma and bullying; fears of disclosure and internalized negative assumptions and stereotypes (Banks, 2017; Cameron & Billington, 2015; Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2019; Iqtadar & Ellison, 2020; Nalavany et al., 2011; Pino & Mortari, 2014). Dyslexia is associated with poor self-esteem and self-concept which develops through attributing successes to outside factors, such as good teaching, and not to internal factors such as capability; interpreting that one’s achievements will never compare to one’s peers; and learning that one’s intentions or efforts do not predict results (Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2019; Glazzard & Dale, 2013). Low self-esteem and negative self-concepts that develop in childhood have been documented to continue to impact people into adulthood (Cameron & Billington, 2015; Glazzard & Dale, 2013).

Studies also demonstrate that dyslexic people experience themselves and perceive themselves to be morally questionable in the absence of a diagnosis. Studies document that dyslexics desire a diagnosis to prove that they are not lazy, time wasters, or stupid (Cameron & Billington, 2015; Collinson & Penketh, 2010; Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Nalavany et al., 2011).
Research argues the need to prove oneself develops through the societal norm that intelligence is equivalent to high levels of literacy and speed and is augmented with the presence of additional marginalized identities (Banks, 2017; Cameron & Billington, 2015; Collinson & Penketh, 2010; Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010; Robinson, 2017). Frustration, anger, depression and stress are associated with the constant need to prove oneself, diminish or emphasize deficits depending on the context, advocate for necessary accommodations and supports and navigate systems when self-advocacy is misunderstood as disobedient or threatening (Banks, 2017; Cameron & Billington, 2015; Granger, 2010; Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010; Nalavany et al., 2011).

Although research literature has clearly demonstrated the dominant personal narrative of dyslexia and its negative impacts on employment, education, social life, self-esteem and self-concept, the medical model of disability continues to persist in schools and society today. Furthermore, although dyslexic people describe negative experiences, low self-esteem and self-perception, they also regularly assert that they see dyslexia as a positive personal characteristic and do not desire a cure (Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2019; Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010).

In spite of societal, systemic, and internalized ableism, research has documented the many ways that dyslexic people resist and find place within ableist societies and systems. One such strategy of resistance found in the literature is developing strategies to avoid, control one’s environment and learn to perform based on the context. Diverse strategies such as sitting at the back of the class to avoid the shame of other students seeing one’s work; sitting under tables to help with focus; developing a quiet demeanor while not contributing to class discussion are examples of how dyslexic people have managed their learning and work environments (Bacon & Bennett, 2013; Glazzard & Dale, 2013; Leveroy, 2013). Iqtadar & Ellison (2020) who looked at 13 qualitative studies that documented the experiences of learning disabled students of color, found that students became acutely aware of the performance required of them based on the context. Participants described these performances as acting white, staying quiet, hiding their disability label and avoiding structural aggression (Iqtadar & Ellison, 2020). Critical dyslexic
scholars describe pressure to maintain the performance of a ‘good student’ in order to succeed (Cosenza, 2017; Granger, 2010). This research emphasizes the work that dyslexic people undertake to succeed and gain access; appear neurologically closer to societal norms; and avoid stigma and aggression.

Dyslexic people are known to sacrifice mental and social well-being to compensate for the extra time and effort certain tasks require as well as the energy needed to self-advocate and demand accommodations (Brante, 2013; Cosenza, 2014c; Granger, 2010; Iqtadar & Ellison, 2020; Seale, 2017; Shaywitz, 2003). Granger (2010) describes disciplining her body with lack of sleep and food to compensate for her “broken brain” (para. Bodies Our Theories Need). Dyslexic people normalize a strict work ethic to keep up and often spend long hours studying to compensate for their challenges (Brante, 2013; Miles & Varma, 1995 as cited in Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010; Shaywitz, 2003). In addition, studies document that teachers and administrators often question the validity of a dyslexia diagnosis and the fairness of giving accommodations to dyslexic students (Banks, 2017; Cosenza, 2010; Iqtadar & Ellison, 2020; Seale, 2017). Cosenza (2010) reflects that her everyday displays of dyslexia are often “minimized, misunderstood or simply unrecognized” (p.7). These studies articulate that dyslexic people often engage in invisible labour, effort and stress in order to resist stigma and marginalization.

Creating personal definitions and pathways of success that are outside ableist expectations and norms is another way dyslexic people resist and find success within ableist systems (Nalavany et al., 2011; Eide & Eide, 2011). Dyslexics become self-aware by getting to know their strengths and challenges and incorporating this knowledge into their plans (Leveroy, 2013; Nalavany et al., 2011). Self-awareness allows dyslexic people to predict when and how their challenges may impede them as well as prepare and strategize to use strengths to create successful environments for themselves. Persistence, determination, intuition, big picture processing, mechanical and spatial reasoning, and identifying patterns in complex and constantly shifting systems are documented strengths that dyslexics use to navigate their lives
An example of this tendency is research that finds dyslexic people are 2-3 times more likely to be entrepreneurs than non-dyslexics (Logan, 2008). Defining one’s own version of success is one way in which dyslexic individuals find a place within a society that continues to marginalize them.

Finally, literature articulates how dyslexic people resist the individualization of their challenges by critiquing the school system. Participants critiqued that they were punished rather than taught, expressed dissatisfaction with teaching and instructional abilities of their instructors and the need for further staff training (Banks, 2017; Pino & Mortari, 2014; Robinson, 2017). These critiques focus on systemic issues and limitations rather than on individual participant’s inability to fulfill educational norms and expectations.

Although some narratives find the creative ways that dyslexic people have used to carve out strategies to thrive inspiring, it is important to acknowledge that these practices are driven by unmet needs of dyslexic individuals. Cosenza (2014b) suggests the term educational disciplining as the process of evaluation, diagnosis, intervention, management, treatment and rehabilitation that produces a normative way of seeing and understanding the world. If seen within the cultural and societal context, dyslexic narratives of self and resistance found in the literature describe the lived impacts of educational disciplining. Within these systems, certain bodies thrive while others experience and internalize stigma and oppression (Annamma et al., 2013; Broderick & Leonardo, 2013; Cosenza, 2014b; Granger, 2010).

2.4 Emancipation, the Neurodiversity Paradigm and Dyslexia

The neurodiversity paradigm has been proposed within theoretical articles as well as in preliminary research studies as an alternative to a deficit focused model of disability (Armstrong, 2010; Bascom, 2012; Kapp, 2020; Rosqvist et al., 2020a; 2020b). Multiple academics have advocated for the application of a neurodiversity paradigm to various fields including education, social work and business management (Armstrong, 2017; Griffin & Pollack, 2009; Haney, 2018; Sumner & Brown, 2015; Muskat, 2017). Theoretical investigations further
propose that a neurodiversity paradigm would encourage a focus on services in education and human resources as well as building capacity and supporting people to discover environments, relationships and structures that allow them to thrive (Armstrong, 2017; Chapman, 2020c; Rosqvist et al., 2020a; Russell, 2020; Sumner & Brown, 2015).

Studies that specifically explore the emancipatory potential of the neurodiversity paradigm and dyslexia are few. In a study that interviewed learning disabled people about their preference between a neurodiversity paradigm and the medical model, Griffin & Pollack (2009) found that half of the participants preferred a neurodiversity understanding. Greater career ambitions and academic self-esteem was associated with participants who preferred a neurodiversity paradigm (Griffin & Pollack, 2009). In a case study, researchers investigated the impact of a neurodiversity paradigm on speech language pathologists and the supports encouraged in a 4th Grade class (Rappolt-Schlichtmann et al., 2018). Both quantitative and qualitative results from this study indicated a significant impact of a neurodiversity paradigm in which teachers saw the ability of dyslexic students and dyslexic students demonstrated increased attentiveness and engagement (Rappolt-Schlichtmann et al., 2018). Similarly, Fitzwater’s (2017) theoretical paper that examined dyslexia in art school argued that a combination of the neurodiversity paradigm and Universal Design for Learning had the potential to reduce the stigma and significantly change the political, social and existential aims of art education and assessment. Finally, in an ethnographic study that included three participants, one with dyslexia, practical applications of a neurodiversity paradigm for dyslexics were suggested such as making printed work worth the effort, ensuring interesting content is prioritized above literacy, co-creating accommodations with students who know their needs best and communicating strengths and advantages of dyslexia alongside challenges (Rentenbach et al., 2017).

Overall, these theoretical and qualitative studies begin to demonstrate that a neurodiversity paradigm can result in intentionally supporting the values, identities, self-
concepts, strengths, and capacity of dyslexic people. They also begin to disrupt and question present day systemic practices that maintain a socially and culturally produced norm that dyslexic individuals, among other neurotypes, experience as oppressive. Research that seeks the perspectives of dyslexic people directly about the neurodiversity paradigm and that center an intersectional approach have not taken place. This investigation ventures to fill this gap by seeking and documenting the perspectives, thoughts and imaginings of 12 self-identified dyslexic adults on the neurodiversity paradigm.
Chapter 3: Epistemology and Research Methods

This chapter maps the epistemology, methodology and research methods used during this study. I begin by describing critical theory as my epistemology, and emancipation and intersectional analysis as informing theoretical frameworks. I share my qualitative methodology that centered narrative inquiry while being informed by participatory action research (PAR) and dyslexic methodology. Following this, I discuss the literature and critical reflexivity that informed my role as the researcher and my choice to add a research informant to the project. In the second half of the chapter, I guide the reader through the research process including ethics approval, participant recruitment, data collection and analysis. Throughout the chapter, I examine issues and questions that arose and the justification for decisions and actions taken during the project.

3.1 Epistemology and Theoretical Frameworks

A critical theory paradigm that incorporated theoretical frameworks of emancipation and intersectionality was used in this study; the theoretical frameworks were specifically informed by the scholars discussed in this section. A critical theory paradigm promoting transformation, emancipation, and critique was employed as it is the most strongly supported research paradigm in critical disability studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Emancipatory research seeks to end the historical practice of doing research on disabled people, without acknowledging their power, resistance and expertise, and looks to do research with disabled people (Hawkins, 2015; McCabe & Holmes, 2009). This practice is an attempt to increase disabled people’s power in the academic conversation and shift focus to validate them as possessors of valuable knowledge (Hawkins, 2015; McCabe & Holmes, 2009). Emancipation tries to uncover and name the dominant narratives in participants’ experience and initiate new ways of thinking that facilitate healing and empowerment (Freire, 1970; McCabe & Holmes, 2009). In emancipatory research, political reclaiming of identity and voice is a core value. In this research project, I endeavored to create an emancipatory and empowering learning process for study participants.
that revealed dominant disability narratives and gave agency to participants to critique and reauthor their stories.

Intersectional analysis further informed this research project in three specific ways. First, it allowed this project to be mindful of the social construction of disability as a category (Collins, 2015). Historically, the category of disability has changed based on those in power and those attempting to maintain power (Harpur, 2012; Campbell, 2008; Withers, 2012). Through this framework, the creation and maintenance of disability as a category goes hand-in-hand with maintaining the power associated with categories of normal neurological thinking, learning, and processing as well as other normalizing structures of power such as heteronormativity and white supremacy (Harpur, 2012; Kattari et al., 2018; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Withers, 2012).

Fundamentally, this research project attempted to deconstruct the dominant narratives that underpin the binary between disabled and neurologically normal by offering neurodiversity as an alternative. Secondly, an intra-categorical approach was used in recruitment and analysis (Christensen & Jensen, 2012). Throughout my analysis and writing, an intersectional framework was employed to make visible the social realities that impact participants’ narratives, realities of both marginalization and privilege (Collins, 2015). Finally, the potential for coalition-building amongst neurodivergent sub-groups working towards systemic change further integrated intersectionality (Collins, 2015; Strand, 2017). This project can be understood as an investigation into whether a neurodiversity paradigm of understanding dyslexia resonates with the dyslexic community, how it might impact their lives, and the possibility of building coalitions between autistic and dyslexic community organizers working to confront ableism with a neurodiversity paradigm.

In employing a critical paradigm through an emancipatory research process and an intersectional analysis, this project makes visible dominant narratives of ableism and the structures of oppression that intersect with it, initiates new ways of thinking that can facilitate
healing and empowerment for dyslexic people, and offers the potential for coalition-building among disabled communities and the professionals who support them.

### 3.2 Research Methodology

A qualitative methodology was best suited for the exploratory nature of this project. Qualitative research centers the agency and expertise of research participants by eliciting deep reflection about participants’ experiences, perspectives, and meaning making (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fraser, 2004; Harpur, 2012). Deep reflection was important in trying to understand participants’ imagined impact of a neurodiversity paradigm. In addition, a qualitative methodology centers the voices of participants, which is most important in studying disabled people, as they ask for more agency, autonomy and voice in the decisions, services and research being created for and about them (McCabe & Holmes, 2009). To facilitate the research, I combined narrative inquiry, the guiding principles of PAR and a dyslexic methodology.

**Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry believes that we organize our life experiences into narratives to help us understand and make meaning of our experience (Kim, 2016). Research has demonstrated that some dyslexic people have strengths in *narrative reasoning* in which they remember and conceive of ideas through experiences, examples and enactments (Eide & Eide, 2011). This research demonstrates that some dyslexic people also use narrative reasoning to imagine the future by reassembling fragments of stored experiences (Eide & Eide, 2011). I chose narrative inquiry to make use of these dyslexic strengths and increase accessibility for my participants, myself during the analysis and writing process as well as for dyslexic readers. I used Jirek’s (2017) definition of narrative to guide my understanding which is, “an interactive process of storytelling, shaped by the immediate audience(s) and the broader social discourses, resulting in the production of co-constructed accounts which have sequence and consequence” (p. 170). This definition invites multiple layers of spoken and unspoken identities, histories, assumptions and
meanings coming together to form an imagined neurodiversity-informed future (Jirek, 2017; Riessman, 2008).

**Participatory Action Research (PAR)**

PAR and emancipation were core values in my research process. PAR focuses on problem solving and education to address social issues and injustices (Hawkins, 2015). In PAR, critical reflexivity and social criticism are understood as key research tools that can lead to transformation and emancipation for research participants (Hawkins, 2015). I sought to create an emancipatory learning process, described by Freire (1970), where participants gained power through transparent education about the research process, dominant narratives of disability and the proposition of the neurodiversity paradigm as an alternative. PAR was also enacted in the research design by inviting many dyslexic people to inform it. In addition to being a dyslexic researcher, a dyslexic key informant participated in all parts of the project following the proposal, and all study participants self-identified as dyslexic. Participants were given information about the research process and its political aims prior to interviews, invited to give feedback on the findings and discussion, and will be invited to guide knowledge mobilization plans upon completion of this thesis.

While PAR and emancipation were core values of my research process, they also increased its complexity and could not be fully enacted. The imbalanced power dynamics present between participants and myself was a limitation. This imbalance included: my in-depth understanding of the research process and ability to personally benefit from the research by acquiring a degree, the reality that many marginalized groups do not have time to fully engage in a research study as a result of immediate needs, and the inability for me to ensure that the study benefitted the participants (Bennet, 2019). In reflecting on these complexities, I still believe that centering this research around PAR and emancipation was advantageous in their ability to hold me, as the researcher, accountable to the power processes active in the research and to center the multiple experiences and perspectives of dyslexic people in the design and findings.
**Dyslexic Methodology**

A dyslexic methodology was an invitation to visibilize my dyslexic ways of knowing, reading, processing, and writing while destabilizing normative knowledge production, writing, reading and sensemaking during the project (Cosenza, 2014a). Dyslexic methodology reflects and legitimizes dyslexic tendencies to think holistically and to experience multiple readings of the same text, inviting a “reclaiming of what has been deemed ‘wrong,’ ...[and] an effort to expand what is perceived as ‘right,’ accepting that not all symbols mean the same thing to everyone” (Cosenza, 2014a, p. 1199). Creative usage of grammar, capital letters, symbols and alignment; creative and performative writing; mixing writing modalities through collage; and leaving misspellings and new words (also known as Bushisms) in academic texts have all been used within dyslexic methodology (Cosenza, 2010; 2014a; 2014; 2014c; Granger, 2010).

Cosenza (2014a) and Granger (2010) argue that dyslexics are able to see new possibilities because we have been disciplined into knowing that our own ways of knowing are “wrong.” A by-product of this is the uncovering of what has been normalized. Throughout my research process, reminders of my non-normative practices came in the form of comments from friends, such as: “what is this mad science?” and “why do you work this way?” upon seeing my workspace sprawling with visual and tactile paper configurations filled with mind maps, arrows, quotes, doodles and color coding, such as what you see in Figure 1. Visibilizing dyslexic processes and practices in this thesis aligns with multiple crip theorists calling for disabled people to embrace their “brilliant imperfection” (Clare, 2017, p.xvii) and to “move towards the ugly...undesirable, unwanted, disposable, hidden, displaced” (Mingus, 2011, para. 32). Taking up this call to action, I chose to make visible the creative struggle that was inherent in thesis production. I chose to do this through including narratives and creative text; naming accessibility-related choices; and including images, pictures and figures in the text. This project grows out of the supports and learning opportunities the academic experience affords me as well as the struggle and resistance that accompanies it.
The combination of narrative, PAR and dyslexic methodologies easily incorporated a critical epistemology by validating multiple truths and readings; ensuring that participant voices remained salient in final results; and centring the historical, societal, and political context of ableism and normalizing practices throughout, including the writing process (Collins, 2015; Cosenza, 2014a; Fraser, 2004; Jirek, 2017; McCabe & Holmes, 2009; Reissman, 2008; Riessman & Quinney, 2005). These methodologies challenged me, as the researcher, to prioritize participants’ agency, voice and construction of meaning, which inherently resisted ableist tendencies to make meaning for disabled people by those with high academic achievement (Fraser, 2004; Harpur, 2012; Kattari et al., 2018; Strand, 2017; Withers, 2012). Furthermore, it challenged me to critically reflect and challenge my own disciplining practices and visibilize my dyslexic ways of knowing, processing and creating research. In using these
three methodologies in conjunction, my goal was to create a complex, intersectional, layered and dynamic (Kim, 2016) portrayal of the current reality and path towards emancipation as co-created by a dyslexic researcher, dyslexic key informant and dyslexic participants.

3.3 Role of the Researcher

Narrative inquiry theory invites the investigator in as an active participant to the research process, encouraging the researcher to write themselves into the project, to make visible their influence and presence (Reismann, 2008). By using narrative inquiry practices as a trajectory for data collection, analysis, and report development, my subjective position and the co-exploration and co-construction of meaning and narrative was assumed and incorporated into my study design.

As the principal researcher, awareness of my own perspective, biases, power, and privileges felt important to ensuring that a shared inquiry with participants took place. To develop my awareness, I began this study by creating a timeline following the methods I used with participants. This process built my mindfulness of my own narrative of dyslexia and the impact of a neurodiversity paradigm on me prior to beginning interviews. In addition, I reflected throughout the project on my privileges of accessing university resources and participating in a master’s level degree. Although significant stress has marked my educational career in order to participate as a dyslexic student, the fact that I am in a master’s degree and completing this project at all is a demonstration of privilege and access that I do not take for granted. It felt important to make these specific privileges visible in an education system where dyslexic people continue to experience barriers, stigmatization and marginalization (Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010; Nalavany et al., 2011; Pino & Mortari, 2014).

Being the only person present for all aspects of the research (study design, data collection, analysis, and mobilization), the process of inquiry was mediated through me. My contribution included the questions asked and interpretation of the narrative provided, while participant’s contributions formed the narrative content and context shared (Fraser, 2004;
Riessman & Quinney, 2005). Furthermore, my identity and the assumptions that my identity solicited played an active role in the ways that participants and I related to one another (Riessman, 2008; Rodriguez-Doran & Jacobs, 2020).

I incorporated reflexive and bracketing practices to increase my self-awareness and limit the influence of my perspective on the research process throughout the study. I did this by journaling about my reactions, interpretations and reflections following each interview. During this bracketing practice, I engaged with Onwuegbuzie et al.’s (2010) debriefing questions as a guideline. Secondly, I completed one close reading of each transcript focusing on my influence on the interview and co-constructed narrative. Building reflexive practices into the study design invited me to reflect on my role as the researcher, and the power and influence of research participants. This was integral to ensuring the complex and layered narratives, perspectives, and dyslexic ways of knowing of each study participant were present in research findings.

3.4 Adding a Key Informant

When I first arrived in Kitchener to start my degree, my sister Annette invited me out with her friends. As I was sharing with one about school and research, this icy defensiveness descended over our conversation. Her friend told me about how excluded from university she felt and how she would never go. Quickly other people chimed in with agreement. I realized that university was not a comfortable, casual conversation topic, it held the weight of injustice and struggle. As the night went on, I reflected on how diverse the experiences of dyslexic people were and how a university sample would never share the story I was looking to uncover and explore.

A few months later, when I learned about PAR and the possibility of including community members more fully, I decided to invite Annette into this research journey. Unlike my dyslexia, which went undiagnosed until my undergraduate degree, Annette’s was diagnosed in elementary school. School, schoolwork and homework were challenging experiences marked by shame, exclusion, resistance and struggle for my sister. When I asked her about being my key informant, she was enthusiastic, she felt strongly that research and advocacy about dyslexia is
needed, had heard the challenging stories of other neurodivergent people in her work as a hairstylist and she was curious and excited to have a glimpse into the world and work of university. Over the past three years, we have spent many moments together laughing at my jargon-soaked vocabulary, sharing about our dyslexic experiences, pulling apart words to create an accessible interview guide, reflecting on the complexity and nuance of interview transcripts and discussing the key findings of the project. Annette has ridden along on this research journey with me. Not only has she brought an important perspective to this work and influenced study findings. She has also provided access to this work for me. Being able to externalize my thoughts with her and bounce ideas around with her have been essential accommodations for me.

