Respected and Heard: Using narratives and poetry to explore the learning experiences of mature students with disabilities in Higher Education

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Abstract

Higher Education, both in an Irish and global context, has undergone significant changes in the past thirty years. One such change is the increase in participation of groups who were previously excluded from Higher Education, such as those with disabilities and mature students. Many studies have focused on the learning experiences of students with disabilities and mature students as two distinct groups; however, few have looked at the experiences of older students with disabilities or learning difficulties in Higher Education. Informed by bio-ecological systems theory, this study explored the learning experiences of five mature students who were registered with Disability Support Services at a Higher Education Institution in Ireland. The study took the form of a narrative inquiry and gathered storied accounts of the students' learning experiences through semi-structured interviews. In conjunction with this, an arts-based 'found poetry' technique was utilised. This participative technique involved the researcher and participants co-creating poems, based on the shared reading of interview transcripts, thereby distilling the students' learning experiences into poetic form. This approach allowed the study to elevate the voices of the people who took part. The findings that emerged from this inquiry suggest that negative prior experiences in education can cause fear and self-doubt for mature students with disabilities when commencing Higher Education programmes. Previous experiences may also cause a lack of awareness of the support that is currently available, as such supports have developed considerably since the participants were last in a formal education setting. In overcoming these challenges, supports and quality educational assessment were found to be important in building confidence, which brought about the emergence of a new self-image for some participants.

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List of Acronyms

ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
AHEAD	The Association for Higher Education Access & Disability
AT	Assistive Technology
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CE	Christian Era
CRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DAWN	The Disability Advisors Working Network
DSS	Disability Support Service
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
FE	Further Education
FSD	Fund for Students with Disabilities
FSD	Fund for Students with Disabilities
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route (HEAR)

HEI	Higher Education Institution
RACE	Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations
SDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
UD	Universal Design
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UPIAS	Union of Physically Impaired against Segregation

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to introduce the research study, which seeks to explore the learning experiences of mature students with disabilities in Higher Education (HE). The chapter briefly outlines the background to the study and explores the personal and professional reasons why this research topic was chosen. Within the chapter, the origin of the idea for the research is explained and the research aims are outlined. The methodology employed is briefly described, followed by a note on intended outcomes of the research process. Lastly, the structure of the dissertation is presented, by providing a brief synopsis of the following chapters.

1.2 Background & Rationale

Higher Education (HE) in Ireland has undergone considerable change in the past 30 years (HEA, 2018a). One of the most significant changes has been the increase in participation rates of previously marginalised groups (AHEAD, 2020; HEA, 2018b). With this widened participation in HE, previously excluded groups, such as people with disabilities, are now entering our colleges and universities in greater numbers than ever before (AHEAD, 2020). The participation rates for students with disabilities in Ireland has increased from 0.7% of the overall student body in 1993 to 6.2% in 2018 (AHEAD, 2020). Likewise, mature students are another group at risk of exclusion whose numbers in HE in Ireland have expanded (HEA, 2018b). Within the Irish education system, mature students are all those aged 23 and over at the time of entering HE (Citizens' Information, 2019) and are currently seen as a key target group for enrolment by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland (HEA, 2018b). Despite the increased participation rates of these previously marginalised cohorts, inequalities still

persist within our systems of HE. For instance, students with disabilities in Ireland find it more difficult to gain employment after completing HE programmes, compared with their non-disabled peers (Pollak, 2018). A recent study has also highlighted the difficulties experienced by disabled students in accessing the social side of HE in Ireland (Rath, 2021). Inequalities persist for mature students also, the HEA's most recent study highlighted the significant financial barriers faced by prospective mature students who would like to return to education (HEA, 2021).

This study is concerned with the experiences of students from groups who were excluded in the past and stems from my interest in education's potential to both disrupt and reproduce societal inequalities (Riddell et al., 2005). Both personal and professional experiences led me to focus on the experiences of this particular cohort. I work as a Learning Support Tutor, as part of the Disability Support Service (DSS) in a Higher Education Institute (HEI). As well as this, I work in Adult Education as an adult literacy and English language teacher. In these contexts, I often support learners who were previously excluded from formal educational settings or may have had negative experiences of education in the past. As an educator in these contexts, I see it as my responsibility to advocate for and practise inclusion. For me, inclusion means building a community that gives *all* those in the classroom or on campus the opportunity to be seen and heard whilst learning. When beginning my own research journey, I wanted to carry out an inquiry that could contribute towards the building of such a community, but also inform my own practice in working with adults with disabilities or learning difficulties. Further, at a personal level, some of my closest family members have had negative experiences of an education system that was not designed to be inclusive or welcoming to those with learning differences and difficulties. These personal and professional motives led me to focus on the experiences of mature students with disabilities, in order to

give voice to their experience and inform the workings of support services in my own HEI and beyond.