3.5 Ethics and Recruitment

The study received approval from the Research Ethics Board of Wilfrid Laurier University on November 12, 2019 (REB#6291) (Appendix B). I began participant recruitment just as November winter winds began to blow through the extra-large timeline paper poking out of my bag. Annette and I drove around in her small red Fiat displaying recruitment posters (Appendix D) throughout Wilfrid Laurier University Waterloo and Kitchener Campuses, Voila Institute for Hair Design and Gina’s College for Advanced Aesthetics. I used posters, flyers, social media posts and announcements to help with recruitment. I intentionally put recruitment materials in diverse spaces, such as the Rainbow Centre and the Student Equity, Diversity and Inclusion offices. During December, I received inquiries from university students and began interviews. Committed to a diverse group of participants who had experience in “workplace,” “college” and “university” education streams (Waterloo Region District School Board, 2016), I reached out to local organizations that support adult learners with reading and continued education. With the help of a few dedicated and passionate staff, who spoke with their students about my project and welcomed me to speak, I concluded data collection with a convenience sample of 12 diverse participants. (For a rich description of all the study participants, please see the portraits section of the findings chapter.)
Interested participants were asked to email or text a study account. Study criteria included being between the ages of 18 and 30, living in the Kitchener-Waterloo area and self-identifying as dyslexic. I contacted interested participants for a short phone or in-person pre-screening interview during which I asked and shared the following information:

- study criteria
- accessibility needs and ways that I could make the study comfortable and convenient for participants
- a brief introduction to narrative analysis, the research process, study confidentiality, compensation, and time commitment required

This initial phone interview was modelled after Skop’s (2016) screening process. I hoped that spending time explaining the narrative inquiry process and the political aims of the project increased participants’ knowledge and power during research interviews (Martin, 1998, as cited in Riessman & Quinney, 2005).

For the purposes of the study, identifying as dyslexic could be medically diagnosed or self-identified to account for the structural and cultural systems that can create barriers to or discourage people from attaining a medical diagnosis. I asked questions about the practical impact of dyslexia during the initial screening interview (see Appendix E for screening interview guide) to ensure that a common identity was present amongst research participants. There were a few instances where potential participants, who did not have a formal diagnosis of dyslexia, looked to me to decide whether they qualified as dyslexic based on information they shared about their experience. In these instances, I encouraged and empowered potential participants to decide for themselves whether they identified with the description that I shared. One person decided that they did not and chose not to participate. The choice to take an empowering stance that honored how potential participants made sense of and described their own experience felt the most aligned with my study principles and values.
3.6 Data Collection

Data Collection took place throughout the winter of 2019-2020 in small confidential library study rooms scattered throughout Kitchener-Waterloo. Participants chose locations that were most convenient for them, and I researched and booked spaces to meet. I met all the participants in library rooms except for 3 participants from a local continuing education program who preferred I come to their program location. Just as I scheduled two days of interviews there, the Grand River Transit (GRT) went on strike, stopping all bus services. The GRT strike created added struggles for participants and for me to attend interviews. In one situation when a participant would have been required to walk for an hour in -18°C weather to participate in an interview, I decided to offer him a ride.

Interviews followed a narrative inquiry process while incorporating elements of PAR. After discussing and signing informed consent forms, I began audio recording with the acknowledgement of participants. I offered the following flexible structure during interviews which was adapted from Jirek’s (2017) process (see Appendix F for full interview guide):

1. an overview of the interviewee’s life story and major life events with an overt valuing of intersecting experiences
2. questions regarding the interviewee’s experience of dyslexia including: the impact of the disability label, experiences of accommodations and ideas of success
3. an introduction to the neurodiversity paradigm that included space for participants to ask questions and form their own understanding of neurodiversity
4. an invitation to imagine how a neurodiversity paradigm may have impacted the participant’s experiences, understandings of self, accommodations received and ideas of success
5. a wrap-up section inviting participants to add topics that felt relevant or important to their narrative and an invitation to complete a short demographic questionnaire that included gender, sexuality, race, age, economic status and spirituality (see Appendix G).
Immediately following the interview, I took in-depth field notes to capture the emotions, body language and context of the interview as well as any reactions, emotions and assumptions that arose in me. I engaged with Onwuegbuzie et al.’s (2010) debriefing questions to deepen my reflexive practice and nurture my critical reflexivity.

As participants shared their narratives, we co-constructed a timeline. Literature demonstrates that the visual of a timeline during interviews encourages participants and researcher to return to different parts of a narrative to clarify and offer additional details about how various narratives are related (Adriansen, 2016; Collinson & Penketh, 2010). I felt that timelines included visual and holistic ways of thinking and knowing which aligned with my dyslexic methodology (Cosenza, 2014a). Through the use of timelines, I hoped to develop transparency in my interpretation and create opportunities for participants to clarify and change their narrative based on feedback from my documentation on the timeline. I invited participants to choose their own timeline colors and to engage with the timeline in any way they desired. When I introduced the neurodiversity paradigm, I switched colors and began documenting how they envisioned their story differently on the opposite side of the drawn line. Most participants used the timeline as a reference, returning to various parts of their story as narratives emerged; some contributed to the narrative described on the timeline, including one participant who drew most of the timeline while I listened; a couple of times the timeline was used as a memory aid; and many participants chose to doodle and draw on the timeline as I documented their narrative.

Aligned with narrative inquiry approaches, I thought of the interview as a co-construction of narrative and meaning between myself and the participant (Fraser, 2004; McCabe & Holmes, 2009; Riessman, 2008). I expected participants to share long in-depth descriptions and made space for this by asking questions to demonstrate my interest and leaving space for participants to share narratives uninterrupted (Riessman, 2008). After introducing a neurodiversity paradigm, I ventured to find a balance between challenging the dominant
narratives and assumptions participants shared and giving space for participants to formulate their own vision and understanding of a neurodiversity paradigm (McCabe & Holmes, 2009). This balance required me to be reflexive during the interview process and to give up control of the interview, a common experience for narrative researchers (Riessman, 2008). Centering my goal of uncovering an intersectional, complex plurality of truths helped me find this balance (Fraser, 2004).

Finally, during interviews I openly discussed accommodations and accessibility with participants in an attempt to reduce stress and center dyslexic ways of knowing. In a number of instances, participants expressed stress about finding and following directions and requested that I meet them in familiar locations and then walk with them to interview rooms. In others, participants requested that I read the confidentiality agreement aloud or rewrite their information for legibility. I had one participant request that his girlfriend stay for the interview as moral support, which I supported and accommodated through asking her to agree to the confidentiality agreement as well. In another instance, I moved interview locations at the last minute when gender inclusive bathrooms were not available. To accommodate myself, I spoke about my practice of not worrying about spelling mistakes as I wrote on the timeline. I referenced this when several participants expressed concerns over spelling mistakes on the demographic survey. In these instances, I encouraged us to clarify a mutual understanding verbally while not focusing on the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ of spelling. Through these moments, we attempted, although I am sure imperfectly, to put accessibility and honoring ourselves into practice.

3.7 Data Analysis

Transcription started following data collection and just as the COVID-19 pandemic began to impact Kitchener-Waterloo. I transcribed the first interview but quickly learned that this task excessively drew on my weaknesses, so I decided to hire transcriptionists. I had three transcriptionists complete the remaining transcripts throughout spring and summer of 2020. I
requested transcription of my dialogue and the participants’ as well as significant pauses and moments of emotional expression. Including these features allowed me to better understand and contemplate the nuance of our co-constructed narrative during analysis, the meaning a participant gave to a narrative and why they were choosing to share it in the context of the research study (Riessman, 2008). Names were replaced with pseudonyms chosen by each participant and identifying information, such as school names, were deidentified in the transcripts. Checking transcripts for accuracy took place over multiple starts and stops of the recording to make space for my slow reading speed and I familiarized myself with the interviews by listening to the recordings. This was faster for me than reading and gave me a more nuanced understanding than my screen reader could offer.

I used Riessman’s (2008) dialogic/performance analysis to uncover and focus on the systemic processes underlying participants’ narratives and how they imagined these processes changing in a neurodiversity paradigm to guide my data analysis. Riessman (2008) writes, “stories are social artifacts telling us as much about society and culture as they do about a person or group” (p. 106). To consider the various levels of storying, I listened and coded the transcripts with the following 4 close readings: (1) my impact on the co-constructive process; (2) dyslexia as deficit; (3) dyslexia as neurodivergence; and (4) intersecting influences, identities and understandings. I spent time reflecting on who participants were directing their stories to and for what purpose they were sharing the narratives they were sharing; these questions helped me consider the meaning behind the narratives and the social and cultural practices they were storying and/or trying to re-story (Riessman, 2008). Intersectional analysis took place as I reflected on my own identity markers during the first reading as well as those of participants and the influence of external systems of power during the last reading (Christensen & Jensen, 2012; Collins, 2015). I considered intersectionality during analysis both when participants named and spoke directly about their intersecting identities as well as when underlying social
and cultural systems of power influenced their narratives (Christensen & Jensen, 2012; Collins, 2015).

To organize my analysis, I adapted Bree & Gallagher’s (2016) Microsoft coding system. Instead of coding phrases and segmented text, I coded entire narratives and gave them each a title based on my interpreted meaning, such as “this looks like a dog’s breakfast” or “talk to me about neurodiversity” (Riessman, 2008). I condensed codes and formed categories using Bree & Gallagher’s (2016) method, which allowed me to return to specific places in transcripts easily during the writing process. In the final phase of data analysis, I printed condensed, color-coded codes and further formulated themes that held meaning for the participants as a group and counternarratives to these themes (see Figure 2). Working with printed versions of the analysis provided a visual, holistic and tactile experience to data analysis, which I understood as part of my dyslexic approach.

*Figure 2. Data Analysis*
Annette read 5 transcripts that represented a range of participant demographics. Over tea on my porch, to maintain pandemic social distancing, Annette shared what stood out to her in each narrative while I furiously took notes. I then returned to data analysis to incorporate her reflections. This validated my emerging themes and developed new themes or reframed existing themes. When her reflections were not represented across narratives, I incorporated them into the portraits or counternarratives presented. One example of Annette’s impact was her reflection that many participants experienced exclusion from their peer groups and/or complex social lives. Following this conversation, the subtheme of peers impacting the inscription of ableism was developed.

After looking at themes and counternarratives across participant narratives, I returned to individual transcripts and timelines to write rich portraits of each participant. Participant portraits aimed to create a space where individual participants are visible and knowable to readers (Rodriguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020). I understood the portrait writing process as a negotiation between how participants saw themselves and their identity in relation to me, the listener (Rodriguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020). Returning to the timelines in constructing the portraits was a way for me to validate what participants had identified as critical to their narratives during their interview. Annette reviewed the portraits corresponding to the transcripts she read and gave me feedback. She specifically requested that more practical details and strategies be highlighted to offer useful tools to dyslexic readers. Returning to each participant’s narrative after data analysis also facilitated a reflexive process for me to consider each participants’ representation in finding themes.

Data analysis came to a close with a virtual member checking meeting. All participants were invited to attend by the contact method they identified on their informed consent form. Ten participants requested to be contacted by email while 2 requested to be contacted by phone. Five participants chose to attend the meeting. I provided each participant with a copy of their portrait, quotes used in the final thesis if requested and the virtual meeting informed consent
form (Appendix H) prior to the meeting. I invited participants to make edits and changes to their portrait to reflect their understanding of their own narrative. To begin the meeting, I summarized the informed consent form and received verbal or typed consent from everyone. All participants chose to keep their video off and participated by unmuting or typing into the chat. First, I shared the research objectives, an overview of participant demographics and a brief explanation of a member checking meeting. Following this, I reviewed major study findings organized in five sections: centrality of intersectionality; lived experiences of ableism; lived experiences of hope, help and resistance; imagined impact of the neurodiversity paradigm; and anti-ableist practices. After each section I paused and invited participant feedback and reflections with the following questions:

- What are your opinions about the results so far?
- Do they represent your experiences?
- Is anything missing? And would you add anything?

Participants affirmed when findings represented their experiences and gave feedback, clarification and expansion to study findings. Following the member checking meeting, I incorporated the feedback participants provided into the findings and discussion chapters. The member checking meeting increased the trustworthiness and validity of study findings and provided opportunities for participants to take co-ownership of the project (Fraser, 2004; Hawkins, 2015; McCabe & Holmes, 2009; Riessman & Quinney, 2005).

This chapter discussed the epistemology, methodology and research methods used in this research study. It reviewed and described the research process undertaken to complete this study. By employing the methods outlined above, I hoped to create a research experience that was meaningful, transformative and emancipatory to the participants and dyslexic community that formed the project.
4.0 Findings

In this chapter, I present study findings. Participant portraits are shared first, allowing each participant to become known to the reader. Next, an introduction to the intersectional analysis is presented. Following this, study themes across interviews are explored, addressing the current disability and neurodiversity paradigms. The intersectional analysis continues to be woven throughout study themes, highlighting the inextricable nature of intersectionality and study themes. All three pieces come together to create a complex, nuanced and intersectional narrative of study findings.

4.1 Participant Portraits

The participant portraits that follow provide a small window into each participant’s life story. Portraits offer space to depict participants’ intersecting identities and their unique experience of dyslexia as well as the relationships and processes that developed between these factors and systems of power. Foreshadowing of study themes can be felt throughout the portraits as experiences are repeated, and nuances revealed. The portraits balance articulating intricate and intersectional lived experiences of each participant and giving rich context to study themes.

Marie

Marie self-identified as a Black, Ghanaian, heterosexual, dyslexic woman in her early twenties. Marie’s story was painted with intricate and creative ways of “scamming” her way through school. Scamming, as she described, began when Marie moved to Canada from Ghana and her teachers assumed that her struggles were due to being a new English language learner. Marie chose not to inform them that English is a national language in Ghana and taught in schools. Marie’s tactics were diverse: distracting her Mom away from spelling practice, being the class joker and exchanging her drawings for completed homework. Marie told me that her goal at the time was not to appear “dumb” or “stupid,” and rather go unnoticed. Marie’s 4th Grade
teacher disguised learning support at recess. Marie even started writing her own magazine. Marie said this was the first time she felt a teacher was working with her.

Marie did well when she knew how to navigate her circumstance. Part way through high school, Marie discovered the field she wanted to pursue and began thinking about high school as something to conquer. She focused on volunteering rather than grades, which gave her a better chance at winning scholarships. At university, Marie struggled to find a school that allowed her to thrive as she faced racism, inaccessibility and mental health struggles. Marie’s third university, a school in a large city where class sizes were small, questions were encouraged and accessible learning supports were easily found, was where Marie thrived.

**Silas**

Silas self-identified as a mixed race (Black, native and white), gay, dyslexic trans man with a Jamaican cultural background. They remembered spending most school days drinking tea with the Child and Youth Worker (CYW) to help them manage the significant stress in their home life. Silas said they struggled to understand what was being taught and needed to exert a lot of energy to complete written assignments. They also shared that they did well with spelling, science and art.

In high school, without the words to describe their learning struggle, Silas insisted and advocated for their learning needs. They completed exams in a separate room and did alternate assignments. Silas told me that they thought their teachers were flexible with them because of their family situation. Silas decided to leave school when they came out as trans because of the bullying and stigmatization they faced. Although this was hard, Silas shared that identifying as trans helped them understand themselves, including their neurodivergence, with increased clarity. At the time of our interview, Silas was working towards completing their high school and desired the financial ability to have a psychoeducational assessment in order to better understand their neurotype.
Qui

Qui self-identified as a Black, Guyanese, heterosexual, dyslexic man in his early twenties. His elementary school experience was sprinkled with failing to meet school expectations. Qui recounted parent-teacher interviews where he was told that he was “lazy,” not demonstrating effort and purposely trying not to listen. Leaving meetings feeling “confused”, “sad” and “hurt,” he would apologize to his Mom but not know why he was apologizing. Qui survived elementary school by keeping school far from his mind the moment the bell rang; he did not know what help to ask for or how to “do school.” Qui noted that his Mom tried to hold him accountable to and help with his homework, however this was a significant challenge while working multiple jobs and supporting his family as a single parent. In high school, Qui looked forward to hands-on learning opportunities, but he continued to be limited by classroom expectations of literacy when hands-on opportunities hinged on reading and writing. School was stressful, overwhelming and frustrating.

Qui told me about his feelings of deception and frustration in high school. After much struggle, Qui finally felt that he saw a pathway forward and spoke with his guidance counsellor about pursuing firefighting. Qui discovered a new barrier to his success when she told him it was too late. Disheartened, he asked himself “Why am I even here?” Qui chose to leave high school with feelings of fear and shame because the story he had been told was, “college or jail.” To his disbelief, when he spoke about his struggles with school, his new colleagues reassured him that he was young and there was lots of time to figure out his future. Qui was in a continuing education program and was in conversations with a local college to pursue firefighting at the time of our interview.

James Martin

James Martin self-identified as a Catholic, African-Canadian, heterosexual man in his late teens who received an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in early grade school for reading, writing, math and other subjects. James Martin described his mind wandering off, not knowing
how to stay focused and the discomfort of staying inactive during school. Although he was with the same peer group, he noticed that he was given different work and segregated in separate rooms sometimes. James Martin said this was difficult and frustrating at first because he did not know why he was being treated differently from his peers. James Martin also shared that it was difficult for his parents, as newcomers, to understand and help him with schoolwork because they were not familiar with the Ontario school system. Over time, he came to trust that his teachers had his best interest in mind and believed that if he took his own learning path and timeline, he and his parents would come to be proud of him. James Martin told me that he believed his family and Catholic faith supported his positive and resilient outlook.

In high school, James Martin maintained a focus on his own pathway to success and found hope even in the face of barriers. He found success in playing football. He failed and struggled with classes but also experienced a feeling of belonging for the first time in a psychology class when his interest paralleled his peers’. James Martin was surprised to learn he could not pursue a university football scholarship because, although encouraged by his parents, he had not been encouraged by his teachers to take the required academic level courses. When facing setbacks, James Martin told me how important it was to him to keep a positive attitude. Inspired by his uncle, James Martin was in a continuing education program and had plans to attend university for business when we spoke.

**Jace**

Jace self-identified as a biracial, heterosexual man in his early twenties who was identified and diagnosed as dyslexic in Grade 4. Jace remarked that some of his earliest memories were because of dyslexia and the “conflict” that would arise with adults. In these situations, he was aware that he was failing to meet expectations, but he did not know how to change or be successful. He was given some accommodations after his diagnosis, but his teachers resisted making it easy and comfortable for him to access them. Gaining access meant leaving class or singling himself out and he felt embarrassed. Internalizing his recurring
experiences of failure and teachers’ descriptions of him as “lazy,” Jace believed he was destined not to succeed in school and saw no reason to put in effort.

In the less intimate environment of high school, Jace got more comfortable with leaving the classroom, accessing supports and self-advocating. He continued to face “tension” from his teachers when he asked and advocated for his accommodations, but now, he sought “back up” from the special education department. When Jace achieved a surprisingly high grade in Grade 11 English, he found momentum and began believing in himself again. Jace found success in the sciences, which he attributed to its kinesthetic and immersive learning environment. Jace was working towards an undergraduate degree at the time of our interview.

**Jonah**

Jonah self-identified as a first generation Filipino, heterosexual, dyslexic man in his early twenties. Jonah spent the first 4 years of his life in the Philippines where he learned the foundations of two languages: Bicolano and Tagalog. Jonah’s Mom was filled with fear when his kindergarten teachers thought he was autistic. She was convinced to stop speaking their ethnic language at home when his teachers suggested it would support his success in English. Jonah found ways to keep up with school and his Mom was reassured repeatedly at parent-teacher interviews that nothing was wrong with Jonah.

When Jonah entered high school, he knew something was different about him. He said that algebra posed the biggest struggle because the numbers would move around on the page. Jonah found a place in music; he excelled in improvisation. He survived by developing elaborate study and memorization strategies to help him with school including adapting the Punnet Square to conceptualize material. He spent long hours studying to find workarounds and complete work. Jonah told me that he never said anything about his struggles because he did not want his Mom to worry, and he always found a way to “muster through.” Jonah reflected on how grateful he was for the hard work of his Mom to offer him opportunities in Canada. He shared
that this and wanting to be good at things was the reason he persevered. Today, Jonah is in university for music and plans to become a speech pathologist.

**Maddy**

Maddy self-identified as a white, dyslexic, Catholic, heterosexual woman with ADHD in her late teens. “Whatever I would do in school would never be right,” Maddy told me at the beginning of our interview. She was identified and diagnosed with a reading disability after expressing her frustration in ways that were deemed inappropriate by her school. Following this time, Maddy was known as “the angry kid,” and this was where bullying started. In Grade 4, she was still failing her school’s expectations and a separate program was suggested when her parents were told, “we can’t help [her].” Bullying got worse when she was forced to take the short bus to her separate program in Grade 5. Bullying and marginalization had profound impacts on Maddy.

Needing a place to fit in, to survive bullying and marginalization, Maddy started volunteering with younger dyslexic students. She discovered strategies through her volunteering that she adapted to help herself. By high school Maddy had figured out what she needed and advocated to complete alternate assignments and attend class after using marijuana to support her concentration. She suspects that teachers were willing to accommodate her needs because they respected all of the help she offered other disabled students. Although she had a place to belong and experienced safety there, she still felt excluded from her peers. When we spoke, Maddy planned to become an Educational Assistant and hoped to help implement systemic changes to support disabled students.

**Josh**

Josh self-identified as a white, French, heterosexual, dyslexic man in his late teens from a low-income family and community. Josh was identified and diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder in elementary school. He told me that school was never his “thing.” He struggled to focus and would find himself zoned out not knowing how to be different. He
described elementary school as a series of suspensions and expulsions. Failing to meet systemic expectations, Josh shared that after a while, he got used to being in trouble all the time. In late elementary school, he started to take medication for ADHD which helped with his concentration and in Grade 9, he was achieving Bs in all of his classes except for English.

At this time, Josh became more aware of the financial stress in his family and began doing what he could to help. As a result of this work, he was regularly in trouble with the law. In Grade 10, he got the "boot" from high school and began cycling through alternative schooling options. He described that he struggled to manage the stress of court dates, work, losing friends and the risk of trusting people so much that he used drugs to manage. After a third overdose, he ended up in the hospital and this was a wake up for him and the people who cared about him.

When I spoke with Josh, he was focused on his career ambitions. He shared many strategies he developed to help himself with school: he highlights as he reads to improve focus, concentrates on getting work done rather than deadlines and works on multiple assignments simultaneously to stay engaged. Josh plans to enter the trades because they are hands-on, in high-demand and will allow him to travel.

Katie

Katie self-identified as a white, dyslexic, queer woman in her late twenties. Katie described herself as a chaotic and hyper child who was regularly asked to leave class for talking, laughing and distracting her classmates. Tears brought on by wanting to be "normal" and anger ignited by not deserving the treatment she faced were regular emotions during early elementary school. She resisted this narrative by identifying the flaws in others; being helpful and friendly; and developing intricate strategies to pass and keep her struggles hidden. When I asked Katie about how she survived, she told me about her sole and cherished friend.

Motivated by parents who highly valued education and grandparents with economic mobility, Katie spent time in afterschool hands-on learning programs and a private school for the last years of elementary school. Small, activity-based learning classes gave her learning
strategies that worked and support building friendships. She loved it, thrived, started achieving high grades and even completed a high school credit in Grade 8. When Katie returned to public school however, she returned to an inaccessible system. She found the larger classes overwhelming, faced significant stigma from teachers when she asked for accommodation or tried to advocate for strategies she had discovered in private school. High school became a patchwork of survival where she tried to spend as little time as possible at school. Attending three different undergraduate universities, Katie slowly found ways to navigate the school system and employ her learning strategies. At the time of our interview, her was completing her graduate studies.

**Alan**

Alan self-identified as a Caucasian, heterosexual man in his late teens. He was identified and diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD in 4th Grade, however inspired by a teacher, he thought of them as difficulties not disabilities. Alan was given a computer as a support which was helpful but also attracted bullies. Bullying started with teasing in Grade 4 and escalated to physical and emotional abuse when Alan attended a separate program for Grades 5 and 6. In Grade 7, he started to choose not to attend class with a couple friends to avoid bullying at school and sibling rivalry at home. No where felt safe. Throughout this time, Alan picked up learning strategies where he could access them and attributed not being kicked out of Grade 8 to a college intern who helped him.

Alan had the option to choose a different high school from his bullies as the result of a family move. He was determined to make high school a fresh start. His Grade 9 drama teacher helped him realize that drama was for him, and he excelled. He started writing scripts and participating in extracurricular drama activities. Another teacher convinced him to join the football team and he learned that physical activity helped him focus and manage stress. After this, he planned his academics around physical activity opportunities. Alan felt deceived when he discovered that most of the classes he had been advised to take throughout high school were
not for credit. High school felt like a “total waste” of time. Alan hoped to find a way to attend university for drama when we spoke but felt stuck at the time of our interview because he was struggling to find work.

**Rory**

Rory self-identified as a white, dyslexic, pansexual woman with a Christian background in her late twenties. When she was 3, she was identified and diagnosed as gifted. Internalizing the value her family placed on education and the meaning of her diagnosis, Rory felt immense pressure to hold herself to very high expectations. She constantly compared herself to her peers and assessed whether she was maintaining her position in the “smart” category. Rory struggled to keep up in high school, spent long hours reading and felt shame when, amidst her best efforts, she failed to meet school expectations. In university, her struggles worsened. Numbers and letters seemed to move around the page. She sought study habit help but would still do poorly after diligently employing what she learned. She wondered if she was “becoming stupider” or if this was due to extra stress. At this time, Rory told me that her worldview and relationships were being challenged as she discovered and began identifying as queer.

Overtime, Rory deduced that struggling with reading was as she shared, “just me.” She developed strategies to pass as “smart” while hiding the shame she felt. To avoid the prohibitive cost of testing and diagnosis, she accessed reading supports in graduate school by disguising her needs as supports for her depression. In her final year, Rory got the courage to focus on learning for herself rather than the expectations of others. A significant moment took place when she told a professor she was struggling. It was the first time she displayed her invisible learning struggle.

**Freeman**

Freeman self-identified as a Caucasian, dyslexic, bisexual man from a low-income family in his early twenties. “It really took a village to get me to read,” Freeman told me. Luck and good fortune were the main ways that he accessed help. The meaning of words clicked for him after hours of tutoring paid for by his grandparents’ Rotary Club; writing, after hours of playing
Runescape, a computer game with a live chat that motivated him to practice; and higher grades after being the right fit for a university trial and gaining access to a computer. Freeman found both a place of belonging with the other “special ed” kids as well as a place of exclusion and separation from the rest of his peers. He said that a Ghanaian teacher who spent time relating her struggles as a newcomer to his experiences of exclusion “kind of just humanize[d] my troubles.”

From kindergarten to present Freeman survived by developing intricate strategies and tricks. In kindergarten he started adding an extra consonant to his name to help read and spell it. In elementary school, he discovered that he listened better when he limited his visual stimuli by looking down. Today, in university, he knows he needs to take handwritten notes in class, draw and develop diagrams and prioritize classes over readings. At the time of our interview Freeman was working towards his undergraduate degree and working full time to pay for school.

4.2 Intersectional Analysis

An intersectional analysis revealed the complexities and differences present within this group of dyslexic participants, their life stories and visions of a neurodiversity paradigm (Christensen & Jensen, 2012). As displayed in the portraits, participants’ multiple and layered intersecting experiences of systems of power manifested in lived experiences of failure, success, visibility, invisibility, access, lack of access, resistance, resilience, amongst many other experiences. In this section, I utilize an intersectional lens to further explore the dynamic relationship between participants’ social positions, institutions of power and their lived experiences. To facilitate this, I explore the ways participants’ experiences of empowerment and disempowerment were inextricably linked to context, time period and systems of power. This theme was present throughout the research data and across study themes. An example was Marie’s experience at her first university where racialization and ableism resulted in her disempowerment and choice to leave school and change programs.
Okay, so this is where I struggle... it wasn't just academically. The town was a very small, very white town. And they were super racist. Add to already school being really hard and I just went from knowing... how to scam my high school. I didn't know how to scam [university]. I don't know how [to]... play the game. I didn't know how to do that. My memorizing is not the same and people come to class and...they're having all these adult conversations with teachers and they're inserting their opinions. And I'm sitting there like, “Yeah, one plus one is two,” that's the most I can do... I think also what I realized was that my program wasn't for me... I didn't want to go into that already being a marginalized person... I had wanted to go get my [undergraduate degree], get my [master's degree] and focus on creating a space for Black girl teens, and then I realized that... I'm already Black, I don't need to see life through those colors. I don't want that to be the rest of my life. (Marie)

Marie’s experience as a racialized dyslexic at a new school in a small, white, racist town manifested in a university experience that exacerbated her disempowerment. At this time when Marie was failing to meet the expectations of her university, she shared that this struggle was further exacerbated by the pressure she felt from her family, who highly valued and experienced success in education. Caught amongst these multiple intersecting experiences of oppression, Marie chose to shift her career and life plans following this time. Marie persisted until she eventually found a place that empowered her as a Black and dyslexic university student. This was in the context of a multi-cultural city and in a school that made accessibility easier for her to navigate. Freeman shared a different experience with intersecting systems of power. Freeman’s intersecting identities as a white, dyslexic boy from a low-income family with limited educational success initially disempowered him in his school context. Freeman reflected that his parents’ limited education levels and busy schedules resulted in their inability to support him with schoolwork. Through the privileges of his family’s relationships however, his grandparents
were able to advocate and access funding for tutoring to support and empower him academically.

*The Rotary Club, my grandparents are members of it. They came in and they helped me through it and the school got money from them to hire someone to teach me how to speak. That gentleman also saw that I had, he never said dyslexia, but he knew I couldn't read because...he'd be like, “Alright, read these words,” and I couldn't...That gentleman went way beyond what we were supposed to do.* (Freeman)

Although Freeman was initially disempowered because of his intersecting identities, in the end his familial privileges empowered his learning journey.

In other instances, participants’ narratives significantly focused on intersecting systems of power while ableism and dyslexia entered their stories in subtle and intricate ways that further disempowered them. Silas’s narrative focused on an inextricable matrix of racialization, poverty, familial illness and stress while dyslexia manifested in a private landscape of questioning, struggle and self-advocacy. These intersecting systems of oppression created significant disempowerment, stress and hardship for Silas and took the forefront of their life narrative. An example of this time period was when Silas’s Mom struggled with cancer:

*Around the same time that my Mom first got cancer, I would always get to leave class...to see CYWs...I basically was never in class because I was always so stressed out at home... I always got bad marks because I couldn't focus and I couldn't read...her cancer was on and off this whole time and then when she was pregnant with [sibling], she kept telling her doctors, "Hey, I think that there's something wrong, I'm in excruciating pain all the time. I think that the cancer might be back." And then they, because doctors don't listen to women, especially Black women, were like, "Oh, no, she's just a baby pressing on a nerve,” and this was the same thing that happened, when she first got cancer.* (Silas)
Silas portrayed their intersecting experiences of struggling with school and reading, the stress of their Mom’s cancer as well as the impact of their Mom’s racialized experience in the medical system. Because Silas’s teachers were often aware and empathetic to Silas’s layered experiences of vulnerability, Silas shared that they were often able to access academic supports and accommodations as they grew older even though they had not been identified and diagnosed. Silas developed a strong ability to self-advocate for their learning needs during this time.

I never had an IEP, which I totally should’ve but I didn’t know how to go about it. They would give me the privileges that a person with an IEP would have without me having it. So, I would get to write my exams in a separate room instead of a classroom… I rarely had to do a presentation. (Silas)

Silas’s experience differed from other participants who often failed to access supports without a diagnosis and who had various levels of success and comfort self-advocating. While Silas’s experiences of systems of power resulted in significant disempowerment, vulnerability and hardship, they also empowered Silas to advocate for their needs in their classes and allowed their school staff to develop empathetic understanding and flexibility.

Participants’ intersecting identities were inextricable from their experiences of empowerment and disempowerment throughout their life narratives and across study themes. Empowerment and disempowerment significantly impacted participants’ lived realities. Furthermore, their dyslexic life narratives and their neurodiversity paradigm imaginings were continuously interwoven with their intersecting identities and experiences of power. An intersectional analysis continues throughout study themes to demonstrate this finding and to bring the layered, complex and intricate reality of both dyslexic life stories and neurodiversity paradigm imaginings to the forefront of study findings.

4.3 Storying Dyslexic Lived Experiences and Re-Storying through Neurodiversity

During data analysis, I came to understand study themes in the form of a narrative arc across time (see Figure 3) and its changing shape in the imagined neurodiversity paradigm. This
diagram is used throughout the chapter to increase clarity and support holistic and visual thinkers as study themes are mapped and presented (Holley & Colyar, 2009; Kim, 2016). Stress, as displayed in the diagram, ranged from the natural stress that comes along with learning to the stress of living with daily experiences of marginalization, ableism and intersecting experiences of oppression. The visual diagram displays commonalities and relationships between study themes as I came to understand them rather than precise quantitative scores of concepts mentioned. Although presented here in a linear narrative, themes were present in participants’ narratives in complex, cyclical and intertwining ways. Within one narrative, where ableism was being inscribed, participants were often simultaneously internalizing and resisting it amongst other systems of oppression.

Study themes are presented alongside the building and shifting narrative arc. Beginning in participants’ lived experiences, themes of identifying divergence; inscribing ableism; internalizing ableism; finding hope and help; and resisting ableism are explored. Then study themes inspired by the neurodiversity paradigm and at times parallel to participants’ lived experiences are shared forming an alternative narrative path. These themes include normalizing diversity, accessing self-understanding and redefining success. The section closes by exploring anti-ableist practices which participants imagined had the potential to bridge participant experiences between paradigms. Throughout study themes, examples of intersecting systems of power and oppression are highlighted forming an intricate, complex and multi-layered display of study findings.
Figure 3. Visual Summary of Study Findings: Current Disability Paradigms vs. Neurodiversity Paradigm

4.3.1. Identifying Divergence

Figure 4. Identifying Divergence
The first thing I ever remember knowing about my disability was in kindergarten, we had to pick our names from a table. And everyone could find their name but me... my teacher at the time... was like, “Oh, this is a problem.” (Freeman)

Participants began their life stories with vivid memories, like Freeman in this opening quote, of when they first failed to meet socially constructed expectations of literacy and class participation. These narratives depicted a conflict between the participant’s subjective experience and the external messages they received. Participants understood that the emotional reactions of adults indicated an individualized deficit; something was "wrong," a "problem," or "bad" about them. Participants described feeling "sad," "angry," "frustrated" and "ashamed" in these instances. The significant impact of these identifying moments is illustrated by the clarity with which many participants remembered the phrases spoken to them or the words and assignments that caused stress. Jace described this memory from the setting of his Mom's lap. Jace's story highlighted the lack of control he felt and the dissonance between his subjective experience and the messages he received from his Mom.

Some of my earliest memories were because of dyslexia, because of the conflict, especially with adults. The first memory I really have related to that...I remember, we were sitting in my room, it was Grade one, so [I was] probably five or six years old. We have the spelling list. It was really basic words. I still remember the words I couldn't get. They were "they" and "said"... I remember, sitting on her lap, and then I remember her just getting frustrated with me...I guess I had never really had an interaction with my Mom like that. She wasn't mad at me, but she was getting frustrated with me. And it wasn't like I could go and clean up my toys. I don't specifically remember but I'm almost certain I cried. I still remember it now, and I still remember those two words, so it must have had some kind of effect on me. (Jace)

Jace’s description illustrated the lack of control he felt in this moment compared to other moments where he was clearly aware of what was upsetting his Mom. For other participants,
these identifying moments less evidently linked to learning struggles but rather the interpretation of an overall lack of personal application and focus. Qui’s experience was an example of this:

*I do remember there’d be times the teacher would give us... the same book and we’d all go along with reading and every time it got to me, I’d just literally be looking out the window or something stupid.* (Qui)

Qui’s description of himself as “stupid” described the individualization that participants embodied in these experiences. Set alongside Qui’s expression of not knowing *how* to pay attention in his interview, his struggles, like Freeman’s and Jace’s, act as moments where participants became aware of their divergence from what was expected, and this divergence was understood as negative based on the reactions of adults around them.

At times in evident ways and at others in less evident ways, participants described the impact of their intersecting identities on their identifying moments. While not evident, Qui’s teachers’ interpretation of his class participation as lack of personal application may have been linked to both his dyslexic and racialized identities. For other participants, their intersectional identities impacted their identifying experiences more evidently. An example of this was when Jonah’s parents stopped speaking their ethnic languages of Tagalog and Bicolano to him upon his school’s recommendation when he was identified as possibly autistic.

*I moved back to Canada, I lived with my parents, and then I was enrolled in school in September. And when I was at school, four years old, I didn’t speak a lick of English, zero English. No English. I was fluent [in] Tagalog. Well, actually Tagalog and...Bicolano. And then because of that they tried teaching me English for a few months. They thought, I had autism or something. I remember my Mom telling me that a few years ago when I asked her why she never spoke to me in Filipino or Tagalog. So, they thought I was autistic and that scared my Mom, and then from then on, it was English in the household only.* (Jonah)
Jonah’s school’s identification and attempt to reduce the impacts of his disability disregarded the importance of his ethnic languages and ability to communicate with his parents in their ethnic language. In contrast, a couple of participants’ dyslexic identities were hidden by other circumstances and intersecting identities. For example, Silas’s poor academic performance was justified by the stress in their home life. Through these examples, the significant impact of participants’ intersecting identities on their identifying moments is evident.

Most participants, reflected that it was not that they were trying to misbehave, not pay attention or perform poorly; their natural way of interacting and participating in the academic setting was, despite their best efforts, not meeting expectations. For participants who did experience identifying moments, they described their distrust of whether they could expose their natural way of knowing, that their negative self-concept originated in these identifying moments, and the layered impacts of their intersecting identities.

4.3.2 Inscribing Ableism

_**Figure 5. Inscribing Ableism**_

*I think a lot of the time kids were afraid of the resource room because they’d be like, “Oh, that makes you dumb”... that kind of stigma was not only produced by my peers, but also by the teachers and by my family as well, which is that if you use the resource room, if you go to college level, you’re not going to go far in life, which is not true.* (Katie)
Participants shared a considerable number of narratives that inscribed ableism onto their lives and sense of self. These narratives reinforced the individualization of struggle as a deficit which was embodied as "shame" and "embarrassment." As Katie articulated above, narratives that inscribed ableism occurred on a systemic level through precarity and deception and on a relational level with adults and peers.

**Systemic Level**

Participant narratives first articulated the *precarity and vulnerability* they felt to *systemic policies*. The requirement of being identified and diagnosed in order to receive accommodations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017) created particular vulnerability for participants. Being identified was dependent on participants exposing their struggles, the perception that adults around them had of their struggles—a disability or purposeful defiance, and whether they would be selected for a psychoeducational assessment. Effective accommodations and having teachers who were supportive of accommodations were often described as a coincidence, rather than a trustworthy support, even after participants received a diagnosis and recommendations. Finally, whether a school had the financial resources to put recommendations in place was another element of precarity in participants’ life narratives. Thus, the vulnerability to systemic practices was significant for study participants. Freeman, for example, attributed most of his success in school to access to a computer, which he only received because his Grade 2 teacher got him into a university trial.

*There was a study going on to see if students with learning disabilities, would work better with technology... so she [teacher] put me through...I got into this trial ...they put me on the classroom computer... starting in Grade 3, and then going up you can see that my grades slowly start to get better as more support was given to me* (Freeman).

In order to access the computer that helped Freeman so much, he was diagnosed and then was chosen from a group of learning disabled students to take part in the trial, a significant and coincidental process. Josh, unlike Freeman, did not have the same luck. Josh shared that his
doctors and teachers put in requests when he was in grade seven and eight for a 
psychoeducational assessment, but he was never assessed or given accommodations throughout 
school. Josh highlighted the debate he witnessed among adults in his life about this, the 
confusion he felt about how he could be identified by the criminal justice system and placed into 
separate alternative education programs while not being given the opportunity to access 
educational accommodations and supports. Josh’s awareness of the debate amongst adults in 
his life and the complexity of gaining access to accommodations illustrates the vulnerability and 
precarity to policies that participants experienced. Josh’s intersecting experiences of oppression 
in the criminal justice system exacerbated the precarity to policies that he experienced. For 
other participants, their inability to access supports was mediated by their inability to articulate 
their struggle and their struggles being misinterpreted as behaviour issues. This was Qui’s 
experience.

*I remember, there was one time my mom and my teacher were talking and I was—it did 
hurt, made me sad, but I know I messed up. I was like, I didn't purposely try to do that, 
you know what I mean? But hearing my teacher say, "Yeah, I think he's purposely trying 
to do this." ... I remember after the meeting, my mom knew I was pretty upset about it. 
So, she was kind of like, "What's wrong?" ... I didn't really know how to let it out at the 
time. It was like, "You're messing up." "Okay, I'm sorry. I don't know how I'm messing 
up but I'm sorry for it."* (Qui)

For Qui, his learning struggles were misunderstood, and he never found a way to describe 
himself to others; after failing multiple classes, his teachers continued to believe his lack of 
effort was to blame. While some participants’ parents were able to support and advocate when 
these misinterpretations occurred, as a single parent, Qui’s Mom was unable to spend time 
understanding Qui’s experience and advocating for further supports. Like Qui, many 
participants’ intersecting identities resulted in a limited ability to advocate and intervene in 
precarious school practices. The financial burden of updating diagnosis documentation,
required by university accessible learning centers (ALCs), was part of systemic precarity as well. All participants who had completed some university education mentioned this financial barrier, highlighting how economic vulnerability intersected with participant’s ability to access accommodations. Many participants resigned to completing university without accommodations when their ALC would no longer accept a diagnosis they received in public school. The systemic policy requiring proof of dyslexia prior to receiving accommodations created precarious and vulnerable situations for participants in which they were not able to access the accommodations they needed to learn and succeed. Participants’ intersecting experiences of oppression often exacerbated their vulnerability and precarity to the systemic policies surrounding accommodations.

Secondly, many participants described systemic practices of deception that reinforced a negative and stigmatized sense of self and made participants feel that their success was not important. Participants described how they were aware that they were doing different work than their peers and taken out of class for testing and special education classes. Because these differences were never named or addressed, participants created their own meaning and self-assessment, which was almost always an individualized negative perception. Marie experienced this confusion and deception during her elementary experience.