As I explored the literature on this topic, it became clear that while students with disabilities in HE are receiving increased attention in broader research, the group can often be viewed homogenously, without much research on the experiences of mature students with disabilities specifically. Admittedly, there were a number of studies into the experiences of disabled students that included mature learners, along with younger students with disabilities (Langørgen & Magnus,2018; Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Jacklin et al., 2007; Riddell et al., 2005). Others had looked specifically at the experiences of mature students with dyslexia in Higher and Further Education (Caskey, 2019; Scothon, 2005). However, there appeared to be a lack of research focusing solely on the experiences of mature students with disabilities in HE. From working in adult education and learning support, I had noticed how the older learners differed to their younger peers. There was a much different dynamic in our relationship, and I could see how the older students approached their learning differently. I was also aware of the potential impact of previous negative experiences on these learners, especially when beginning their programmes of study. I wanted to investigate these observations further and thus, set out to explore the learning experiences of mature students with disabilities in HE.

1.3 Purpose of the Research Study

Within the background and rationale outlined above, a number of aims for the study were developed. Primarily, the study aims to explore the learning experiences of mature students with disabilities. Within this broad aim, the impact of prior experiences is looked at. Earlier research on the experiences of mature students suggested that school experiences can

impact individuals returning to education (Kearns, 2014; Farrell, 2012; Reay, 2002; 2003). This study aims to explore the impact of these prior experiences on students with disabilities specifically. Beyond this, the study seeks to understand the challenges and barriers to learning faced by mature students with disabilities. Barriers to learning and the participation of disabled students have received much attention from researchers (Rath, 2021; Bartz, 2020; Lister et al., 2020; Spassiani et al., 2017; Hopkins, 2011; Madriaga et al., 2010; Riddell et al., 2005; Fuller et al., 2004). I considered it would be worthwhile to examine the commonalities or differences in the barriers faced by older learners with disabilities. Lastly, the study aims to explore the successes experienced by students in this cohort. As mentioned above, much of the research has centred on challenges, which is a wholly necessary and useful research focus. However, practitioners in HE can learn from how disabled students overcome challenges and progress in HE settings.

1.4 Methodology

Narrative inquiry was identified as being the most appropriate and powerful methodology to address the above aims. Narrative research focuses on the stories of participants and contends that these stories can encapsulate experience (Lewis, 2014). In tandem, the study was framed by the bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The theory was used in order to make sense of the systemic and personal interactions the participants experienced. Using this theory and by gathering and analysing narrative accounts of prior experiences, challenges and successes, a researcher can then produce trustworthy and useful data. As mentioned earlier, I believe inclusion is about facilitating learners to be seen and heard. I reflected on this belief and wanted to build it into the research study. After reading an innovative postgraduate study (Dalton, 2017) that used a ‘found poetry’ technique

to explore students with disabilities' HE experiences I decided to incorporate this arts-based method into the project. Employed alongside semi-structured interviews, found poetry is a technique whereby pertinent or well-expressed lines from a transcript are extracted and used to form a poem (Szto et al., 2005). This technique allows participants to be both seen and heard within the research process, as the poems offer the reader a window into the learning experiences of these students.

1.5 Outcomes

Beyond the research aims, this study also has a number of intended outcomes. To realise its full potential, research must be communicated and valued by those outside of the study. For this reason, it is intended that the study can have an impact and help improve the learning experiences of mature students with disabilities in the HEI where I work and in other HE settings. As well as this, at a personal level, I hope that the study will improve my own practice and offer me greater insight into the experiences of the students I work with. As teaching is a relational practice, I hope that carrying out this study can help me to better understand the learners in my class groups and strengthen our learning relationship. For the participants, I aim to provide a safe, reflective space in the data gathering process that allows them to comfortably tell their stories and construct poems that may help them to sum up and make sense of their learning experiences.

1.6 Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter One has provided an introduction to the dissertation. Following this, Chapter Two takes the form of a literature review. It critically evaluates a range of research studies, policy documents and theoretical papers. Chapter Two explores the various concepts of disability and reviews policy related to mature

students and students with disabilities. Earlier studies into the experiences of students with disabilities and mature students are also evaluated. Having reviewed the literature, Chapter Three provides a description of the methodology employed by the study. As mentioned earlier, this study took the form of a narrative inquiry and the rationale for this decision is considered. Issues of ethical concern are outlined, as well as concerns around quality and rigour.

The penultimate chapter, Chapter Four, presents the findings and a discussion of the results of the study. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), this chapter is subdivided thematically. The themes presented in this chapter were created in the data analysis phase of the research. Alongside the themes, the participants' poems are presented. These were co-created in meetings with participants a few weeks after the semi-structured interviews. The poems are placed throughout Chapter Four. The final chapter, Chapter Five, serves as a conclusion. This chapter presents the implications of the findings for policy and practice, and also discusses possible future research in light of the findings. Following Chapter Five, a number of documents are attached in the form of appendices.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an introduction to the dissertation and research project. It has outlined the background to the study, which is marked by an expansion in participation rates in HE of previously excluded groups. Coupled with the background, a rationale for the project was presented, including both personal and professional reasons for exploring this topic. The aims of the study were then addressed, with a brief outline of how it is proposed to realise these aims. Lastly, the dissertation layout was described so as to inform the reader

of the structure of what follows. In the following chapter, the literature related to the study is critically reviewed and evaluated.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an exploration of the literature related to the experiences of disabled students in Higher Education (HE). Firstly, the concept of disability is explored within the wider literature. Following this, the policy and philosophy of 'inclusive education' are examined. After addressing these broader issues, the literature related to the experiences of disabled students in HE is explored. Lastly, the review considers the experiences of mature students with disabilities and seeks to ascertain how their experiences may be differentiated from their younger counterparts'.

2.2 Conceptualising Disability

As this research study focuses on the experience of students with disabilities in HE, it is important to explore the concept of disability as it has changed over time. Historically, society has used a medical framework to conceptualise disability, focusing on impairments or characteristics deemed 'not normal,' (Rath, 2021; Tomlinson, 2017). Aspects of a person's disability were deemed to be the fault of the disabled person. People with disabilities were thus 'treated' and stigma was attached to their impairment. In the 1970's, challenges began to be made against this perspective on disability. Michael Oliver (1990) argued for a 'social model' of disability rather than the 'individual model', in which medical discourse and approaches predominated. The social model attempted to challenge the perception that the 'problem' was at the individual/personal level, and posited that it is societal factors that create a process of disablement (Barton, 1996).

This challenge was made by differentiating between impairment and disability. In the 1970's the Union of Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS) defined an impairment as "...lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body" (UPIAS, 1975, p. 3) and disability as: "...the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities" (UPIAS, 1975, pp. 3-4). An impairment being a physical trait, whilst a disability stems from a sociological process of disablement.

The social model has also come in for criticism. Researchers and advocates (McCarthy, 2013; Crow 1996) have cautioned researchers in the field and reminded that impairment cannot be discounted completely when adopting the social model. McCarthy (2013) warns that when using the social model, we should not ignore the impairment. Removing barriers in a social and physical sense will be welcomed and make things more accessible, however, it does not render the impairment as irrelevant. McCarthy (2013) posits that the capability approach, first developed by Martha Nussbaum (2006), would do much to enhance the social model. The capabilities model accounts for the barriers presented in the social environment as well as an individual's impairment. This model then focuses on the capabilities that all human beings should be empowered to develop (Nussbaum, 2006).

In spite of these valid criticisms, the social model is of particular relevance for those working in education, as it allows us to think differently about disability; to consider our institution's role in disablement and adapt our systems to be more inclusive (Fuller et al., 2004). The model challenges HEI's to focus on changing processes and procedures, as well as

accommodating individuals separately, within a 'one size fits all' system (Doyle, 2015; Hopkins, 2011).