*I wish they would tell you, instead of letting the kid think "What are we doing?" cause they would do all these little tests and stuff, or I might get extra time, but they're not telling me why, so I'm not knowing what's going on.* (Marie)

Marie went on to describe how it felt to be taken out of the classroom in these instances, “Okay, get up and like go! It's time for real learning, you're kinda dumb.' They didn't say that, but that's how it felt” (Marie). Marie’s articulation of being treated differently with no explanation illustrated how the practices meant to help students academically were harmful emotionally. Participants experienced practices of deception outside of the school setting as well. Silas experienced this deception when they asked their doctors to complete their ODSP (Ontario
Disability remains unspoken and the deceptive practice of not talking directly about it again left Silas to create their own narrative. Finally, some participants experienced systemic practices of deception on a larger scale when they discovered that their program was not leading to a high school diploma. Alan thought he was heading towards university or college until he realized he was not even going to graduate with a high school diploma, “I did up until Grade 12 when I learned that in order to go to any college or university, I had to retake the entire high school in anything other than [alternative learning program]” (Alan). Alan was forced to rethink all of his plans for the future after discovering that his trajectory had not been explained clearly or prioritized by his school.

Systemic precarity of accessing supports and systemic practices of deception inscribed ableism into participants’ life experiences. Ableist messages included an individualized understanding of their struggles as deficits and that their presence and success was unimportant. Intersecting identities such as being from a low-income family, being racialized or involved in the criminal justice system intersected and impacted participants’ precarity and vulnerability to systemic ableist practices and in most cases further disempowered them. These systemic ableist practices increased the likelihood and opportunities for participants to experience ableism on a relational level as well.

**Relational Level**

Participants’ narratives were overwhelmingly filled with experiences of ableism inscribed by teachers, education staff, parents and peers. These experiences served as reminders that participants did not and could not meet socially constructed norms of academic performance and class participation. Largely through relationships with teachers, adults inscribed ableism on
participants in covert and overt ways. Participants described covert experiences as receiving impatient or aggressive negative feedback; being accused of cheating; being told that one's class participation and questions were unwanted; being made to feel like an inconvenience; having coping strategies misinterpreted as class disruption and behavioral issues; enduring heightened surveillance; not having requests for help fulfilled; and being singled out in order to access accommodations. Jace's experience of trying to access scrap paper in Grade 4 was an example of how systemic policies and covert relational experiences of ableism came together to limit his access to accommodations and inscribed ableism into his experience:

*Because I had such difficulty ... getting my words down on paper. One of the suggestions from my testing was when I'm doing my work, just have scrap paper to write things down with me. So, my Mom and Dad went and bought a bunch ... they brought it into the class, and they were explaining this to my teacher ... 'We think it would really help him if he just had stuff like scrap paper, to write it down.' ... he [teacher] was like, 'No, that wouldn't be appropriate for me to accept it - it would be a gift.' But then, I had to advocate for myself whenever I wanted it and obviously when you're in Grade 4, it's kind of tough to do that. (Jace)*

Although reasonable and necessary for teachers not to accept gifts, the impact of this teacher's interpretation and actions resulted in Jace not accessing his accommodations or being singled out in front of his classmates in order to do so. Participants emphasized that they did not believe their teachers had malicious intentions in these covert experiences of ableism but rather that their teachers did not have the time and resources to offer the support and understanding that they required, thus resulting in unintentional ableist experiences and messages.

Participants described more overt experiences of ableism as well. Some examples were being shamed in front of their peers, being called names, being told it was “too late” for their success, having formal accommodations denied and being told their accommodations were an
unfair advantage. Katie’s experience of trying to advocate for herself after receiving a grade she felt was unfair is an example of overt ableism followed by covert ableism:

One time I had this teacher... she gave me a 72—and I was like, "I deserve more than that. I know I deserve more than that." Because I put this amount of hours in and I remember thinking, if I put this amount of hours in, that’s how my grade should be reflected. And so, I went up to her and I asked her. And she was like, "No, no, no, your hard work doesn’t always make a difference, Katie. Sometimes the stupid is just the stupid." ... then I got really mad. Yeah, but it didn’t work out well. I got a lot of detention from her. Like every class—I would step in class and she’d be like, "Nope, you’re violating the dress code" And I’d be like, "What?!" And like, "Nope, you talked in class" and like, "Yeah, because it was a group project." It was awful. She was not nice. (Katie)

Katie is first told that she is “stupid” and then is reminded through covert actions that she is not welcome or meeting classroom expectations. Participants repeatedly described specific teachers who said demeaning things to them, like in Katie’s story, experiences that inscribed ableist beliefs onto their experience and sense of self.

With peers, inscribing ableism took the form of bullying, social pressure, social rejection and acute awareness of the stigma of disability. Covert experiences of ableism shared by participants were described as feeling “awkward,” “different,” “separate” and “stupid” in front of their peers. Most participants described severe or mild experiences of bullying and all participants expressed awareness of the potential for bullying if their dyslexia was exposed. Jonah, who was never identified as dyslexic in school, was an example of someone who was aware of the potential of bullying, “I was never bullied or anything. I just remember shitty occurrences that didn’t happen to me necessarily... I flew under the radar” (Jonah). Jonah shared that his choice to remain “under the radar” resulted from his intersectional identity as a newcomer and his desire not to further worry his Mom who was working hard to create
opportunities for him in Canada. This choice helped safeguard him from experiencing bullying. In contrast, Alan, who was identified, diagnosed and separated from his peers, experienced severe, ongoing bullying throughout his time in elementary school.

*Alright, so Grade 4, was probably the least amount of bullying—it was mainly just teasing and picking on me. But Grade 5 is where it started to get [pause] bad...because my dyslexia was severe enough, they wanted to move me into a different program... so during Grade 6, I—the new grade 5s decided to play a game, which wasn't really a game, where they taped me by my hands and feet and actually beat me. Calling me all the worst names in existence, which, luckily, I have now come to terms to be able to actually say, but before it was a huge PTSD [post traumatic stress disorder] trigger for me, the word "retard."... The part that hurt the most is that I had to return to that class and do the rest of the school year with those kids...they would now whisper in my ear, that word in class and call me it after class.* (Alan)

Participants, like Alan, described how systemic policies exposed their dyslexia or their teachers’ negative perception of them to their peers. Experiencing bullying increased when systemic practices meant to support students, exposed participants’ inability to meet classroom expectations.

Although many participants believed that most of their teachers were doing the best they knew how with the resources they had access to, the systemic practices in place repeatedly stigmatized and marginalized participants in the public classroom context. Experiences of ableism on the systemic and relational level served to inscribe in participants that they were not expected or welcome in school environments and for many, that classrooms were places of violence or of potential violence.
4.3.3 Internalizing Ableism

**Figure 6. Internalizing Ableism**

Because at that point, I wouldn't want to do the... home reading. I would never do it. I would tell my parents, "No, I'm not doing that. I won't ever be able to read it anyway, so why the hell would I do that?" (Maddy)

As described by Maddy, participants internalized the ableist messages they experienced on systemic and relational levels. Through repeated occurrences, participants came to believe the negative messages they perceived and began to use self-disciplining practices to pass as non-dyslexic. Internalized ableist beliefs took the form of feelings of “shame,” “embarrassment,” and “self-doubt”; desires to be “normal”; feeling that something was “wrong” with them; believing that accessing their accommodations was unfair to their peers; and giving up on themselves and their potential to succeed. Participants described feeling so discouraged and helpless that they stopped putting effort into schoolwork. Jace’s narrative described his loss of motivation and confidence:

*I remember...my paper was crumpled and he [teacher] was like, “Yeah, you just don't care about school. This looks like a dog's breakfast.” And I remember that because I had no idea what that even meant at the time...Yeah, it was totally, just sad, I crumpled it up and put it in my bag and handed it in that day. I knew because I didn't care. I just*
was— that was who I was. I just wasn’t good at...languages. I couldn’t write a book report and do well on it. So, I ... didn’t put a lot of effort into it. (Jace)

Jace described the extent to which he internalized that he would not succeed in his statement, “that was who I was.” Internalized ableism was also evident in participants’ practices and narratives of constant self-comparing and self-disciplining. Participants hid their struggles and lack of understanding to blend into their classroom, school and social environments. This effort was palpable in Silas’ narrative of hiding that they failed the literacy test.

I didn’t get my literacy credit, and I’m always so embarrassed to tell people...I’m enrolled in a literacy course online right now and people are like, "Oh, what's the course you're in?" and I’m like, "Oh, English" because I don’t want them to know. (Silas)

Silas described how they intentionally avoided telling people about their course because they were embarrassed of their struggles with reading and writing. Other participants monitored their peers and exerted great effort, stress and time to keep up with schoolwork. Rory’s narrative was an example of self-comparing and using self-disciplining practices to remain invisible:

I really struggled to not check all the boxes to finish things like a normal student. So, I remember, I was trying to finish Wuthering Heights for a test. And I was halfway through and its midnight. I’m not gonna finish the damn book, but they’re gonna know that I didn’t read the book. I need to force myself to read this whole book. (Rory)

Rory’s narrative illustrated her perceived separateness and simultaneous stress and exertion to fit into the “normal student” category. Participants described extensive tactics for appearing to understand material while knowing that they did not. They repeatedly had to make a choice between blending into the classroom environment or understanding material and accessing accommodations. Participants overwhelmingly chose to blend in through self-disciplining practices and pass as able-minded, internalizing that their dyslexic identity was negative and a part of themselves that required hiding.
Unlike other participants in the study who struggled with many negative emotions and self-perceptions, James Martin felt separate from his peers but found ways to accept his experience early in his schooling.

_Sometimes it would be a little frustrating because I would notice that, “Oh, this work is not as hard as I thought it would be.” Or I would think that “Oh, this isn’t something that I thought I should do.” But once I understood a little bit more that I wasn’t where I wanted to be in school, I started to realize. I was like, “Okay, I agree.” I agreed with the people at my school that I should probably be a little bit more different, but not different in a bad way. I realized I could actually be more effective...and I could have a better grasp at what I wanted to do at school._ (James Martin)

James Martin’s narrative differed from other participants because although he was treated differently, he did not internalize these experiences as a negative perception of himself. He attributed his positive attitude to his intersecting identities, including his religiosity and family’s values.

_I had role models that really knew how to talk about life and how to understand that life will be okay if you have setbacks and that if you believe that you can be a person that can be well...My dad's work ethic is really good, he works really hard. He knows that the work that he does, will benefit my family, and the future... We always talk about me owning companies and like owning businesses. I think me being Catholic, also, played a role in that, because I do believe in God._ (James Martin)

For James Martin, his Catholic faith and his familial role models supported his resilience to the ableist messages and experiences around him.

For most participants, internalized ableist messages became, with time, part of the perception they had of themselves, and this informed the way they related to others as well as the effort they put into academic tasks and understanding material. Through narratives of
internalized ableism, the impact of experiences that inscribed ableism onto participants’ self-concepts and the anxiety and energy that dyslexic participants put into passing is illustrated.

4.3.4 Finding Hope & Help

Figure 7. Finding Hope & Help

She more supported us emotionally and talked us through a lot of this stuff. Because she would tell us how...coming to Canada, being a French speaker, but not from Quebec, not from Europe, and having an African accent... made her feel very alienated so she could kind of see how it made us feel alienated being separated from our classmates. (Freeman)

Amongst narratives of ableism, participants shared moments, semesters, and years during which they found help and hope. These narratives were marked by words of ease such as “fun,” “easy,” “work with me,” “belonged,” “motivated,” and “supported emotionally.” Freeman said that the support he received from this Ghanaian teacher impacted the rest of his life. Many participants reflected that these moments of help and hope changed the trajectory of the rest of their life stories. Participants named the people and programs that helped them find a new strategy, see their potential and build resilience and self-compassion. Among them were the YMCA homework program, a Rotary Club volunteer, a college intern, private school and many specific teachers. Participants described the significance of both academic and emotional help.
Marie’s experience in Grade 4 is an example of a year of help. Not only did Marie’s teacher support her academically, she also orchestrated a circumstance where Marie did not feel separate or stigmatized; in fact Marie thought she was helping the teacher rather than the other way around:

Oh, 4th Grade…this was good because this was the first time that a teacher was actually trying to work with me. So, it was me and a bunch of my friends and … I thought it was for her sake and I didn’t really think she was trying to work with us. I just thought she liked us … even though [I see] that was not what was happening now. So, some recesses we would stay in and we would read and we would watch a movie and we would discuss and write what we saw. I remember that teacher was very visual and she encouraged us to kind of learn how we wanted. Which was really, really good.

Everything was a poster with a picture. She used to draw a lot. I loved to draw and I used to want to be an artist or whatever, and that was the first time I thought, "Oh you really can do this!" Cause she was a teacher but she would still draw… that was a fun year. I remember even, one of our projects, instead of everyone doing it alone, we made a class cookbook. And if you couldn’t write your recipe, you could just send in a picture.

(Marie)

In this narrative, Marie gave some examples of what help and support looked like for her; she also described how rarely she received effective support, this was the first time after 4-5 years in school that she felt a “teacher was actually trying to work with” her. Other participants shared the significant help it was when their accommodations were automatically given or when accommodations just seemed normal. Katie shared how helpful it was when accommodations were normalized in summer school:

It was given to me automatically. I think that’s why I did well in summer schools.

‘Cause they would give me those accommodations automatically. And almost everyone had accommodations. So, I wouldn’t be like, "Oh, I’m so weird" kind of thing. It’d be
like, "Oh, here it is." Or "Here's a project. Here's how everyone is going to do it differently. Tell me what you need or come up to me individually." And every single person would have to come up to them. So that was helpful. Rather than having to be singled out and be like, "I can't do this." (Katie)

The narratives that Marie and Katie shared illustrated how academic and emotional support were wrapped together. These moments relieved stress for a class or two, like in Katie’s narrative, or built skills that participants took through the rest of their life, like in Marie’s narrative. Many participants shared how their intersectional experiences of power significantly impacted their access to help. Katie articulated that the shared experiences of marginalization in summer and night school among the diverse student population, including newcomers, single parents, and neurodivergent students, required accommodations for multiple, layered and nuanced experiences, not only for disability, like in her case. This created an environment with reduced stigma. At other times, intersecting experiences of power significantly limited participants’ access to help. An example was James Martin who experienced low economic mobility, newcomer status and dyslexia.

I noticed when I was younger, it was hard for me to get help from my parents for school, because I wasn't born in this country, same with them... So, they didn't really speak the language very well. It was a little bit hard for them to help me with the homework that I did at home. Because then I didn't have enough money to get a tutor and really help me get to where I wanted to be. (James Martin)

Many participants, like James Martin expressed frustration and anger when their intersecting experiences of oppression limited their ability to access help that they knew other students could access. The impact of intersecting experiences of power and participants’ ability to access help was a significant factor in the moments of help that they experienced. In the rare moments when participants were able to access help without being stigmatized or marginalized, they described immense relief.
Another significant element of participants’ stories were moments that gave them hope. These narratives were about being successful after repeated failures or finding new strategies that increased their quality of life. Jace’s experience in Grade 11 English was an example of a moment of hope.

So, Grade 11 English was ... probably when I started putting in a little bit more work. And I think ... not the sole contributing factor is—she was a new teacher so, the [class] average in general is higher. I think I finished with an 80 in English, which I’d never done before. But I think what that did for me was, I saw results. Then it kind of built a little bit of momentum for me to start investing in myself a little bit more. (Jace)

This moment of hope profoundly shifted Jace’s long held beliefs since elementary school about his inability to succeed. Jace’s narrative of hope also demonstrated how internalized ableism and hope co-existed in participants’ narratives. Although Jace found hope, he also expressed how he did not fully attribute his achievement to his own efforts, he justified part of his grade by his teacher being new and therefore generally more lenient than other teachers. Intersecting identities also significantly influenced participants’ experiences and access to moments of hope. Katie’s intersecting experiences of privilege as a white, dyslexic girl from a family with economic mobility and high levels of education allowed her to access hope during her later elementary school years in private school.

It was a private school that my grandparents paid for. It was really helpful because they gave me a lot of different coping skills. So, I got to do a lot of...activity-based learning... small classes, there was 12 people or 11 people in my class. (Katie)

During this time Katie learned that she could succeed academically and socially and, like Jace, this experience shifted her self-confidence and perseverance. Katie described how she continued to use these strategies throughout university. Experiences of hope impacted participants’ narratives and for some, significantly shaped the trajectory of their futures.
Overall, most participants described moments where help or hope diminished the stress in their lives, even for a short time. They spoke about how this helped them build academic skills and learning strategies as well as resilience to confront the stigma and negative beliefs they had about themselves and encountered from others. Intersecting experiences of power and oppression shaped how, where and for how long participants were able to access help and hope during their narratives.

4.3.5 Resisting Ableism

*Figure 8. Resisting Ableism*

*I've just made it work for myself without even thinking that I did.* (Marie)

Marie said this as she looked back at our co-created timeline of her life story. Many participants, like Marie, exerted great energy resisting and strategically navigating a school environment that was not built for them and was inscribing ableism, amongst other internalized oppressions, onto their experience and sense of self. Resistance themes that emerged in the data included avoidance, self-advocacy and navigating the school system.

Participants shared narratives of resistance through *avoidance* when their practices of self-disciplining were not adequate to protect them from ableism or were not an option. They avoided having their academic deficits exposed; public displays of ability, such as reading aloud; circumstances they knew they would fail within or disappoint adults; bullying and emotional
stress; and intersecting experiences of oppression. During childhood, participants described using behavioural tactics to avoid these circumstances. Participants were silly to distract their teachers, parents or peers; misbehaved or caused trouble in class so they would be asked to leave; ignored instructions and engaged with more comfortable activities; and allowed people to make incorrect assumptions. Katie’s strategies provide some examples:

*I didn’t like the stuff that was, “read a paragraph and find that”...I would always be like, "I’m just gonna go on the computer," and then do that instead of doing work, or I would do building blocks. Draw. I would draw a lot. Yeah, things like that. And not at the appropriate time. [Teachers] would be like, "You have to go" or "You have to go to the resource room."* (Katie)

Not experiencing success with class reading activities, Katie resisted the learning environment that was not working for her by doing something that brought her comfort. Like Katie and Marie, many participants developed creative and extensive strategies of avoidance during their elementary school years.

As participants grew older, they had more agency and control, which allowed them to avoid negative and stressful experiences more effectively. One strategy, that participants began to use as early as middle school, was choosing not to attend class. Participants shared that sometimes their avoidance strategies led them into unhealthy relationships or drug use.

Participants also reflected that their avoidance strategies led to developing strengths, such as Jonah who developed his talent in improvisation by avoiding traditional music notation. Maddy’s strategy to avoid the severe bullying she was facing was another creative example of resistance.

*When I got to that point in my life, I really started to realize like, “Okay, you need to find a place that you’re going to fit in,” and it may sound really weird, but my place that I fit in was I helped the kindergartens who had reading disabilities and writing disabilities, the kids that were like me. I would go in with them at lunch times, and I*
play with them at lunch, the kids who didn’t have friends. That’s what I decided to do being in Grade 7... I didn’t want anybody else to feel the way I felt in elementary school, ‘cause nobody needs to feel that way. (Maddy)

Maddy chose to support students who she identified with to avoid bullying during lunch periods. This not only reduced her experiences of bullying, it also supported her to find learning strategies that helped her academically. Avoidance was the most utilized strategy of resistance for all participants until they found environments, strategies and subject areas that allowed them to self-advocate and succeed.

Self-advocacy was used as a strategy of resistance as well. Participants shared that their ability to self-advocate increased as their awareness of useful learning strategies and acceptance of appearing “different” increased. Participants mainly relied on self-advocacy to access accommodations and more accessible learning formats and assignments. Self-advocacy resulted in both positive and negative outcomes. Katie’s narrative of asking about her grade, shared previously, is an example of a negative outcome that furthered her stigmatization. Maddy’s story was an example of a positive outcome.

I remember my religion teacher, we had to write out this whole thing on how Jesus died on the cross. Well, I drew a seven stage of what happened when he was [crucified], from going to the chapel, walking to the big thing, getting nailed on the cross ... I handed it in and he’s like, "What is this? There’s no words on it." And I said, "I’ll show you what this is." And I showed him every single point, used every single word. And he looked at me and gave me 95. He said, “I’ve never seen a student do that before.”

(Maddy)

Maddy resisted the given written assignment and advocated that understanding can be shown through images. Many participants described starting to self-advocate in later elementary school or high school. Some participants connected their ability to self-advocate to their gender performativity. An example was Jace who attributed his ability to self-advocate in high school
for his accommodations to his gender identity and resulting comfort with conflict, “I guess most boys have that period where they’re super defiant and everything, I was a troublemaker... And I think [being able to self-advocate] was probably partially because I was comfortable having this conflict with my teachers,” (Jace). While many participants shared moments of self-advocacy, others discussed continuing to struggle to self-advocate into adulthood or in specific environments. However perceived and successful, self-advocacy was a strong theme in how participants resisted the systemic and relational ableism they experienced during their life narratives.

Finally, strategically navigating the school system was an important form of resistance. Participants developed their own goals for classes and social situations to resist normative values and to prioritize their energy. Participants strategically planned classes based on supportive teachers, neurodivergent-friendly teaching styles and their interests. Silas described strategically allotting energy to classes based on their accessibility while accepting low grades in inaccessible classes.

*The courses I was doing okay in and I was more so focusing on, the ones I wasn’t doing well in and I kind of just like, “Okay, let’s just get a 52, get the credit” and I think I only failed like two courses.* (Silas)

The effectiveness of Silas’ strategically navigating high school is evident in their achievement of passing most of their classes. Marie navigated the school system by strategically focusing on extracurriculars to increase her chances of winning university scholarships.