More recently, the conceptualisation or definition of disability has developed further. For some researchers, disability can now be conceptualised using a human rights model (Rath, 2021; Lawson & Beckett, 2020; Degener, 2017). This has stemmed from the publication of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006. The UN's CRPD was only recently ratified here in Ireland and is expected to have a significant impact going forward (Holland, 2018). The Convention broadened the definition of disability and focused on participation. According to the CRPD, the category now "[includes] those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others," (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016, Article 1). Ratification of the document by the Irish government in 2018, also sets a legal precedent going forward. Under the convention, disabled students have a right to participate and HEI's have a duty to remove barriers to that participation. Using this Human Rights model, this study hopes to identify and help remove some of those barriers.

2.3 Inclusive Education: Policy Directions and Philosophical Foundations

2.3.1'The Inclusive Turn'- A Global Context

The movement towards more inclusive systems of education has coincided with global and national legislative changes that aim to achieve greater inclusion. At the international level, the United Nations (UN) has been instrumental here. Arguably, the most significant policy document in this regard was the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (UNESCO, 1994). This document paved the way for a global shift in

discourse (if not in practice) from special education to inclusive education (Ainscow et al., 2019). This 'inclusive' discourse aimed to create inclusive schools in order to combat discrimination and change societal attitudes to disability (UNESCO, 1994, p. ix).

This 'inclusive turn' (Ainscow, 2020) originated in the movement against the Warnock Report of the 1970's in the UK (Slee, 2018). The Warnock Report is credited as having popularised the term 'special education.' By 1994, global discourse had begun to move away from special education towards inclusive education. The aims of the inclusive education movement were first set out in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). The statement declared that "schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions." Inclusion is about education for all, but is also about all children being educated together, in the same classrooms, not just on the same campus. Progress since Salamanca has been mixed. Some researchers and advocates are disparaging, claiming that separate and special education has merely appropriated the language of inclusion, while providing schooling that segregates children by perceptions of normality and difference (Slee, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017). This would appear to be the case for much of the Irish education system, which has been described as a 'mixed model' of inclusive and special education (Aston et al., 2021).

Inclusive education theorists and advocates generally focus on primary and post-primary settings. However, since Salamanca, more international policy has evolved to encompass HE and adult learners. In 2006, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) came into being. This document referred to HE and the right of disabled people to access education after second level. Article 24 states that "Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational

training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others," (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016, Article 24:5). More recently, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's), have also referred to the inclusion of students with disabilities in education. UN SDG Goal 4 focuses on education and aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UN SDG, 2020). Within this goal, Target 4.5 endeavours to "ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations," (UN SDG, 2020). It is hoped that this SDG will help to achieve the goal of greater inclusion in society (Slee, 2019).

Others in the field are critical of this 'human rights' turn in education (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Kauffman and Hornby (2020) are disparaging towards human rights discourse and are critical of the inclusive model's efficacy in improving the educational experiences of people with disabilities. One may also question whether UN Statements make much difference at a national and local level. For instance, Ireland was the last EU nation to ratify the CRPD and failed to sign up to the protocol to allow disabled people to use the CRPD to make a legal challenge (Rath, 2021). Thus, there is no way of guaranteeing Irish compliance with the convention. Despite this, the Salamanca Statement coincided with the beginning of the expansion of participation of individuals with disabilities in HE in Ireland (AHEAD, 2020). The participation rates for students with disabilities has increased from 0.7% of the overall student body in 1993 to 6.2% in 2018 (AHEAD, 2020). These international policies may not have the 'teeth' to make them fully enforceable (Quinn, 2009), but they can impact positive change and discourse on key areas of our education systems (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007; Preistley, 2001).

2.3.2 The Irish Policy Context

The Irish policy context broadly aligns with the international trends outlined above. Ireland followed the rest of the Anglophone world towards a path of special education following the "Warnock Report" or 'Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People' (1978) (Rath, 2021). Since then, a number of pieces of legislation have come into being that diverged from the medical model and moved towards the social model of disability (McCarthy, 2013). This culminated with the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (2004). EPSEN (2004) was the first piece of legislation in Ireland to embrace a social model of disability. The 'inclusive turn' in Ireland is borne out in statistics on the participation of disabled students in HE (as referenced above).

With regards to HE policy in Ireland specifically, steps towards inclusion began with the Universities Act (1997). This was the first act to target the expansion of the participation of students with disabilities in HE (McGuckin et al., 2013). Since then, a number of pathways and advocacy groups have been established. Following the HEA's National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Education (2008–2013), specific goals were set which included the 100% increase in the participation rates of students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities (HEA, 2008). To achieve this aim, the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) was introduced in 2009. The DARE scheme is an alternative application route to HE for students with disabilities. The Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) is an advocacy group that has worked for the inclusion of disabled students in higher education for over thirty years. AHEAD, along with The Disability Advisors Working Network (DAWN) support HEI's in Ireland to be more inclusive and support disabled learners.

2.3.3 Defining Inclusive Education

As outlined above, policy, both in Ireland and elsewhere, has shifted towards a social definition and model of disability. This shift has coincided with and been driven by a growing discourse around 'inclusion' or 'inclusive education.' The concept of inclusion appears simple at the outset; inclusion meaning the full participation of all learners in the education system. However, when reviewing the debates and philosophical contentions in the area, defining 'inclusion' is anything but straightforward.

In order to provide greater clarity, it is essential for researchers in this area to have a conceptual understanding of the various definitions of inclusion (Nilholm, 2020). Inclusion is more than a policy 'buzz-word' and must be clarified conceptually (Krischler et al., 2019). By synthesising other work on inclusion, Göransson and Nilholm (2014) produced four differing definitions of inclusion:

1. **Placement Definition**: inclusion as placing students with disabilities or additional needs in general education classrooms.

2. **Specific Individualised Definition**: inclusion as meeting the social and academic needs of students with disabilities or in need of special support.

3. **General Individualised Definition**: inclusion as meeting the social and academic needs of all students.

4. **Community Definition**: inclusion as the creation of communities with specific characteristics.

Whilst much of the literature around inclusion focuses on how society provides education for children, Göransson and Nilholm's (2014) definitions may be easily transposed

onto systems of Higher Education. In Ireland in the early 1990's we began with a placement model of inclusion. Policies outlined above provided that HEI's had to encourage the increased participation of people from educationally disadvantaged groups, such as those with disabilities. To aid access, the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) in Ireland was established in 1994 (Quirke et al., 2018). Importantly, disabled students should not only gain access to HE programmes but also gain access to the same "academic benefits" as their peers (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2010). In Ireland currently, this is achieved by the functioning of the Disability Support Service (DSS), run by the college Disability Officer (DO) (McCarthy et al., 2018). Under this current system we have a 'specific-individualised' definition (Göransson and Nilholm, 2014). Inclusion is seen as meeting the needs of those who can provide 'proof' of disability and, thus, obtain funding for the college DSS from the Fund for Students with Disabilities.

Some have pointed to the fact that this system may not be sustainable, nor optimal going forward as participation widens further (McCarthy et al., 2018). The answer suggested within the Irish post-compulsory education context is Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Quirke & McCarthy 2020; McCarthy et al., 2018). UDL is a comprehensive model for teaching and learning that focuses on flexibility, ease of access and empowerment. Within this vision of inclusion, responsibility is key. In special education, the participation of students with disabilities is the remit of the specialists. In inclusive, universally designed education inclusion is everyone's business (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). This model utilises Göransson and Nilholm's (2014) fourth and final definition, that inclusion is the creation of communities. It takes the UDL Principle 8 'Community Building' beyond the classroom and to a 'whole institution' approach (CAST, 2021).

The movement towards UDL aligns with HEA guidelines and regulations: “equity of access policies should be mainstreamed into everyday life of higher education to enhance the quality of the learning experience and the progression outcomes for all students” (HEA, 2015, p.18). This model focuses on the needs of individuals and the beliefs of the staff by trying to “make staff internalise inclusivity as a general guiding ethos rather than something that is tagged on to a disablist curriculum as a reaction to an excluded student” (Hopkins, 2011, p. 723).

Challenges in defining inclusion abound. It is an area of educational philosophy, research and discourse that has seen charged debate. This presents a challenge for researchers looking at disability in HE. Conceptual clarity can, however, be achieved by gaining an understanding of the recent history of inclusive education, and its impact on all levels of the education system. Further clarity can be gained by defining inclusion in specific contexts using Göransson and Nilholm’s (2014) framework. This framework allows us to assess the nature of inclusion in our institutions and assess what direction we are going in. Drawing on this framework, this study considers successful inclusion to be related to the community definition, and hopes to contribute towards the building of such a community.