*I didn’t think I was going to get the grade... But I knew that with volunteer hours, I can get that same [scholarship] money. So that’s why I took all of these easy courses so I could immerse myself in volunteer hours and not really think about the academic side ... I was thinking about school in terms of this thing I could conquer. And actually, it was fun.* (Marie)
Marie knew that she would not be able to access scholarships based on her grades so she reduced her course load during the school year and focused on volunteering. Marie shared that her intersectional identities supported her interest and commitment to volunteering as well. For example, when she discovered a budget for the Black History Club, she initiated school wide activities that supported both her success in school and educated her peers about Black issues. Like Silas and Marie, participants described multiple ways that they navigated their school environment to support themselves and reduce the stigma that they felt and experienced.

In summary, participants resisted ableism through avoidance, self-advocacy and strategically navigating the school system. Participants’ intersectional identities played central roles in the ways they resisted and navigated their inaccessible school environments. Participants used these forms of resistance to skillfully decrease their exposure to ableist and potentially ableist situations and increase their access to supported learning and success.

4.3.6 Normalizing Diversity

*Figure 9. Normalizing Diversity*

*If we didn't have to be compared, I think that would be better. Because it bred a lot of competitiveness in us and also... a connection to competition as self worth, I think, in both of us, which I think was kind of negative. Think less competitive if we were able to, accept the idea that neurodiverse kids exist. (Katie)*
Within a neurodiversity paradigm, participants imagined a different experience from the narrative themes described thus far. Experiences of systemic ableism were reimagined and conceptualized in the theme normalizing diversity. Experiences and practices that supported participants during their life stories were adopted in participants’ neurodiversity paradigm visions and expanded upon in the themes of accessing self-understanding and redefining success. These three themes are represented in the following three sections.

Participants imagined that if neurological diversity was normalized in the school system, they would not have experienced and internalized ableism. Unlike in their lived experiences where they had to prove their need for diverse resources and supports, participants believed that making diverse resources, supports, teaching styles and assignments automatically available to all students would be central to a neurodiversity paradigm. Classrooms would truly be places for neurodivergent and neurodominant students. Visions of diverse teaching and knowledge evaluation included: visual, kinesthetic, interactive, immersive, holistic, discussion-based, presentation-based, and real-world learning. Classrooms would automatically contain supports such as: diagrams, manipulatives, seating options, fidgets and field trips. Qui gave some examples of the teaching methods he imagined incorporated more regularly in a neurodiversity-informed classroom.

*Probably more hands-on stuff would have been nice. Instead of just, sit down and books all day. I remember there was a small lake nearby so he [teacher] took us to that and ... let's say we're studying plant life, he took us and showed us in real life. If they did more of that, that would have been nice...I remember we had a couple of school trips, where you're sledding and stuff like that, which is awesome (Qui chuckles) but doesn't really help [students who need hands-on learning]. (Qui)*

Qui highlighted that within current school practices, offsite trips for leisure occur however, offsite trips for *learning* occur much less frequently, if at all. It was evident that valuing and
utilizing diverse methods of teaching, communicating and evaluating knowledge would be embraced in participants’ imagined neurodiversity paradigm.

Participants articulated that although neurodiversity-informed classrooms would support their learning more effectively and they would likely garner better academic results, the more important element would be reducing experiences of internalized ableism (visualized in Figure 8). Participants reflected that by making diverse supports and teaching available to everyone, many systemic practices that upheld ableism would be eliminated including: the financial burden of being identified and diagnosed, negative preconceived assumptions about neurodivergent students, the need to prove oneself, the idea that giving supports is unfair, the binary between “smart people” and “dumb people”, and practices that encourage peer comparison. Rory reflected on preconceived assumptions about giving resources to everyone in our interview:

Because I think there’s this mindset that people are going to abuse the system if you don’t have to prove [dyslexia], like everyone else will have it easier because they’ll have access to these things but I don’t think that’ll make it easier for people to read if they’re neurotypical … They don’t need those extra things to read easier because it’s not actually going to help them. (Rory)

Like Rory, participants believed that if resources were automatically available, ableist practices and ideas would be eliminated and diverse students could easily access what they needed on the basis of neurodivergence as well as other intersecting identities. Participants imagined learning alongside their classmates instead of being removed or separated from their peers, and teachers and additional help would be readily available in the classroom. Participants imagined that this would discourage unnecessary competition and would rather encourage feelings of safety in the classroom and reduce shame. Peers would rely on and support one another and feel safe to ask questions and to talk about their struggles. Freeman compared the current disability paradigm with the neurodiversity paradigm in classroom safety and access to help through community.
They treated me like I was a different type of learner. At the time, it made sense. These kids needed more work. So, we had a teacher who was specifically designed, put them in a quiet room where they could do their own thing. But then you’d come back right before recess. They’d be at the end of their lesson. You just sit there being [like], “what am I doing here?” and feel out of place. But in a classroom like this [with a neurodiversity paradigm enacted], you’re never leaving the classroom. Everyone is with everyone. You have five teachers; you all know their names. You all know their strengths. You can go to one that knows more or go to the other one that knows more. And you know your students, your fellow students’ strengths, the weaknesses that’s the thing that I take advantage of in university now. I try to know the strengths and weaknesses of my fellow classmates. Because if I don’t understand one part of something, I can get them to help me with it. (Freeman)

Similar to Freeman, participants imagined classrooms where they could ask for help from fellow students and expose struggles because a mindset of competition would be removed, and struggles and weaknesses would be normalized.

While imagining a neurodiversity paradigm, participants repeatedly stated that they imagined it as a paradigm that centered and worked to normalize and create equity for intersecting experiences of oppression as well. Some participants emphasized the need to normalize various forms of mental health and wellness. Others, such as Josh, focused on and centered the need for economic stability within a neurodiversity paradigm. Finally, other participants discussed equity in relation to intersecting experiences of oppression such as racism, homophobia, transphobia and sizeism.

Normalizing diversity and increasing equity would be achieved through making resources and supports available and nurturing community focused classrooms. Participants stressed that in order to sufficiently support a classroom where neurodiversity is normalized and intersecting identities are embraced and supported, increased resources, particularly teachers’ and
educational assistants’ time and knowledge of neurodivergence would be necessary. Participants believed that normalizing neurodiversity would significantly reduce the systemic, relational and internalized ableism that they experienced during their life stories.

4.3.7 Accessing Self-Understanding

*Figure 10. Accessing Self-Understanding*

Developing self-understanding was described as essential in both participants’ life stories and in an imagined neurodiversity paradigm. In participants’ lived experiences, self-understanding was a slow accumulation of strategies and self-discoveries through unpredictable moments of hope and help as well as personal perseverance and determination. Participants articulated that in a neurodiversity paradigm, the school system would be structured so that they would have received sustained, trustworthy support from the systems around them to arrive at self-understanding without experiences which inscribed and internalized ableism. Participants emphasized that this would require additional training to equip staff with the knowledge required to support diverse students and additional time or reduced class sizes to allow teachers and school staff to understand individual students’ learning styles. Understanding learning strategies, their weaknesses and strengths were themes that increased participant’s self-understanding in their lives and their imagined neurodiversity paradigm.
Diverse learning strategies tailored to participants were identified as central to both participants’ survival and success in their lives as well as in their imagined neurodiversity paradigm. Finding learning strategies required time, energy and effort but all participants found them. Learning strategies that they found transformational supported their attention, concentration, reading, writing, conceptualization and memorization. Jonah, for example, shared the impact of discovering tablature:

Well, luckily, I play guitar and one of the most popular alternatives for sheet music for guitar is tablature...And that's always been the way that works for me. And I don't know why my dyslexia isn't triggered by that because of all the different things going on with the numbers and stuff. But that's what seems to work for me...I remember auditioning for [university] and getting my pieces for my audition and I did the exact translation [to tablature] of the thing there. (Jonah)

Jonah’s explanation highlighted how learning strategies were not always evident to participants and that discovering them required exploration and time. Unlike in participants’ lived experiences, where exploration and discovery were unpredictably supported, in a neurodiversity paradigm teachers’ support would be central. Participants shared a wish for teachers to look beyond their disengaged and defiant behaviour, and to have the time and resources to sit with them and understand how their minds work. Sometimes, they shared, their defiant behaviour was the clue to finding the right learning strategy, such as doodling or moving to process and understand what was being taught. Participants reflected that presenting diverse learning strategies and then empowering students to use and refine the ones that worked best for them would take place regularly in a neurodiversity-informed classroom.

Study participants highlighted that recognizing their weaknesses was important in their lives and would be important in a neurodiversity paradigm as well. Emphasizing that it is okay to have weaknesses, participants imagined that teachers explicitly recognizing and accepting student weaknesses would validate their lived experience—a change from
the practices of deception previously discussed. While imagining a neurodiversity-informed alternative to Marie’s experience with math, she exclaimed, “this sounds really bad but like, give up!” Providing further explanation, Marie shared the following:

_Acknowledge [a weakness] and accept it. And maybe work on sharpening what they can grasp. Because I remember my tutor... he was like, “You’re never gonna get it, every week you come, it's the same thing. So, let's just strengthen multiplication,” and then in strengthening that, it actually helped me to get the basic one. I remember, I got negative eight on one test...and in strengthening the multiplication tables, it helped me._

(Marie)

Most participants, like Marie, envisioned a model where weaknesses were acknowledged and accepted without being stigmatized. Alan shared a differing opinion however, he felt that his teachers gave up on teaching him to read and write too early. He thought that weaknesses would only be accepted in older grades while additional time would be given to understand and help younger students find effective learning strategies. Acknowledging and accepting weaknesses was a significant theme in participants’ life stories. In a neurodiversity paradigm, participants imagined students would have the flexibility to accept their weaknesses in certain topics and areas without having their value, strengths and post-secondary opportunities eliminated or questioned.

Finally, _identifying and supporting strengths_ was a significant topic in both participants’ lived experiences and while imagining a neurodiversity paradigm. Participants had diverse areas of strength including math, music, science, writing, drama, sports and visualizing written information. All participants came to identify their strengths. Some participants emphasized that coming to understand their intersecting identities supported their understanding of their neurodivergence. An example of this was Silas who only felt able to understand their learning struggles after understanding their trans identity. “Once I came out as trans, I started to realize a million other things about myself. That’s when I started to realize, ‘Oh, maybe I have
something going on with my learning” (Silas). For Silas, coming to understand their gender identity was an essential step towards understanding their learning struggles. Self-understanding increased participants’ ability to be successful, allowed them to combat negative internalized narratives and increased their self-confidence.

To conclude this section, Alan’s reflections on the transformative power of self-understanding summarizes participants thoughts about the importance of supporting the development of learning strategies and validating weaknesses and strengths.

I think that—it would be the teachers were teaching kids who they are. I don’t think that there ... would be less labels on kids if you were doing that because if you were finding a way of learning that worked for you, you would be succeeding, and you wouldn’t be failing and then you wouldn’t feel like an idiot and then you wouldn’t look like an idiot and then kids wouldn’t really call you an idiot. If they did call you an idiot because you don’t feel it, it wouldn’t really hit you. One thing that I learned from being bullied is that as soon as you feel it, hearing somebody call you it hurts about 10 times more. When you know that you’re not that, hearing someone call you that, it’s easy for it to rub off your shoulder, just say “Oh whatever.” But with the neurodiversity thing, if you were learning and you felt smart, even if someone’s like, “Your method is stupid!” you’d be like, “Yeah, well, my method works.” (Alan)

Alan described the empowerment and resilience he imagined within a neurodiversity paradigm. Participants explained that in their lived experiences, finding self-understanding did not take away their experiences of ableism, internalized ableism and continued struggles with shame in adulthood. Participants imagined that while operating from a neurodiversity paradigm, teachers would have the resources, training and time to help students identify their strengths and encourage them to develop their strengths early in their educational journeys. The interviews demonstrated that participants’ focus was not to improve or change who they are, but rather to
understand and accept themselves in a neurodiversity paradigm. This would lead to pride in who they are, inclusive of their weaknesses, dyslexic neurotype and their intersecting identities.

4.3.8 Redefining Success

*Redefining Success and pathways to success* was how participant narratives ended and was an integral part of their visions for a neurodiversity paradigm. Once participants gained self-understanding, they were able to find pathways forward that embraced their strengths, weaknesses and learning styles. All participants had a vision for their future when I spoke with them during interviews. When imagining a neurodiversity paradigm, participants discussed the need to create systemic practices to support students in finding individualized pathways to success. Participants imagined that this could be supported through flexibility and diverse and supported career paths.

*Flexibility* was central to a neurodiversity paradigm. Participants expressed frustration with the rigidity of the current school system and how it limited their choices and opportunities for the future. Participants imagined that a neurodiversity paradigm would limit mandatory classes because a required, broad base of mandatory classes advantaged and disadvantaged specific types of learners. Within a neurodiversity paradigm, the school system would be sensitive and selective to ensure that mandatory classes would be worth the effort required from
neurodivergent students. For example, participants imagined that mandatory classes would focus on life skills that everyone requires, such as how to buy a house or make investments. Furthermore, in a neurodiversity paradigm, participants imagined that students would have the flexibility to take courses that focus on their strengths. Participants believed that this approach would benefit them most in post-secondary education and job markets. Freeman was an example of a participant who imagined this in a neurodiversity paradigm.

When really, you should be challenging the kids who understand math to get better at math. And then challenging the kids who are really good at English to get better at English. Because if I walk into a Technology Building today and test all the people who are coding at math, they'll be good at math. If I go into a university English place, test all the people at English, they will be good at English. If you do those tests backwards, you're not going to get good grades. That's how the real-world works. (Freeman)

Freeman emphasized that focusing on strengths would support neurodivergent students in school but also in pursuing a career. Similarly, participants believed that students would have flexibility to create schedules that allowed them to prioritize wellness and manage stress based on their intersecting identities. For example, students would be able to complete high school over a longer timeframe so that they could incorporate more physical activity into their schedule if this supported their learning. Through these discussions, participants emphasized that in a neurodiversity paradigm, flexibility would not be an accommodation that one needs to fight for, but rather a practice that empowers everyone to explore and self-define wellness and success.

Participants shared the transformative impact of finding a vision for their future and accepting a timeline that allowed them to succeed in their life stories. With a goal in mind, participants held increased self-confidence, could confront external messages that they would not succeed, choose where they placed their time and navigated the school system to support their wellness and success. In a neurodiversity paradigm, participants described that the school system would further support and facilitate defining and finding success in individual classes
and in long term goal setting. Rory articulated how teachers could support redefining success in a classroom setting:

_I feel like success looks different for different people too. Someone could get great grades but hate what they’re doing. And is that still success? I feel like there should be a level of enjoyment... I think of another one of my [siblings] who struggled through university...then ended [up] in [program of study]. Loved it. [Their] marks were terrible._ (Rory)

Rory emphasized that success in a neurodiversity paradigm would go beyond achievement and focus on enjoyment and wellbeing. In Qui’s reflection about what message he would have received in a neurodiversity paradigm when he chose to leave high school, the importance of centering an intersectional approach and equity was highlighted.

_Not to over stress about [having a vision for the future], you know what I mean? Because at the time, it was just like college or jail... Honestly, if I had left high school earlier, I probably would've come back to high school earlier._ (Qui)

The narrative that Qui noted, “college or jail,” reflected his intersecting experience as a Black, dyslexic young man and reveals the harm and fear that this narrative incited in him. Qui reimagined a supportive process in which he was not made to fear for his future and was instead supported to find a pathway forward. In a neurodiversity-informed system, participants illustrated that success would be defined and supported in a diversity of ways. Navigating setbacks would be normalized; students would be supported regardless of their age, disability, additional intersecting identities and past school participation; and diverse school and career paths would be destigmatized.

To conclude, participants often ended their life narratives by sharing career plans they found that allowed them to use their strengths, accept their weaknesses and feel empowered in their intersectional identities. Participants also shared how they redefined success for themselves and accepted their own timeline that often fell outside normalized life trajectories.
When imagining a neurodiversity paradigm, participants envisioned systemic practices that supported and valued diverse pathways and definitions of success. Participants imagined that systemic supports to find career paths earlier in their education experience would create greater wellness for all parts of themselves, including their neurodivergence and intersecting identities.

4.4 Anti-Ableist Practices

Figure 12. Anti-Ableist Practices

I remember [her] saying, “it's not fair for the other students.” And I don't know...that's a very slippery slope to say it's not fair. Because, I mean, I have a learning disability. And is it fair to me that the way our education system is doesn't favor this disability?...

It's hard to determine what equity is. I think that baseline of what fairness is, it's over-emphasized. I think it's definitely a slippery slope as well, I don't think everything should be black and white. I think there is a lot of grey area. (Jace)

Discussions about the neurodiversity paradigm not only inspired a new vision where a dyslexic neurotype would be normalized and systemically supported, they also inspired ideas about how teachers, school staff and parents could help combat ableism within the current disability paradigm. Jace highlighted the need to embrace the “grey area” to support equity for dyslexic students. The following themes described how to begin destigmatizing neurodivergence as well as recognize and resist ableism alongside neurodivergent students to support equity. The
anti-ableist practices that appeared in the data included talking and teaching about neurodiversity, recognizing the impact of ableism on dyslexic people's ability to access support and building sensitivity when giving feedback.

The first anti-ableist practice defined in participants’ narratives was to **talk and teach about neurodiversity**. Participants imagined that if neurodiversity was talked about and taught, they would have an alternative narrative from the one they created based on their ableist experiences. Participants believed that neurodiversity could be discussed on a school-wide, class and individual level. At the school-wide level, participants believed that assemblies and presentations about neurodiversity could educate the school community and build compassion and understanding for neurodivergent students. Within the classroom, participants imagined that if teachers were better educated about neurodiversity and systemic ableism, they could openly talk about diverse learning styles in connection to learning activities. Marie’s articulation of how a teacher could introduce an activity was an example of how neurodiversity could be talked about in the classroom to combat ableism:

> For the first time, make everyone do it... Say something like, “We all have different ways of learning. And some of us are gonna look at the books with pictures and some of us are going to look at books with words and that's okay.” And then move on. But don't not acknowledge it! (Marie)

Like Marie, participants emphasized the impact talking about neurodiversity in the classroom could have on shifting the stigmatization of disability. Bringing in an intersectional lens, participants shared that they imagined schools talking and teaching about multiple experiences of power and oppression to build empathy and compassion within school communities. Participants envisioned that talking to students directly about their neurodivergence could make a significant difference on their experience as well. School staff had an opportunity to name and validate student experiences as well as redefine dyslexia as a neurodivergence in individual conversations. Participants believed
that employing an anti-ableist practice of talking and teaching about neurodiversity on a school-wide, classroom and individual level could name and cultivate a narrative that countered the negative, stigmatized one that participants currently received from multiple sources.

The second anti-ableist practice that participants articulated was the need for teachers, school staff and parents to recognize the profound impact of ableism on students’ ability to access support. As illustrated in previous sections, participants emphasized the impossibility of seeking help under a disability paradigm that inscribes ableism and cultivates shame and embarrassment. Participants shared that in an anti-ableist practice, the school system would take more responsibility for ensuring students had the support they needed on a structural level and on a relational level. Participants shared how accommodations, resource rooms and extra help could be destigmatized on a structural level by locating these resources centrally and providing support for students on how to ask for accommodations and help, such as email templates to send to teachers. On a relational level, teachers could respond with compassion and an open mind when students asked for help, accommodations or an assignment change. For example, Jace imagined that the tension he felt when asking for his accommodations could be replaced with a response that communicated that a teacher has an open mind to the need for accommodations. Marie shared how teachers could be adamant and encouraging of students to access supports, which could circumvent the vulnerability students felt while asking for help.

Two profs were like really adamant. Once I said [I was registered with the accessibility center], then they kept communication going. They almost... forced [help] down my throat. ’Cause some people, they won’t take the help unless you do that. (Marie)

Marie emphasized that she needed professors to offer a great deal of encouragement to counter her tendency to hide her struggles. Participants imagined that if an anti-ableist practice for accessing help was integrated on the systemic and relational level, they would feel more
comfortable saying that they were struggling, asking for what they knew would work for them and sharing when something felt overwhelming or out of reach in the current system.

The final anti-ableist practice that appeared in the interviews was related to sensitivity when giving students feedback about their work as well as their disability. As described in previous sections, participants described feeling overwhelmed and defeated within the current disability paradigm. Many participants shared that they did not think that their teachers realized how hard it was to receive negative feedback repeatedly and continuously. Participants imagined that an anti-ableist practice to giving feedback would be sensitive to experiences of repeated failure and would focus on next steps for each learner rather than grades and right and wrong. Maddy articulated the importance of this sensitivity and how she imagined a shift in thinking.

*Teachers, they should, not at the best, they should more assume the worst when it comes to marking a person's page and if it's really, really wrong. They should really think "Okay, what does this person need to actually get all this right?" Like is it, "Do they need to draw a picture instead of writing this story up?"* (Maddy)

In addition to feedback on assignments, participants imagined that staff could be more sensitive when identifying disability and choosing to speak with students. In reflecting on the multiple times that teachers tried to talk with Marie about her learning struggles, she shared that a transformation would be for those teachers to be sensitive and prepared to help her.