2.4 Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

2.4.1 Barriers & Supports

Much of the scholarly contributions in this area focus on the barriers faced by students with disabilities and the support provided by the HEI they attend (Bartz, 2020; Lister et al., 2020; Spassiani et al., 2017; Hopkins, 2011; Madriaga et al., 2010; Riddell et, 2005; Fuller et al., 2004). It would seem that staff attitudes present a major barrier for students’ learning and participation. A number of studies noted how disabled students felt that the teachers they

encountered in HE lacked awareness around disability (Bartz, 2020; Lister et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019; MacLeod et al., 2018; Moriña et al., 2017; Redpath et al., 2013). Participants in other studies went further and expressed that they felt discriminated against based on their disability (Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Redpath et al., 2013; Hopkins, 2011; Riddell et al., 2005; Fuller et al., 2004). It would also appear that the experience of these attitudinal barriers is common to many students with disabilities in HEI's across Europe and North America, as the works cited above suggest.

More in-depth, theoretical work has been done on support structures and provision (Doyle et al., 2013; Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Supports may be more difficult to qualitatively investigate as they are often specific to an individual's needs or vary across institutional contexts leading other studies to favour a 'list and rank' style of quantitative data gathering (Bartz, 2020; Spassiani et al., 2017; Mortimore & Crozier, 2006). Doyle and her colleagues (2013) used Bronfenbrenner's (1989) bioecological model to restructure supports in their HEI around a student journey framework, whilst Getzel and Thoma (2008) advocate for the use of 'Self-Determination Theory' (SDT) in support provision and conceptualisation. At a more practical level, Kubiak (2017) designed a participative action research study that provided practical suggestions on supports and pedagogies for working with students with intellectual disabilities in HE. Kubiak's (2017) work offers value, in that these suggestions were driven by 'student voice' work- that is the students helped to form the framework of strategies and pedagogies that worked best for them.

Following on from the research findings cited above, others have advised that the remit of the Disability Officers and support services may need to be changed in HEI's (Quirke et al., 2018). This seems to suggest that greater inclusion in contemporary HEI's will not solely be

achieved by identifying and removing barriers (Kioko & Makoelle, 2014). Nor can we rely on a linear path of disclosing an impairment, identifying barriers and providing adjustments (Fuller et al., 2004). This adds to the chorus of voices in the research community calling for an end to the 'separateness' of students with disabilities in HE. They claim that students with disabilities in HE should not be viewed as a homogenous group, separate or different to the 'main body' of students (MacLeod et al., 2018; Spassiani et al., 2017; Kioko & Makoelle, 2014; Wray 2012; Madriaga et al., 2010; Fuller et al., 2004).

The needs of students with disabilities in HE should be viewed from within the needs of the entire student population in a HEI (Wray 2012; Madriaga et al., 2010). This position is supported by empirical evidence. In a study of the needs of disabled students in HE, Fuller et al. (2004) found that less than 50% of the disabled students who responded to their survey described barriers related to their impairment or difficulty; the majority of participants described non-disability related barriers. More recent studies have also found that disabled and non-disabled students confront similar barriers to learning (Wray 2012; Madriaga et al., 2010) and have similar likes and dislikes (Spassiani et al., 2017). These findings all point to the fact that supporting disabled students is not an 'inclusion and diversity' side issue, it is a quality issue (Madriaga et al., 2010), and in many ways, this is *the* issue in contemporary HE settings. In light of this, studies in this area tend to conclude that training staff and incorporating Universally Designed Learning (UDL) environments is a key 'next step' for the development of a more inclusive model that benefits *all* students (Bartz, 2020; Lister et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019; MacLeod et al., 2018; Quirke et al., 2018; Moriña et al., 2017; Kendall, 2016; Doyle et al., 2013; Wray; 2012; Kioko & Makoelle, 2014; Madriaga et al., 2010).