*If you’re going to talk to somebody about an issue you think that they have, just be clear about it... and then bring them options, but don’t be like, “Do you think you have an issue?”... Because if you thought it was big enough for you to talk to them about it, then be prepared and actually try and help them.* (Marie)

Marie articulated that is it okay to talk with students about their learning struggles in the current disability paradigm but emphasized that people should be prepared to help and be sensitive to the stigma and complexity of recognizing neurodivergence in a system that perpetuates ableism.
Through anti-ableist practices, participants depicted avenues to begin to transform the current disability paradigm to a neurodiversity paradigm. Participants imagined that if the school system and individual teachers began to employ these anti-ableist practices, it would communicate that they were informed and aware of the ableism students face as well as their genuine interest in helping neurodivergent students succeed.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I shared participant portraits, study themes and an intersectional analysis to develop a rich, complex and nuanced narrative of study findings. Within the current disability paradigm, participants experienced ableism that became internalized. Participants’ narratives described a slow coincidental process of finding hope and help while resisting ableism in order to arrive at self-understanding and redefined definitions and visions of success. This allowed participants to have a vision for their futures that allowed them to utilize their strengths and accept and embrace their weaknesses. Within a neurodiversity paradigm, participants imagined that normalizing diversity by automatically giving resources and support to all students could circumvent inscribed and internalized ableism. In a neurodiversity paradigm, participants imagined arriving at the same or deeper self-understanding and vision for their future earlier in their educational experiences and with significant and continuous support from the school system and people around them. Participants identified anti-ableist practices that they believed would further support them within the current disability paradigm as well as a paradigm shift towards a neurodiversity paradigm. Throughout study findings, intersectional experiences of power and oppression are central and inextricable from participants’ lived experiences and their visions for a neurodiversity paradigm. Participant narrative imaginings reinforced the importance of employing an intersectional approach to a neurodiversity paradigm. With a paradigm shift, participants believed that they would achieve greater wellness, self-acceptance and self-confidence.
The concluding chapter will summarize and link key study findings to current literature; articulate implications for research, practice and policy; explore critical reflexivity during the research process; and note limitations and future research opportunities.


5.0 Discussion

In this closing chapter, I use an emancipatory and intersectional framework to discuss how the key research findings fit into and expand current literature as well as their implications for social work practice, research, policy and neurodiversity movement building. Key themes from my critical reflexivity practice are shared, and limitations and opportunities for future research are discussed. Finally, the research journey is summarized and brought to a close.

5.1 Key Findings

Grounding in the starting place of lived experiences, I asked: how do self-identified dyslexic people construct their life narratives around the dominant narratives of dyslexia? Then I inquired about my main question: what is the emancipatory potential of the neurodiversity paradigm for self-identified dyslexics? The exploratory conversations that I had with 12 self-identified dyslexic young adults with diverse intersecting identities from the Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario region revealed rich, intricate and complex data about the emancipatory potentials of the neurodiversity paradigm. Key findings revealed that an intersectional lens was central and inextricable from participant lived experiences and visions of a neurodiversity paradigm, and that systemic policies and practices maintain ableism and a culturally created neurotype hierarchy in which neurotypical ways of knowing are valued above dyslexic ways of knowing. The neurodiversity paradigm inspired visions for systemic and structural change which considered the wellbeing of dyslexic people and included anti-ableist practices to initiate a transformative shift in disability paradigms. In the following section, I examine the study key findings through the present landscape of literature.

Revealing and Challenging Neuronormativity and Ableism

One of the main goals of the neurodiversity paradigm is to name culturally and socially produced neuronormative standards and expectations as well as challenge the ways these standards disadvantage and oppress neurodivergent people (Chapman, 2020c; Rosqvist et al., 2020a; Walker, 2014; Yergeau, 2017). Although study findings confirmed
literature that demonstrates dyslexic people internalize feelings of shame, embarrassment and self-doubt (Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2019; Nalavany et al., 2011), I strived to uncover underlying systemic and social practices maintaining these individualized beliefs using an intersectional and narrative dialogic/performance analysis (Christensen & Jensen, 2012; Riessman, 2008). Applying a neurodiversity paradigm lens, practices that expressly or inadvertently modeled and maintained a social hierarchy based on neurotype alongside other socially constructed hierarchies were revealed in participants’ lived experiences and will be discussed in relation to the literature in this section (Chapman, 2020c; Rosqvist et al., 2020a).

Crip theorist Robert McRuer (2006) and neurodiversity studies scholar, Remi Yergeau (2017) argue that prevailing Western culture pushes us to embody and perform able-bodiedness and neurotypicality, akin to how we are trained from infancy to reproduce and embody the performance of heteronormative gender roles. Dyslexic participants in this study experienced a conflict between their embodied way of knowing and the expectations of the systems and adults around them which exemplifies a systemic cultural push towards neurotypicality (Cosenza, 2014a; 2014b; Granger, 2010). Often taking place when participants failed to meet academic or class participation expectations, identifying moments marked dyslexic participants’ self-perception as deviant or inferior and made knowable the unspoken, yet expected embodiment of neurotypicality (Cosenza, 2014b; Granger, 2010; Yergeau, 2017). In other instances, participants’ intersecting identities were intertwined in these identifying moments where rather than visibilizing a failure to meet neurotypical standards, stereotypes of intersecting identities, such as race, were active when participants’ deviance was perceived as laziness or lack of motivation (Banks, 2017; Iqṭadar & Ellison, 2020). As each participant shared identifying moments and the ways that these moments impacted their narrative, the presence, power and influence of
invisible standards of neurotypicality as well as other socially constructed norms such as white supremacy and heteronormative gender roles were made visible.

The inadvertent enforcement of neurotypicality and a social hierarchy based on neurotype continued during participants’ life stories through systemic processes (Chapman, 2020c; Rosqvist et al., 2020a). Participants experienced the institutionalized solution to dyslexia, described by Cosenza (2014b) as educational disciplining, as they moved through processes of identification, assessment and attempted remediation. In Ontario, dyslexic students access educational supports and accommodations through an IEP determined by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) in which, “The IPRC will decide whether the student is an exceptional [disabled] pupil and, if so, what type of educational placement is appropriate” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, para.1; 2017). Often separated from their classmates for testing or remedial support with no explanation other than the expressed concern and worry of adults, many participants described the deceptive, marginalizing and stigmatizing experience associated with the IEP and IPRC processes. Although laid with good intentions, evidenced by the IPRC’s use of the word “exceptional” rather than disabled (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007; 2017), participants experienced the systemic unfolding of the IPRC and remedial process as a systemically enforced public performance of disability. As Maddy described, “Shuffled back and forth, that just makes me look like an idiot.” Maddy describes the distance between the systemic process which made her look like an idiot and her embodied way of being, learning and understanding. Participants’ lived experiences aligned with the autoethnographic work of dyslexic scholar Cosenza (2017) who noted that the American Disability Act puts the responsibility of disclosing dyslexia and advocating for accommodations and support provisions on disabled students: “This is the individualization of dyslexia, making a systemic issue into an individual’s problem. The ideological production of dyslexia through naming and accommodating what differs from the mythical norm is systemic,” (p. 7). Through the lens of the neurodiversity paradigm, the IPRC
process as experienced by study participants reduced dyslexic ways of knowing to a deviation from the ‘normal child,’ individualizing the solution to whether or not, with remedial help, dyslexic participants could achieve or at the very least perform the neurotypical standard institutionalized in the education system (Cosenza, 2017; Waltz, 2020).

Leonardo and Broderick (2011) describe the ways that schools uphold white supremacy and hierarchies of intelligence, and how these systems of power interlock to maintain one another. These themes were seen in participant narratives in various ways. Jonah’s experience of losing his ethnic language in order to prioritize his success in Ontario’s Western, English-language school system was one glaring example of how schools’ recommendations based on neuronormativity overlook the importance of cultural knowledge and connection through language, upholding both neuronormativity and white supremacy. Another example was when schools held low expectations of Black participants mirroring DisCrit literature. This occurred when Black participants’ learning struggles were perceived as deviance or lack of motivation and when they were diagnosed and placed in segregated and lower academic classrooms and streams (Banks, 2017; Broderick & Leonardo, 2013; Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). The portraits of participants of color in this study offer nuanced, intersectional qualitative data that supports current DisCrit research.

Economic stability was another intersectional identity that interlocked with participants’ experiences of neuronormativity. MacDonald & Deacon (2019) found that dyslexic people whose families were experiencing economic instability struggled to access a diagnosis and supports. Participants who came from homes with economic security accessed help through private academic supports or had increased access to their parents’ time and its resulting support with schoolwork. Some participants who came from homes with economic insecurity described accessing help from community organizations while others struggled to find help. The financial burden of acquiring a diagnosis also significantly impacted participants who were university students because their schools’ ALC required an updated diagnosis to access accommodations.
All participants who attended university described completing portions of their education without accommodations as a result of not being able to afford an updated diagnosis. These study findings illustrated the precarity of accessing support especially when disability and economic insecurity intersect.

DisCrit and neurodiversity paradigm researchers suggest that ableist norms result in the neurotypical majority responding with some degree of prejudice, misunderstanding, discrimination and oppression to neurominorities (Iqtadar & Ellison, 2020; Seale, 2017; Walker, 2014). This study supports the small amount of current research that illustrates this takes place for dyslexic people specifically (Banks, 2017; Griffin & Pollack, 2009; Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010). Participants described an overwhelming number of subtle and overt ways in which their teachers, school staff and parents misunderstood their neurotype, consciously refused to accommodate their needs, created barriers to accessing help and overtly reinforced an ableist understanding of dyslexia. Stigmatization of the dyslexic neurotype was solidified in participants’ experiences of bullying or acute awareness of the possibility of bullying if they stopped blending in with their peers. Sue (2010) defines microaggressions as subtle, brief everyday exchanges that send oppressive messages based on group membership. Among race, gender and class minorities, her research demonstrates that repeated microaggressions can result in low self-esteem, disengagement, forced compliance with a dominant group expectation, fatigue and hopelessness (Sue, 2010). I believe Sue’s theory of microaggressions can be useful to understand the subtle and repeated experiences of ableism described by participants as well as their expectations of ableism. Participants described an expectation of ableist microaggressions particularly when advocating for help or accommodations and while receiving feedback on schoolwork. These findings mirror findings by Clouder et al. (2020) that found, in a systematic review of neurodiversity in higher education, that the main limiting factor to the usefulness of institutionally provided supports was the expectation of stigma. Participants’ experiences in my
findings display the expectation and experience of various degrees of prejudice, misunderstanding and discrimination in the form of microaggressions and overt discrimination.

All study participants came to understand a socially constructed hierarchy of neurology through their direct experience or observation of educational disciplining processes. Participants described this understanding in various ways that resembled a spectrum between “dumb” and “smart” in which they were constantly self-monitoring and self-disciplining to establish a position as far from “dumb” as possible (Banks, 2017; Cosenza, 2010; 2017). Most study participants internalized neurotypical norms culturally and socially communicated. This was illustrated through coming to believe negative messages about themselves, believing their accommodations were unfair and giving up on their success. Participants described the multiple strategies they used to pass\textsuperscript{10} as non-dyslexic, often sacrificing access to accommodations and help in the process. Self accounts and research demonstrate the significant negative mental health impacts of masking\textsuperscript{11} for autistic people (Cage & Troxell-Whiteman, 2019; Heidel, 2019; Pearson & Rose, 2021; Thornton, 2021) and passing for disabled people (Campbell, 2008). A place for possible future research could explore the mental health impact of passing for dyslexics and how this relates to dominant research documenting low self confidence, self-doubt, shame and embarrassment.

Moreover, study findings demonstrate that the systemic policies and practices intended to create accessible learning opportunities resulted in maintaining a socially and culturally accepted hierarchy based on neurotype and intersecting systems of power. Unlike the majority of research about dyslexia that maintains an individualized understanding of negative self-concepts, I argue that these self-perceptions can be linked to neuronormativity. For dyslexic

\textsuperscript{10}Passing defined by Leary (1999, as cited in Campbell, 2008) occurs when disabled people perceive danger in disclosing disability and choose to maintain an appearance of ableness. Passing often results in the disabling or destroying of the self in an attempt to safeguard the self.

\textsuperscript{11}Masking is described by autistic writers as changing how one acts to pass as neurotypical or to reduce the discomfort neurotypical people feel (Heidel, 2019; Thornton, 2021).
participants, the institutional practices of the IPRC and IEP processes modeled and maintained neuronormative standards and the stigma of neurodivergence. In participants’ lived experiences, neuronormativity was enacted in overt ableist experiences and ableist microaggressions on the relational level, and on the personal level through internalized ableism and the felt need to pass as non-dyslexic. In this study, the neurodiversity paradigm offered an alternative way to understand these systemic practices that often go unseen in the lives of dyslexic individuals when current paradigms of disability are relied upon for analysis (Chapman, 2020c; Freire, 1970; Rosqvist et al., 2020a; 2020b). This study finding aligns with the autoethnographic work of dyslexic and DisCrit scholars (Banks, 2017; Consenza, 2010; 2014a; 2014b; 2014c 2017; Granger, 2010) as well as broader DisCrit and neurodiversity studies literature which focus on a broad range of disabled identities (Iqtadar & Ellison, 2020; Walker, 2014; Yergeau, 2017).

**Emancipatory Potentials of the Neurodiversity Paradigm**

Study findings demonstrated that dyslexic participants envision emancipatory potentials in the neurodiversity paradigm when implemented alongside an intersectional approach. This study is among the first to document the opinions of a group of dyslexic individuals directly about the neurodiversity paradigm and expand current literature that reflects the perspectives of non-dyslexic professionals and dyslexic autoethnographic perspectives (Griffin & Pollack, 2009; Fitzwater, 2017; Rappolt-Schlichtmann et al., 2018; Rentenbach et al., 2017). Study findings showed that dyslexic individuals believed a neurodiversity paradigm (1) better conceptualized their experience of a dyslexic identity, (2) necessitated an intersectional approach to diversity, (3) inspired a focus on supports rather than individual deficits, and (4) asserted a prioritization of self-understanding and wellness rather than reproducing and enacting a neurotypical norm. These four thematic areas will be examined below in detail.

The neurodiversity paradigm asserts that neurological diversity is the norm and thus neurodiver-gences, such as dyslexia, are not inherently pathological, tragic, negative or unhealthy
Participants readily agreed with and supported reconceptualizing their dyslexic identity as part of normal human variance. Jace for example stated, “If someone asked me about dyslexia, I would just say they learn differently. I wouldn't say their abilities are less.” Most participants understood their dyslexia as an inseparable part of their identity which brought both positive and challenging experiences into their lives. Rosqvist et al. (2020) write:

Neurodiversity orientations tacitly assume neurodivergence as a potentially valuable form of human existence. Acknowledging neurological difference does not imply that all difference is good in itself, or that human traits associated with neurodivergence are always desirable, but it accepts that there are ‘good’ and ‘not so good’ traits in all human beings. (p.7)

Many participants spoke about the “not so good” traits of dyslexia such as annoyances and frustrations that came with reading, writing and other aspects of schoolwork and everyday life. They also spoke about the “good” traits, often significant strengths, that connected to the career paths they chose or envisioned. The strengths that participants articulated were frequently parallel to strengths associated with the dyslexic neurotype in research literature, such as spatial, narrative and interconnected reasoning (Armstrong, 2010; 2015; Eide & Eide, 2011). Similar to the neurodiversity paradigm, dyslexia researchers Eide & Eide (2011), state, “we’re claiming that certain talents are as much a part of dyslexic processing as the better-known challenges” (p.17). Findings in this study indeed underscore the theories of both the neurodiversity paradigm as well as current strengths-based dyslexia research that reflects the inextricably intertwined nature of the strengths and weaknesses of the dyslexic neurotype.

Neurodiversity theorists argue that the primary sources of suffering for neurodivergent people are social exclusion and marginalization rather than inherent individualized characteristics (Chapman, 2020b). Dyslexic participants in this study significantly supported this theoretical perspective through their stories of lived experiences and their visions for a
neurodiversity paradigm future. After I asked Alan how a neurodiversity paradigm may have changed his experiences, he reflected, “I like it. That’s a good theory. I think it’s highly accurate too because I didn’t learn the same way the kids in my Learning Difficulty class learned. I learned my own way.” When study participants re-imagined their lives through a neurodiversity paradigm, they shared that the most significant difference would be that dyslexia would be normalized and supported in their schools as well as other contexts, such as the workplace. In Marie’s neurodiversity paradigm imaginings, she stated, “[Workplaces] would have an open space where you’re actually able to tell people that, ‘Hey. Look. I have dyslexia,’” (Marie). The desire to feel safe being truthful about one’s neurotype illustrated the suffering of social exclusion and marginalization that dyslexic individuals experience.

When study participants spoke about the neurodiversity paradigm, they identified the need to address the stigma associated with their dyslexic neurotype in tandem with the stigma and social inequity of their intersecting experiences of oppression. Participants named diverse intersecting experiences including racialization, economic instability, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, sizeism, and sanism that would need to be transformed. For example, Marie re-imagined her university experience where her Black identity would be welcomed and valued, and where supports for mental health and disability would be central, normalized and easy to find. Participants also emphasized the ways systems of power impacted their families and communities, and the need for these systems to be addressed to support their wellness in a neurodiversity paradigm. For example, Josh spoke about the ways his family’s financial stress interlocked with his involvement in the criminal justice system, drug use, dyslexia and the inaccessible nature of alternative schooling options. For Josh, a neurodiversity paradigm addressed these intersecting inequities. As evidenced in participant narratives, an intersectional approach to neurodiversity is essential. This sentiment is echoed in DisCrit literature (Annamma et al., 2013; Broderick & Leonardo, 2013; Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011) and some neurodiversity studies literature (Giwa Onaiwu, 2020; Russell, 2020;
Yergeau, 2017). However, there are also neurodiversity scholars arguing for a more prominent focus on intersectionality and its further incorporation into current conceptualizations of neurodiversity (Giwa Onaiwu, 2020).

To confront the stigma of neurodivergence in schools, dyslexic participants employed the emancipatory potential of neurodiversity to envision making diverse resources, supports, teaching styles and assignments automatically and readily available to everyone. To begin, participants imagined that all students would have access to a quiet room to write tests if they desired, be encouraged to complete assessments in diverse formats and be provided teacher feedback focused on supporting individual learning instead of peer competition. Classrooms would truly be places for neurodivergent and neurodominant students. Participants emphasized that these interventions could confront systemic practices that enabled ableism while also supporting their academic success. Specifically, participants identified the following ableist systemic practices that they believed could be eliminated with these changes: the requirement to disclose and prove their worthiness of supports, the focus on peer comparison, the financial barriers to diagnosis and identification, and the negative preconceived assumptions about neurodivergent students that they often felt they needed to confront. Like other research within neurodiversity studies, these participant findings identify necessary changes in the education system and human resource allocation, rather than individual remediation (Armstrong, 2017; Chapman, 2020c; Rosqvist et al., 2020a; Russell, 2020; Sumner & Brown, 2015).

Dyslexic participants’ collective vision of neurodiversity-informed classrooms, where “everyone is with everyone,” (Freeman), reflect the principles developed in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), DisCrit and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Annamma et al., 2013; De Walt & Barker, 2020; Rappolt-Schlichtmann et al., 2018). Scholars argue that a combination of intersectional teaching approaches that incorporate historical and social contexts, and UDL (which believes an accommodation that supports one student will support all students) can allow education systems to more adequately and equitably address the needs of students with
dynamic and intersectional identities (De Walt & Barker, 2020; Whitenack et al., 2019). Like participants’ visions for a neurodiversity paradigm, UDL advocates for multiple means of representation, engagement and expression of class material (CAST, 2020). Preliminary studies have shown that a UDL teaching model supports dyslexic students’ motivation and class participation (Rappolt-Schlichtmann et al., 2018). Intersectional, culturally sustaining pedagogy and neurodiversity approaches stress that confronting systemic injustice and stigma in the classroom requires naming, discussing and reflecting upon the multiple systems of power at play in the classroom context and material directly with students (De Walt & Barker, 2020; Fitzwater, 2017; Whitenack et al., 2019). Similar to this scholarship, participants reflected that extending flexibility to all students could support intersectional needs such as the needs of English language learners, newcomers, parents, students managing mental illness as well as disabled students. Finally, DisCrit renounces the segregation of students based on ability and promotes unqualified belonging in both schools and society which participants emphasized and illustrated as well (Annamma et al., 2013). These burgeoning theories and teaching approaches support the intersectional, neurodiversity-informed classrooms that study participants envisioned.

Participants expressed, in addition, a shared desire for systemic support to access self-understanding and a pathway towards wellbeing, further aligning their collective vision with neurodiversity scholarship (Armstrong, 2010; 2015; Chapman, 2020b). Participants wanted to access and understand learning strategies that worked for them and incorporated their personal strengths and weaknesses. In their neurodiversity paradigm visions, significant systemic support would be provided early in their educational journey to gain deep self-understanding, instead of having to rely on personal perseverance, determination and unpredictable moments of hope and help, as was the case in their lived experiences. They stressed that if adults in their lives accepted and supported their strengths and weaknesses, they would have faced less ableism, achieved greater academic success and embodied greater self-acceptance and
confidence in who they were, inclusive of their dyslexic identity. Participants believed that it was essential that teachers have the time and resources to understand their students to support this. Contrary to Griffin & Pollack (2009) who suggest that the label of dyslexia may need to be removed to reduce stigma, many participants in this study shared that if neurodivergence was destigmatized, labels and testing could help teachers and students understand themselves. Similarly, autistic and crip scholars have articulated that when neurotype labels support creating culturally defined groups, labels can support individuals in connecting with communities that promote self-acceptance, understanding and community building (Chapman, 2020c; Clare, 2017; Singer, 2017).