2.4.2 Identity

As well as supports and barriers, the combined issues of identity, disclosure and stigma are evident in the wider literature (Lister et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019; Kendall, 2016; Riddell & Weedon 2014; Riddell et al., 2005; Watson, 2002). This is perhaps unsurprising due to certain commonalities in the nature of support provision in HEI's in various countries. In most countries, as in Ireland, students with disabilities must disclose the nature of their impairment, difficulty or illness in order to gain support or even to access HE (Bartz, 2020; Smith et al., 2019; Quirke et al., 2018; Kioko & Makoelle, 2014). Generally speaking, 'disability' has a broad definition in HE settings, encompassing a range of conditions, impairments and learning difficulties (Kennedy et al., 2008). This presents certain quandaries surrounding the issues of labelling and stigma, as many students registered with a disability service may not consider themselves to be disabled (Lister et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019; Kendall, 2016; Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Riddell et al., 2005; Watson, 2002).

There is evidence to suggest that individuals registered with support services may positively identify as disabled or adopt the identity for the sake of administrative convenience (Watson, 2002). Equally, a student with an impairment may not register in order to avoid discrimination or stigma (Jacklin, 2011). This inclination to not declare a disability is perhaps unsurprising in light of the empirical evidence. Studies from the UK and North America have shown that disclosure is both uncomfortable and painful for many students (Smith et al., 2019; Kendall, 2016). Others challenge the idea that they must declare and adopt a disabled identity in order to gain supports (Riddell et al., 2005).

While these studies have analysed and examined identity for disabled students (Smith et al., 2019; Kendall, 2016; Riddell et al., 2005), other studies have gone slightly deeper in

their investigation of identity (Lister et al., 2020; Riddell & Weedon, 2014). A recent study explored students' perspectives on the language used to label and identify them (Lister et al., 2020). Lister and her colleagues (2020) asked students registered with disability support services for their language preferences when it came to their impairment, difficulty or illness. Riddell and Weedon (2014) carried out a single student case study that found that identity is negotiated across contexts. The participants in this study positively adopted a disabled identity while at university, but hid their disability at work and whilst on placement (Riddell & Weedon, 2014). Similarly, MacLeod et al. (2018) found that a diagnosis of autism helped the participants in their study better understand themselves, but acted as a barrier to social inclusion due to stigma and prejudice. In different ways, these studies offer insight into the complexity of identity for disabled people and students registered with disability services. These studies suggest that whilst a diagnosis or label of disability may help an individual make sense of their learning experiences (MacLeod et al., 2018; Riddell & Weedon, 2014), HEI's need to find a way of supporting students who face challenges due to an impairment, without labelling them or presuming that they identify as disabled.

2.4.3 Students with Disabilities in Irish HEI's

In Ireland, a number of studies have focused on students' experience of transition and progression in HE (Aston et al., 2021; Doyle, 2015; Doyle et al., 2013; McCarthy, 2013; McGuckin et al., 2013). In this transition McGuckin et al. (2013) found that students with disabilities experience a number of barriers when progressing to HE, namely availability of transport, accommodation and the accessibility of the HEI in terms of the physical space and atmosphere. These barriers may be present before disabled students even make the transition to HE, as Aston et al. (2021) recently found that students with intellectual

disabilities do not receive adequate guidance counselling at post-primary school when compared to their peers. Beyond transition, others have focused on retention (Christie et al., 2005; Reilly, 2016), barriers to engagement in HE (Shevlin et al., 2004) and more recently barriers to social engagement in HE (Rath, 2021). Rath (2021) found that many students with disabilities experienced barriers to social engagement in HE. It is vital that these barriers be removed as the students in this study recognised how social engagement contributed to their sense of belonging (Rath, 2021).

A voice that is, perhaps, missing from these studies is that of mature students with disabilities in Ireland. Of the students with disabilities in Ireland participating in HE, mature students with disabilities represent 12% of this group (AHEAD, 2020). It is felt that this group of learners lack a voice in an Irish research context. The next section will consider the literature on the learning journeys of mature students with disabilities.

2.5 Lifelong Learning & Higher Education

2.5.1 Policy

The category of 'mature student' varies across national contexts. In Ireland, all those aged twenty-three and over at the time of commencing their studies fall into the category and can apply for HE programmes as a mature student (Citizens' Information, 2019). For the past number of years, policy within Irish HE has focused on expanding the participation rates of mature students. In 2011, the Department of Education and Skills projected the participation rate of mature students to expand to 25% of all new entrants by 2030 (HEA, 2018a). Indeed, mature students are seen as a 'target group' by the Higher Education Authority of Ireland (HEA, 2018b). This policy of expansion aligns with the pan-European

discourse on the 'learning society,' whereby adult education is seen as being good for society, the economy and individuals (European Commission, 2010).