Study participants articulated that they did not believe most teachers intentionally stigmatized or perpetuated ableism, rather they thought that teachers lacked resources, including time and training. Participants thought it would be important for teachers and school staff to access training to develop a robust understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of multiple neurotypes, and the range of supports that could be beneficial and affirming to students. In addition, training would be required to understand the stigma and stereotypes that dyslexic students face. This reflects literature that advocates for equity and reflexivity training to confront multiple systems of power and oppression facing students (De Walt & Barker, 2020; Griffin & Pollack, 2009; Hanafin et al., 2007 as cited in Seale, 2017; Whitenack et al., 2019). Interestingly, as study participants articulated their visions of increased resources, they simultaneously reflected internalized societal messages of austerity. Many participants stated that they knew it was too much to request a classroom that would actually support their neurotype while others stated that they felt both uncomfortable asking and knew additional resources were required to confront the stigma and learning barriers they faced in the current disability paradigm. Marie for example said, “It sounds entitled to be like, cater to me, but it’s a lot of kids that have that issue [requiring diverse teaching and learning methods]. And yeah, they need to also thrive, right. So, you have to find a way.” I understood these sentiments as an
extension of the ableism that dyslexic participants had internalized after years of receiving messages that individualized their challenges and justified limited resources through restricted budgets that required austerity, that notably continue to exclude and stigmatize them.

In summary, study participants found significant emancipatory potential when they envisioned their life stories through a neurodiversity paradigm. Participants illustrated that systemic and structural changes would take place in a neurodiversity paradigm to support all diverse learners in the classroom. Participants emphasized this would require increased resources and professional training. Study participants imagined that these structural changes would have supported them in accepting and embracing their identities, inclusive of their dyslexic neurotype and intersecting stigmatized identities. More important than academic success, dyslexic participants believed that these systemic changes would reduce social and internalized stigma and support their wellness, positive self-concept and ability to thrive. These findings are therefore consistent with research found in support of UDL, culturally sustaining pedagogy and neurodiversity studies.

**Anti-Ableist Practices to Initiate a Paradigm Shift**

Participants in this study requested a recognition that they are arriving in classrooms with previous experiences and expectations of ableism as well as intersecting oppressions. These experiences make it incredibly difficult to assert their learning needs, participate in classrooms and ask for help and accommodations. The impact of previous ableist experiences on participants’ identity parallels what McCarthey & Moje (2002) describe for other minority groups:

experiences [students] have had in their families, their previous experiences with institutions such as schools, as well as the larger social and political frameworks in which they have operated, have shaped their classroom interactions. In turn, who they are as individuals in terms of race, gender, and class contributes to classroom interactions.

(p.229)
Previous research demonstrates that students facing racial, gender and class oppression in the classroom lack a sense of safety, are reluctant to engage and expect to experience microaggressions (hooks, 1994; Sue, 2010). This study’s findings indicate that dyslexic students experience a similar lack of safety as described in the literature. While study participants emphasized the requirement for systemic and structural changes to shift towards a neurodiversity paradigm, they identified anti-ableist practices that teachers, school staff and parents could enact. If utilized by people who are critical of ableism and the current paradigms of disability and other systems of oppression, participants felt that anti-ableist practices could begin to confront ableism and make classrooms safer and more welcoming for diverse dyslexic students.

This study found that dyslexic participants want school professionals to talk and teach about neurodiversity, as well as other stigmatized identities, in order to reframe and destigmatize difference. Study participants believed that by framing learning supports through a neurodiversity paradigm on a school-wide, class-wide and one-to-one context, school professionals could support destigmatizing, and depathologizing the dyslexic neurotype. As Jonah articulated, “You’ve got to remove the stigma. Teach kids that it’s alright and that there’s nothing wrong with them.” In addition to neurotype, participants articulated the need to destigmatize multiple experiences of difference. For example, Silas articulated their desire for mental health identities, such as depression and bipolar to be more readily discussed in a destigmatized way in schools. Participants felt that the practice of naming and talking about difference would equip them with a more accurate and empowering way to understand themselves and could nurture greater empathy and understanding across neurotypes as well as their intersecting identities. By framing dyslexia as a naturally occurring neurodiversity, school professionals would be decentering a neuronormative perspective (Rosqvist et al., 2020a). Validating neurodivergent ways of knowing and inviting a critical inquiry examining why
disability is presently framed as a deficit, alongside additional critical discussions, could empower dyslexic students to share and express their own ways of knowing (Freire, 1970).

Participants articulated that support and encouragement to access accommodations and remain engaged was another way that school professionals could help counter present stigma and ableism. Participants in this study asserted that educational professionals could normalize, encourage and support engagement with accommodations, resource rooms and learning help. In addition, participants shared that focusing on next steps for an individual student’s learning rather than on grades, peer comparison and competition could reduce the impacts of internalized and expectations of ableism. I believe these findings connect to the practice of microaffirmations explored in Critical Race Theory (CRT). In research that investigates their impact for racialized individuals, microaffirmations have been defined as small actions that empower individuals to thrive in environments where they may feel marginalized, hopeless or stigmatized (Rowe, 2008 as cited in Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021). Microaffirmations have been found to be effective at allowing people of color to feel more supported and empowered in spaces where they expect racial microaggressions (Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021).

Microaffirmations that normalize and demonstrate support for neurodivergence and accessing supports could combat expectations of stigma or “tension,” as described by Jace, while accessing accommodations and supports. Furthermore, microaffirmations of an individual dyslexic student’s efforts, next steps and challenges could help combat the hopelessness and defeat that many participants described embodying after experiencing repeated failures. While individual teachers cannot shift the disability paradigm in an entire school or society, small neurodiversity affirmations based in training and awareness of ableism and neurodiversity could lead to dyslexic students feeling increased comfort, support and engagement in classrooms.

To conclude, the invitation for participants to imagine a neurodiversity paradigm led to envisioning anti-ableist practices. Specifically, participants imagined educational professionals employing a neurodiversity lens to reframe dyslexia and offer microaffirmations to encourage
dyslexic individuals to access accommodations, help and maintain school engagement. As evidenced by related literature and anti-ableist study findings, if teachers, school staff and parents applied anti-ableist practices with a critical understanding of current disability paradigms, ableism and intersectionality, the wellbeing of dyslexic students could be further supported. Set alongside anti-racist and other anti-oppression classroom practices, anti-ableist practices articulated by study participants could act as “self-determination preparation,” as described by Banks (2017, p.106) by equipping students with the skills and empowerment to recognize and correct racism and ableism, amongst other experiences of oppression. Anti-ableist study findings expand on existing calls for affirming professionals (Jackson-Perry, 2020; Walker & Raymaker, 2021) who focus on supporting neurodivergent people inclusive of their disabled identity.

5.2 Contributions and Implications

Study findings offer contributions and implications for multiple sectors. In the section that follows, I discuss their implications for social work practice, policy, research and neurodiversity movement building.

Social Work Practice

Study findings have important implications for the field of social work. As a profession committed to strength-based principles, social justice and building knowledge with marginalized communities, social work aligns naturally with the principles of the neurodiversity paradigm (Gibson, 2020; Haney, 2018). With this basis of values, social workers are well positioned to support the disability paradigm shift articulated by participants on both macro and micro levels.

Social workers employed in educational institutions and policy can support necessary systemic and structural changes described in study findings. Social workers are trained to evaluate systemic oppression, support equity and facilitate organizational change (Haney, 2018). Study findings articulate the ways that the present systemic practices of identifying and
accommodating dyslexic students lead to intersectionally complex marginalization and stigmatization at all levels of education from elementary to post-secondary. Study findings suggest that the neurodiversity paradigm could support the wellbeing of dyslexic individuals. With adequate training and awareness, school social workers could highlight the systemic practices that lead to the stigmatization of neurodivergent students and advocate for policy and practices that align with a neurodiversity paradigm. School social workers could also advocate for professional trainings to support the education and increased empathy of school staff about ableism and neurodiversity. Moreover, social workers could support and advocate for the recognition of the present neuronormative systems and the shift towards a disability paradigm that centers and supports neurodivergent wellbeing.

Study findings also suggest the importance of understanding ableism and neurodiversity for counsellors. Participants’ narratives not only illustrate the harmful ways that the current disability paradigm is internalized by dyslexic individuals, they also make visible the great effort exerted by dyslexic people to conceal and pass as non-dyslexic. These findings indicate that many dyslexic individuals experience the impacts of microaggressions and traumatic stress. School counsellors need an understanding of the harmful impacts of the current neuronormative understanding of dyslexia, internalized ableism and stereotypes faced by dyslexic students. This understanding would allow counsellors to think critically about disability when it is and is not disclosed, for example when clients demonstrate significant school anxiety, resistance and failure or when narratives of lack of exertion or intentional defiance are proposed. Study findings indicate that this critical analysis is especially important for dyslexic individuals who have intersecting experiences of oppression. Neurodivergent students could benefit from school counsellors bringing this perspective and critical analysis to multidisciplinary teams making decisions about how best to support struggling students both identified and unidentified as disabled.
Study findings also suggest that the neurodiversity paradigm may offer an alternative narrative that holds emancipatory understandings of dyslexia. Counsellors who have an understanding of the neurodiversity paradigm could support neurodivergent individuals through integrating affirming practice into their social work practice (Jackson-Perry, 2020). By combining a neurodiversity paradigm with other anti-oppressive practices, counsellors could support individual clients to develop understandings of their dyslexic and intersecting identities that affirm and increase their ways of knowing, self-defined wellbeing and conceptualizations of success.

Moreover, the field of social work has much to offer to a disability paradigm shift that supports and affirms neurodivergent identities. Developing a nuanced understanding of systemic ableism as experienced by a diversity of neurodivergent individuals will be necessary in social work training to prepare future social workers to support neurodivergent wellbeing and resist ableism on a systemic and internalized level (Dupré, 2012). Social work classrooms offer an excellent opportunity for social work faculty professors to exemplify integrating anti-ableist practices and a neurodiversity paradigm into practice.

**Policy**

During this research project, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) launched a public inquiry into the experiences of students who struggle with reading, “The Right to Read” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2019). The guiding “scope of the inquiry” of The Right to Read did not invite critical reflections on the deficit understanding of reading disabilities or student experiences of ableism and marginalization (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2019). Study findings in this study stress that the continued stigmatization and deficit focus of dyslexia through the current disability paradigm are the central contributors to dyslexic people’s negative sense of self, internalized ableism and academic struggles. Research findings indicate that a broad analysis that includes understandings of disability, experiences of ableism and neurodiversity in policy research, such as The Right to Read, are essential. Important
information about the experiences and barriers for students experiencing difficulties with reading may be overlooked within research that omits these factors. Study findings indicate that embracing a neurodiversity paradigm may invite further emancipation and empowerment of dyslexic and neurodivergent individuals within the Ontario school system.

**Research**

This project contributes to neurodiversity studies and the use of a dyslexic methodology. With the first neurodiversity studies reader (Rosqvist et al., 2020b) published during this research project, I am excited to contribute the thoughts, perspectives and perceptions of a group of self-identified dyslexic people to the growing body of neurodiversity literature. This study expands our presence beyond theoretical and autoethnographic research as well as research from the perspective of professionals (Griffin & Pollack, 2009; Fitzwater, 2017; Rappolt-Schlichtmann et al., 2018; Rentenbach et al., 2017).

During this project I utilized a dyslexic methodology to subvert academic writing norms and sense making (Cosenza, 2014a; 2014b; 2017; Granger, 2010). Unlike Cosenza (2014a; 2017) and Granger (2010) whose primary data collection and analysis was a dyslexic methodology, my use of it was the conscious choice to name and include the dyslexic ways of knowing (at least the ones that I am conscious of) that informed the study in its documentation. As I did this, the impact of my dyslexic processing style on this research project became clearer to me. It also made me wonder about the absence of neurotype positioning by researchers while reflecting on our roles as researchers to bolster consciousness of processing, analyzing and writing diversity as well as accessibility. I hope to see an expanding array of dyslexic and neurotype specific methodologies that honor and make use of our neurodiversity.

**Neurodiversity Movement Building**

Speaking with fellow dyslexic people about our lived experiences of ableism, our strategies of resistance and our visions for a neurodiversity embracing future has been healing and relieving for me. I now know that many of us carry stories of defiance and visions for change
within us. I now know that the neurodiversity paradigm *does* inspire us to problem solve and believe, even for a moment, that we too are deserving of classrooms, teaching and resources that fill us with ease and curiosity. This research has demonstrated that coalition-building between neurodivergent communities or *cross-neurotype* (Hillary, 2020) could potentially strengthen the neurodiversity movement and offer transformative intra-categorical partnerships (Collins, 2015). Scholars and activists, engaged in an identity-based analysis, are discussing the need to extend beyond singular identity groups and find pathways to intersectional strength to end marginalization, stigma and inadequate resources (Chapman, 2020b; McWade et al., 2015; Walker & Raymaker, 2021; Yergeau, 2017). Coming together under banners of *anti-normalization* and *anti-medical model* offer opportunities to build partnerships between neurodivergent, disabled, Indigenous, refugee, gender nonconforming and C/S/X communities for example (McWade et al., 2015).

Finally, I hope to see coalitions built between neurodivergent scholars, activists and education professionals. The individualization of systemic issues takes place on the bodies of marginalized people but also through the individual professionals who execute systemic ableist practices. While many of these findings focus on education professionals, namely teachers, study participants stressed that individual professionals are not to blame. It is my hope that teachers will connect and support the neurodivergent struggle for more resources and supports in the classroom rather than hearing an individualized critique. As seen in the stories of participants, I believe coalitions between education professionals and neurodivergent students is of utmost importance to a paradigm shift.

5.3 Critical Reflexivity

Before I close, I wanted to share some notes from the critical reflexivity that has been a central part of this research journey. I believe sharing is important for two reasons: first, to

---

12 The C/S/X acronym refers to mental health consumers, psychiatric survivors and ex-patients who are collectively fighting for a critical revisioning of the mental health system.
interrogate the idea of certified knowledge and rather make visible my perspective and standoff (Collins, 2009); and second, to explore how my choices in this project have both resisted and maintained dominant social positions and their resulting lived realities (Kondrat, 1999). These themes are explored in the following sections: colliding assumptions, actively anti-racist, un/re/weaving ableism and what I long to be different.

**Colliding Assumptions**

Badwall (2016) and Nadan (2017) propose that social workers need to move beyond binary thinking, for example between ‘innocence’ and ‘guilt,’ in order to make space to honestly reflect on our inevitable trespassing and contribution to reproducing harmful stereotypes and structures of power. While committed to an intersectional approach, I ventured into this project not knowing exactly how to honor this intention. As I worked to honour it, I was challenged to move towards a "multifaceted and flexible identity" and create more space for honestly looking at my assumptions and biases (Nadan, 2017). These tensions and struggles frequently arose in the context of building research relationships across differences. As participants and I cultivated a space of sharing, I noticed how both our initial assumptions of one another and our continued openness to exploring and hearing what was truly present (rather than assumed), merged together to form co-constructed research data (Riessman, 2008). For example, based on the context of my research questions, Marie shared openly about her experience in local Ontario schools. However, during our interview, I realized I had to consciously and overtly cultivate trust with Marie and provide reassurance that I was also interested in learning about her experiences in Ghana. Similarly, while Josh spoke freely about his experiences in mainstream classrooms, I recognized trust building and reassurance was required to communicate that I also valued his experience of dyslexia in the criminal justice system and alternative schooling streams. During and following interviews it felt important to reflect on my own identities, the assumptions I perceived participants and I had of each other, and the ways that I could nurture a space that
welcomed participants’ full life stories, including their intersectional experiences that confronted and questioned multiple normalizing and oppressive systems.

In other instances, I noticed how my awareness of the current literature impacted my expectations and assumptions in my research relationships. This especially came alive in my interview with James Martin whose positive outlook surprised me. During our interview I noticed that I expected his story to reflect what I had read in the literature, specifically the negative internalized impacts of living within multiple systems of oppression related to racialization, class, and immigration (Banks, 2017; Hoyles & Hoyles, 2010). Instead, I was surprised to hear his positive outlook and his ability to create distance between the oppressive structures around him and his own sense of self. Recognizing my inner reactions in our interview, I attempted to refocus on hearing his story, the way that he told it. James Martin’s narrative reminded me that while critical research spotlights systems of oppression that do articulate harmful patterns that require change, the complex nuance of each participants’ story holds much more than summarized critiques calling for transformation. He, amongst other participants’ narratives, reminded me that the story being woven in my data included both systemic injustices and the complex, intersectional, and sometimes surprising-to-me ways that participants exercised their agency to navigate these systems—James Martin’s compassion, Jace’s courageous tolerance for tension, Freeman’s immense gratitude for precarious yet helpful instances and Marie’s wise and mischievous strategies. In these instances of colliding assumptions, I tried to lean into the discomfort and imperfection of an intersectional approach and the multifaceted and flexible identity required to be open to this process (Badwall, 2016; Nadan, 2017; Weinberg, 2017).

**Actively Anti-Racist**

The data analysis phase of this study took place during the upsurge of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement following the murder of George Floyd, a 46-year old Black man, by Minneapolis police. At this time BLM was reigniting a call to action initiated by the words and
work of Angela Davis, “In a racist society, it is not enough to be a non-racist, we must be anti-racist.” My study analysis was punctuated by attending BLM protests, and reading local and global news, and scholarly writing about police violence within Black communities and within Black disabled communities. Renewed energy urged me to sit with what it means to be anti-racist in my spheres of influence. Although the data collection phase of this project was complete, the BLM movement was a central part of the political and social context present during my data analysis.

First and foremost, it is necessary to say that the weight and importance of the racial justice organizing and resistance that has taken place over this past year reaches far beyond the scope of this project. Completing research during this time has ignited my continued desire to read and put into practice the research and writing of Black DisCrit and neurodiversity studies researchers. It has brought to me more questions and queries about the neurodiversity movement than answers. In parallel, it has been a reminder to me that working to be anti-racist as a white person in our society today is a long-term commitment.

Alongside the challenge to make space for participants’ acts of resistance and agency, the BLM movement challenged me to lean into naming the systems of oppression present in participants’ narratives. Most participants illustrated their experiences with systemic injustice through the stories they chose to share, through their emphasis, tone and embodied expression. As I listened and re-listened to participants’ narratives, I grappled with the weight, importance and possibility for misinterpretation in the task of linking critical theory to the narratives that participants were sharing. I asked myself questions such as; what are the markers that indicate an experience of oppression for this particular participant? How do I recognize experiences of oppression when I do not have parallel lived experiences to draw on? What are the consequences if I choose to name versus not name possible systems of oppression in a particular narrative? The presence of the BLM movement all around me reminded me that systems of oppression were more likely present than not within participants’ narratives. With the
possibility of misinterpretation, throughout data analysis, I chose to assume that systems of oppression in respect to ableism as well as intersecting systems of oppression, namely anti-Black racism, were at play rather than not.

The BLM movements’ call to be actively anti-racist was a significant part of my critical reflexivity. Within this call, I heard a truth-telling demand to acknowledge that anti-Black racism is the norm—not the exception. With this in mind, I re-examined my literature review. What I found was the presence of non-racist mentalities within the school system—approaches that are theoretically against racism and denounce overt racism, but that lack the active reflection and self-critical work required to take up an actively anti-racist approach. These reflections and realizations soon mapped onto my study analysis. As a distinction in meaning between non-racist and actively anti-racist was crystalizing for me, I began to think about non-ableist and actively anti-ableist approaches. All of these reflections and realizations influenced my study analysis. I began to hear participants’ demand for those in power around them to employ an anti-ableist in addition to anti-racist and holistically anti-oppressive approach. The influence of the BLM movement was a clear origin of inspiration for the anti-ableist practices found. In addition to writing about the anti-ableist practices presented, I chose to center perspectives of Black, Indigenous and participants of color throughout my paper to bring attention to the intersectional reality of the dyslexic narratives that I gathered.

Un/Re/weaving Ableism

“I think people have different time zones on what they do,” (James Martin). I whisper this phrase, or others like it, to myself when “the socially average timeline for completion of this task comes between me and my text,” (Granger, 2010, section: Lessons in Reading). To me, this is the power of sharing under the umbrella of the dyslexic neurotype. There is no ticket collector at the brim requesting a psycho-educational assessment. There is just a dry place out of the cold
of ableism where we can collect these nuggets that keep us going. It is this access intimacy\textsuperscript{13} that makes it feel warm (Mingus, 2011b); to me, the exchange of nuggets is the resistance and transformation.

Ableist cold air blows into our space sometimes too though. As I look back through my research journals, I found that we were all seeking validation of our dyslexic identity. These moments were true for me when I questioned whether I should be doing this research and whether I am dyslexic enough. These moments were also palpable when I felt participants, especially self-identified participants, seeking my validation of their dyslexic identity. At first these moments surprised me. I would be hit with an inclination to look past my own shoulder with them for the expert in the room. In other moments, I could be tricked into an evaluative mindset. Following interviews, I wrote about how I felt that both of these patterns were an expression of our internalization of ableism; how society has tricked us into thinking that it is only when an expert gives us the test or the big words that our tears, stress and exclusion can be gathered into collective struggle. This echoes toxic struggles in the neurodiversity movement. Rather than thinking of neurotypes and diagnoses as something that can potentially bring us together and offer self-understanding and clarity, they can act as dividing forces of membership evaluation (Chapman, 2020c). Walker & Raymaker (2021) asserts that neuroessentialism, conceiving of neurodivergence as the need to fit neatly into a category created by pathologizing systems, limits and perpetuates a medical understanding of neurodivergence. I got better at resisting this narrative within myself and with participants in an attempt to undermine the idea that we need an expert to validate our experiences and identities (Rosqvist et al., 2020a). I wrote, “I’m realizing that the label of dyslexia is not the most important part...the most important part is [participants’] perception of themselves and the experience of being in a system that isn’t aligning with one’s learning style,” (Field notes: February 3, 2020). I believe

\textsuperscript{13} Mingus (2011b) describes access intimacy as the creation of access and liberation through new ways of being, caring and supporting one another in relationship. She states, “Access intimacy is that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs” (para.4)
this is what identifying as politically or culturally dyslexic can mean. I know that I did not
dissuade the ableist cold out of each interview or day of trying to temper my own internalized
ableism. I got more comfortable with the idea that ableism will lurk around, trick us, tease us
and make us cold even while we do our best to resist it and center neurodivergent ways of being
and visions of wellness (Rosqvist et al., 2020a).

**What I Long to Be Different**

At the end of this research journey, I look back at my orientation day and realize that I
wish for accessibility advisors that *know* and *expect* emotional decomposition from disabled
students. Decomposition, the breaking down of our sense of selves, our confidence, our ability to
advocate, disclose and compose our emotions is often the only response we have left after
repeated experiences of ableism. I hope for accessibility advisors who expect this and are plump
with resources and time. So, when one of us arrives decomposing from inside and out, they can
help gather us up, normalize and validate our emotional struggle in the current ableist system
and guide us to the supports that we need— and yes, perhaps sometimes that *is* a counsellor. I
hope that the social workers to whom we arrive have a deep understanding of ableism,
intersecting systems of power, their own ableist and oppressive assumptions and neurodiversity.
In this way, our emotions, “forms of resistance that do not yet have a recognizable language to
define it as such,” can be heard (Granger, 2010, section: Final, Very Important, Dytracting
Thoughts).

**5.4 Limitations**

This study is limited as it is a preliminary exploration of the neurodiversity paradigm
from the perspective of dyslexic individuals. It explores the specific context of dyslexic adults
between the ages of 18-30 from the Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario context. The transferability of
the findings and the theoretical implications proposed need to be examined in more depth and
in multiple contexts to ensure transferability. The absence of an established dyslexic community
in the Kitchener-Waterloo area, time restraints and the academic requirement of thesis as
individual work, limited my implementation of a participatory approach. Ideally, in following a PAR methodology, study participants would have been included in developing the research questions and study focus to ensure that my study aims reflect the concerns of the community rather than my interpretation of these concerns or my interests specifically. Similarly, in my recruitment I focused on young adults to explore the experiences of individuals who have recently been in the education system. This focus does not reflect most recent changes in educational approaches, for example in elementary grades. The group of participants who I recruited held diverse identities which resulted in rich intersectional findings. However, the diversity of the sample also limited the exploration of specific intersectional identities. Exploration of dyslexic perspectives at the intersections of Indigenous, racialized, gender, sexual orientation and class identities needs further research using multiple methodologies. In addition, the extent to which I could analyze the findings based on economic stability was limited because some participants answered the demographic survey based on their parental household and others based on their individual household. As a result, I had to rely on participants’ narratives and descriptions to inform my intersectional analysis of class. Finally, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic directly following data collection modified my research process. Most notably, the member checking meeting was changed from my original plan for an in-person discussion to a virtual discussion. Despite these limitations, this study provides a preliminary view into the perspectives of a sample of self-identified dyslexic individuals with multiple intersecting identities. It expands existing literature while leaving multiple opportunities for future research.

5.5 Opportunities for Future Research

Throughout this project, several opportunities for future research emerged. Being among the first studies that investigates neurodiversity from the perspective of a group of self-identified dyslexics, further investigation into how a neurodiversity paradigm is perceived and envisioned, implemented by and for dyslexic individuals, would expand and validate a vision of
neurodiversity. Research that explores the impact as well as barriers to implementing a neurodiversity paradigm from the perspective of dyslexic people as well as the professionals implementing the paradigm would continue informing the emancipatory possibilities of a paradigm shift. PAR studies that fully include dyslexic participants would allow future research to center the concerns and goals of dyslexic individuals more directly. Further inquiry that explores dyslexic ways of knowing and learning strategies would also continue uncovering the insight, wisdom and expertise harbored within the lived experiences of dyslexic individuals. This study was rooted in current disability paradigms that have mainly been developed and implemented through a Western worldview. Research that investigates neurodiversity from the perspectives of nondominant cultural perspectives, such as Indigenous worldviews and an anti-colonial perspective, could continue to reveal important limitations and oppressive barriers imposed by disability paradigms presented here.

Second, continued research into dyslexic experiences of ableism could deepen and validate the findings in this project. The ableist microaggression scale has investigated ableist microaggressions for individuals who have invisible physical disabilities (Kattari, 2019); this study reveals that research into microaggressions experienced by dyslexic and other invisibly neurodivergent individuals could uncover important nuance and information about the daily oppression neurodivergent people experience. Similarly, research that explores the effectiveness and impact of microaffirmations for dyslexic people would also expand this investigation. As revealed by this study, centering and prioritizing experiences of dyslexic people with intersecting identities in future research would be imperative to continuing to uncover the experiences of individuals with intersecting experiences of oppression and the unique barriers they confront.

5.6 Closing

In closing, this research project found that self-identified dyslexic young adults find significant emancipatory potential in the neurodiversity paradigm. The neurodiversity paradigm supported participants to identify neuronormative and neurodominant narratives of dyslexia;
imagine structural changes that could enact a centering of neurodiversity and increase the wellbeing of dyslexic people; and conceive of anti-ableist practices that could support a paradigm shift towards a neurodiversity paradigm. Study findings urge social workers, policy makers, researchers and educational professionals to learn about and resist ableism while working to embrace and make space for neurodiversity.
Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Monica van Schaik

has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)

Date of Issue: 28 September, 2018
Appendix B: Ethics Approval

7/20/2021

Monica van Schaik <vans0150@mylaurier.ca>

REB #6291 Clearance Notification

do-not-reply-laurier@researchservicesoffice.com <do-not-reply-
laurier@researchservicesoffice.com>

To: "van Schaik Monica(Principal Investigator)" <vans0150@mylaurier.ca>
Cc: "Suarez Eliana(Supervisor)" <esuarez@wlu.ca>, reb@wlu.ca, do-not-reply-laurier@researchservicesoffice.com

November 12, 2019

Dear Monica van Schaik

REB # 6291
Project, "Emancipatory Potentials of the Neurodiversity Paradigm: Perceptions of Self-Identified Dyslexics"
REB Clearance Issued: November 12, 2019
REB Expiry / End Date: November 30, 2020

The Research Ethics Board of Wilfrid Laurier University has reviewed the above proposal and determined that the proposal is ethically sound. If the research plan and methods should change in a way that may bring into question the project’s adherence to acceptable ethical norms, please submit a "Request for Ethics Clearance of a Revision or Modification" form for approval before the changes are put into place. This form can also be used to extend protocols past their expiry date, except in cases where the project is more than four years old. Those projects require a new REB application.

Please note that you are responsible for obtaining any further approvals that might be required to complete your project.

Laurier REB approval will automatically expire when one’s employment ends at Laurier.

If any participants in your research project have a negative experience (either physical, psychological or emotional) you are required to submit an "Adverse Events Form" within 24 hours of the event.

You must complete the online "Annual/Final Progress Report on Human Research Projects" form annually and upon completion of the project. ROMEO will automatically keeps track of these annual reports for you. When you have a report due within 30 days (and/or an overdue report) it will be listed under the ‘My Reminders’ quick link on your ROMEO home screen; the number in brackets next to ‘My Reminders’ will tell you how many reports need to be submitted. Protocols with overdue annual reports will be marked as expired. Further the REB has been requested to notify Research Finance when an REB protocol, tied to a funding account has been marked as expired. In such cases Research Finance will immediately freeze funding tied to this account.

All the best for the successful completion of your project.

(Useful links: ROMEO Login Screen; REB Students Webpage; REB Connect Webpage)

Yours sincerely,

Jayne Kalmar, PhD
Chair, University Research Ethics Board
Wilfrid Laurier University

Please do not reply directly to this e-mail. Please direct all replies to reb@wlu.ca
Appendix C: Informed Consent

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

INTERVIEW CONSENT

Emancipatory Potentials: Stories from Self-Identified Dyslexics
Principle Investigator: Monica van Schaik Master of Social Work Student
Supervisor(s): Dr. Eliana Suarez (Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Work) and Dr. Maryam Khan (Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Work)

You are invited to participate in a research study that seeks to understand:
- How dyslexia impacted your life experiences, self-perceptions, and identity
- How an understanding of dyslexia as a neurodiversity (that disability is a natural human variance in thinking and learning) may have impacted your life experiences, self-perceptions, and identity

Monica van Schaik is the principle investigator and is a Laurier Master of Social Work Student. Monica is being supervised by Dr. Eliana Suarez, Associate Professor and Dr. Maryam Khan, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Social Work.

INFORMATION/CONFIDENTIALITY

You are invited to share your experiences in a semi-structured, life history interview with Monica that will take approximately 1.5-2 hours to complete. As part of this interview, you will be invited to create a timeline of important life events and experiences with Monica. This interview will take place at a mutually agreed upon location between Monica and individual study participants. Compensation for transportation to this location is available if required for participation.

- This interview will be audio recorded. This audio recording will be kept on a password protected hard drive until transcribed (written down). Based on what you are comfortable with, after transcription, the audio recording can be deleted between March- May 2020 or kept for the possible creation a publicly available audio presentation of study results such as a podcast or webpage until June 2021. Audio recordings for sharing study findings with the public may be more accessible and authentic than written formats or recordings of someone reading transcription quotes. Identifying information, such as your name, your place of work, and names of people in your life, would not be used. Monica, Eliana, and Maryam will be the only people with access to these recordings.

  I agree to be audio recorded: YES  ______  NO  ______
  I would like my audio recording to be deleted following transcription between March- May 2020: YES  ______
  I agree to have parts of my audio recording kept for a publicly available audio presentation of the findings such as a podcast or webpage until June 2021: YES  ______

- Monica will keep the timeline that you create until December 2020 in Dr. Maryam Khan’s locked office at the Wilfrid Laurier Faculty of Social Work. Please select what you would like Monica to do with the timeline after December 2020:
Dispose of the timeline in a private and secure way.
Return the timeline to me.

- Quotes will be used in the final report of this project. Please do not participate in this study if you do not wish to have your quotations used in presentations or publications that arise from this project. Please select how you would like to be quoted:
  
  Only quote me in ways that do not allow people to know who I am.
  Do not include my name but I am not concerned about other identifiers (such as your job, ethnicity, gender, etc.)
  You can include my name and identifiers in the final report and in quotes.
  I want to read the quotes before you share them in the final report.

Between March-May 2020, Monica will invite you to take part in a feedback meeting that everyone who was interviewed is welcome to attend. You do not have to attend this meeting to take part in the study. During this meeting, Monica will share a summary narrative of your interview with you and the themes that she has found in the study data analysis. Monica will ask for your feedback about the findings to ensure they reflect your perceptions and experiences. If you prefer to provide feedback about your narrative summary individually, this can be arranged with Monica. Monica cannot ensure that what you share at this meeting will stay confidential. Everyone who participates will be asked to agree not to share information about other people outside of the meeting. Compensation for transportation to this location is available if required for participation.

- Yes, I want to be informed of the feedback meeting.
- I would prefer to have an individual interview to provide my feedback.
- No, I do not want to be informed of the feedback meeting.

- This feedback meeting will be audio recorded. This audio recording will be kept on a password protected hard drive. Monica, Eliana, and Maryam will be the only people who have access to these recordings. Monica will dispose of this audio recording by December 2020.

- Yes, I agree to be audio recorded during the feedback meeting.

**RISKS**

You might remember uncomfortable or stressful experiences about your life and experiences with dyslexia during this study. Any distress or discomfort normally stops after a short period of time. Monica will give you a list of support services that you can contact for support if this would be a benefit.

You can say that you do not want to answer any question throughout the entire study. You can stop or end the interview at any time and you can leave the feedback meeting at any time. You will still receive cash compensation if you choose to end the interview early or leave the feedback meeting early.
BENEFITS

You may feel empowered, proud, or happy after sharing your experiences with Monica and connecting with other people who may have had similar experiences to you in the feedback meeting. Your experiences and the study research may help researchers, professionals, and other people respect, support, and understand dyslexic people better.

COMPENSATION

You will be given $30 in cash for your participation in an interview and another $20 if you choose to also participate in a feedback meeting. You will still receive compensation for participating if you end the interview early, say no to answering questions, or choose to leave the feedback meeting at any time.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures you may contact the researcher, Monica van Schaik, at vans0150@mylaurier.ca or 514-746-3959 or Dr. Eliana Suarez, at esuarez@wlu.ca.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board (REB#6291), which receives funding from the Research Support Fund. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Jayne Kaimar, PhD, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 3131 or REBChair@wlu.ca.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty or change of honorarium at any time. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time. You have the right to refuse to answer any question or participate in any activity you choose.

If you withdraw from the study, you can request to have your data removed by contacting Monica until December 31, 2019.

FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION

The results of this research may be published and presented in a thesis, course project report, book, journal article, conference presentation, class presentation, on a webpage, podcast or on social media.

A summary of the study findings will be available by December 2020. If you want Monica to send you a summary of the final report, please write down your email or mailing address here: (If there is another way that you would like to receive the final report, please discuss this with Monica).

Yes, I want to receive the summary: ___________________________
CONSENT

I have read and I understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature __________________________  Date ______________

Investigator's signature __________________________  Date ______________
Appendix D: Recruitment Poster

DO YOU IDENTIFY AS DYSLEXIC?

We want to hear from you!

How has dyslexia influenced your life?

How could you have been better supported and empowered?

A formal diagnosis of dyslexia is not necessary to participate

Must be between the ages of 18-35
Live in the KW area
People are invited with diverse experiences including ethnicity, race, sexual orientation and income status.

$30 compensation for an interview and $20 for follow-up meeting will be provided

Contact Monica van Schaik, MSW Candidate
kwdyslexia@gmail.com or text 514-746-3959

THIS STUDY (REB # 6291) HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD
Appendix E: Screening Interview Guide

Emancipatory Potentials of the Neurodiversity Paradigm: Perceptions of Self-Identified Dyslexics

Pre-Interview Telephone Script:

Following Participant’s contacting me by phone, text or email, I will follow up with a short phone interview:

Length: approximately 10-15 minutes

1) Criteria for Participation:
   - Age
   - Self-identity as dyslexic

   Participants will be asked whether they identify with two of the following defining factors of dyslexia:
   - Have received a diagnosis of dyslexia by a medical professional at any point in their lifetime
   - Experience of persistent difficulty with reading or/and spelling
   - Experience of persistent difficulty with short-term/working memory, and day-to-day organization
   - Have one or more family member who has a formal diagnosis or who has experience with persistent difficulties with reading and/or spelling
   - Identify themselves to have an increased ability in three dimensional thinking, connecting ideas, narrative, and/or dynamic thinking
   - Schooling Experience: University or College/Workplace experience

2) Introduction to Study: a brief introduction to narrative analysis, the research process, participant confidentiality, compensation, and the commitment required for the study

3) Questions and Accessibility Needs: questions, accessibility needs and ways that I can make the study comfortable and convenient

4) Set date, location, and time for the interview
## Interview Question Guide

**Emancipatory Potentials: Perceptions of Self-Identified Dyslexics**

1. Consent and introduction to timeline
2. Life Story and Major Life Events  
   Tell me about your life experiences and any major events that stand out for you.
3. When and how did dyslexia intertwine into your life.  
   a. Timeline and context of diagnosis  
   b. Immediate impact of diagnosis  
   c. Long term impact of diagnosis  
   d. Present day impact of diagnosis
4. Imagining Neurodiversity: Some people with learning and developmental  
   disabilities are advocating for neurodiversity as a way of understanding disability.  
   They think that disabilities are natural human variances that need to be valued  
   equally to other ways of learning and thinking. What do you think about this  
   concept of neurodiversity? How may this have changed your life experiences?  
   a. Immediate thoughts about neurodiversity as an idea  
   b. Impact on experience of diagnosis  
   c. Impact immediately following diagnosis  
   d. Impact long term throughout life story  
   e. Impact on present day experiences
5. Wrap-up  
   a. How has it felt to talk about this journey with me today?  
   b. Before we end, would you mind completing this short demographic  
      survey?
Appendix G: Demographic Survey

Demographic Survey: Emancipatory Potentials

Principle Research: Monica van Schaik vans0150@mylaurier.ca

Please respond to the following questions as you feel comfortable.

Name/Chosen Pseudonym:

- What is your age?

- What is your gender?

- How do you identify your sexual orientation?

- Do you identify as part of an ethnic or cultural community (e.g. Jewish, Christian, Jamaican, Dutch, etc.)?

- How do you identify your race?

- What percentage of your grade 11 and 12 secondary classes were “college” or “workplace” stream?
  - 0-25%
  - 26-50%
  - 51-75%
  - 76-100%

- What best describes your household income (pooled income that supports you and your family (chosen or origin))?
  - less than $10 000
  - $10 000- $20 000
  - $20 000- $30 000
  - $30 000- $40 000
  - $40 000- $50 000
  - $50 000- $60 000
  - $60 000- $70 000
  - $70 000+

- How many dependents do you have (loved ones who you financially support)?
Is there anything else you think I should know about you?
Appendix H: Virtual Meeting Informed Consent

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT
VIRTUAL FEEDBACK MEETING CONSENT

Emancipatory Potentials: Stories from Self-Identified Dyslexics
Principle Investigator: Monica van Schaik Master of Social Work Student
Supervisor(s): Dr. Eliana Suarez (Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Work) and Dr. Maryam Khan (Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Work)

You are invited to participate in a virtual feedback meeting for a research study that seeks to understand:
- How dyslexia impacted your life experiences, self-perceptions, and identity
- How an understanding of dyslexia as a neurodiversity (that disability is a natural human variance in thinking and learning) may have impacted your life experiences, self-perceptions, and identity

Monica van Schaik is the principle investigator and is a Laurier Master of Social Work Student. Monica is being supervised by Dr. Eliana Suarez, Associate Professor and Dr. Maryam Khan, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Social Work.

INFORMATION/CONFIDENTIALITY

Between April-June 2021, Monica will invite you to take part in a virtual feedback meeting with zoom that everyone who was interviewed is welcome to attend. You do not have to attend this meeting to take part in the study. During this meeting, Monica will share a summary narrative of your interview with you and the themes that she has found in the study data analysis. Monica will ask for your feedback about the findings to ensure they reflect your perceptions and experiences. If you prefer to provide feedback about your narrative summary individually, this can be arranged with Monica. Monica cannot ensure that what you share at this meeting will stay confidential. Everyone who participates will be asked to agree not to share information about other people outside of the meeting.

- This feedback meeting will be an online video meeting using zoom. You can attend using a computer or phone. You are welcome to keep your video on or off during this meeting. You will be audio recorded. This audio recording will be kept on a password protected hard drive. Monica, Eliana, and Maryam will be the only people who have access to these recordings. Monica will dispose of this audio recording by July 2021.
- You may receive extra phone charges if you choose to attend using a phone. To avoid these additional phone charges, contact your phone provider and ensure you call the local phone number provided to you when you attend the meeting.

Yes, I agree to be audio recorded during the virtual feedback meeting_____

I would prefer to have an individual interview to provide my feedback _______

No, I do not want to attend the virtual feedback meeting_____

1
RISKS

You might remember uncomfortable or stressful experiences about your life and experiences with dyslexia during this study. Any distress or discomfort normally stops after a short period of time. Monica will give you a list of support services that you can contact for support if this would be a benefit.

You can say that you do not want to answer any question throughout the entire study. You can stop or end the interview at any time and you can leave the feedback meeting at any time. You will still receive cash compensation if you choose to end the interview early or leave the feedback meeting early.

BENEFITS

You may feel empowered, proud, or happy after sharing your experiences with Monica and connecting with other people who may have had similar experiences to you in the feedback meeting. Your experiences and the study research may help researchers, professionals, and other people respect, support, and understand dyslexic people better.

COMPENSATION

You will be given $20 if you choose to also participate in a feedback meeting. Monica will e-transfer this money to you following the feedback meeting. You will still receive compensation for participating if you choose to leave the feedback meeting at any time.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures you may contact the researcher, Monica van Schaik, at vans0150@mylaurier.ca or 514-746-3959 or Dr. Eliana Suarez, at esuarez@wlu.ca.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board (REB#6291), which receives funding from the Research Support Fund. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Jayne Kalmar, PhD, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 3131 or REBChair@wlu.ca.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty or change of honorarium at any time. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time. You have the right to refuse to answer any question or participate in any activity you choose.

FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION

The results of this research may be published and presented in a thesis, course project report, book, journal article, conference presentation, class presentation, on a webpage, podcast or on social media.
A summary of the study findings will be available by September 2021. If you want Monica to send you a summary of the final report, please write down your email or mailing address here: (if there is another way that you would like to receive the final report, please discuss this with Monica).

Yes, I want to receive the summary: __________________________________________

CONSENT

I have read and I understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this feedback meeting.

Participant’s signature ____________________________ Date ________________

Investigator’s signature ____________________________ Date ________________
References


Brante, E. W. (2013). ‘I don’t know what it is to be able to read’: How students with dyslexia experience their reading impairment. *Support for Learning, 28*(2), 79- 86.


Cameron, H., & Billington, T. (2015). The discursive construction of dyslexia by students in
higher education as a moral and intellectual good. *Disability & Society* 30(8), 1225-1240.


https://doi.org/10.1177/019685998601000205


Iqtadar, S., Hernández-Saca, D. I., & Ellison, S. (2020). “If it wasn’t my race, it was other things like being a woman, or my disability”: A qualitative research synthesis of disability research. *Disability Studies Quarterly, 40*(2). https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v40i2.6881


https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/10-principles-of-disability-justice


http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.wlu.ca/10.18061/dsq.v37i2.5374


Walker, N. (2013). *Throw away the master's tools: Liberating ourselves from the pathology paradigm.* Neurocosmopolitanism: Dr. Nick Walker’s notes on autism, neuroqueering &