2.5.2 Mature Students' Learning Experiences in Higher Education

Adults return to education for myriad reasons. Some return for more practical reasons, such as improving employment prospects (Shafi & Rose, 2014; Fleming et al., 2012; Salisbury & Jephcote, 2008) whilst for many, it is more about personal fulfilment (Fleming et al., 2012; Waller, 2006; Reay 2002; 2003). Others may have had prior negative experiences of education and return to experience what may be termed 'second chance' education (Fenge, 2011; Gallacher et al., 2002; McFadden, 1995; Coolahan, 1981).

In terms of HE, this 'return' to formal learning settings for older students is not without its risks and challenges. Studies in Ireland (Graham, 2015; Kearns, 2014; Farrell, 2012; Fleming et al., 2012) and the United Kingdom (Crozier et al., 2008; Reay, 2002; 2003) have pointed out the challenges that mature students face when compared to their younger peers. A major barrier experienced by mature students in HE is a lack of time compared to their younger classmates (Graham, 2015; Kearns, 2014; Farrell, 2012; Reay; 2002; 2003). Reay (2003) has described this as 'time poverty.' She found that competing responsibilities such as family and work impacted mature students' ability to complete coursework and eliminated time for 'selfcare'. In many ways, this is an unsurprising finding, however, Reay (2003) also found that students felt that HE providers rarely take this into account. This has led to many researchers and advocacy groups to call for greater flexibility in HE provisions for mature students (AONTAS, 2020; Graham, 2015; Fleming et al., 2010; Reay, 2003).

Whilst at a practical level time and financial constraints impact mature students negatively (Graham, 2015; Reay, 2003), at a deeper, psychological level negative prior

experiences of education may act as a barrier to mature students' success (Kearns, 2015; Tett et al., 2012; Crozier et al., 2008). Crozier and her colleagues (2008) included a number of mature students in their study of the experiences of 'non-traditional' students in the UK. They found that some of the mature students felt they did not belong in a HE setting. Similarly, a participant in Kearns' (2014) study describes feeling singled out and judged in a tutorial by younger students for being older and a single parent. These findings seem to align with issues of stigma and identity for disabled students, explored in the previous section, perhaps suggesting that HEI's need to consider how we might approach difference more broadly in HE if we are to develop more inclusive institutions.

Evidence suggests that another major barrier to success in HE for mature students is around assessments (Farrell 2015; Tett et al., 2012; Crozier, 2008). Some mature students may feel that their younger peers arrive with the academic skills required, making it "doubly difficult" (Crozier et al., 2008, p. 170) for older students who are learning course content and writing skills simultaneously. Tett et al., (2012), looked specifically at mature students' experience of assessment. Interestingly, they found that uncertainty around expectation was a key issue here; the participants in their study did not know what was expected of them, in terms of assessment. As the studies into disabled students' experience suggest, this may be an issue with staff awareness and training (Bartz, 2020; Smith et al., 2019; Moriña et al., 2017; Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Tett et al., 2012; Hopkins, 2011; Riddell et al., 2005; Fuller et al., 2004).

2.5.3 Mature Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

Whilst the literature reviewed in previous sections does not focus solely on the experiences of older learners with disabilities in Higher Education, a number of studies of

disabled students' HE experiences included older learners (Langørgen & Magnus, 2018; Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Jacklin et al., 2007; Riddell et al., 2005). As well as these, others explored the experiences of mature students with dyslexia returning to education (Caskey, 2019; Scothon, 2005). Thus, in the absence of research addressing the experiences of mature students with disabilities directly, it is important to review the findings of these studies that were particular to the experience of older learners with disabilities in HE.

It may be timely here to refer to the Bio-Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; 2005) and specifically to the 'chronosystem' at the foundation of the model (this model is explored in more detail in Chapter Three). The chronosystem refers to temporal influences on the experiences of individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Time seems to be a key factor here. Mature students are differentiated by their 'life-stage' when returning to education and often return in order to improve their lives (Scothon, 2005). For mature students with disabilities, time of diagnosis or identification of difficulty is also a key factor. Riddell et al. (2005) included thirteen mature students in their qualitative study and found that being identified as having a learning difficulty helped to alleviate negative emotions due to having trouble in reading and writing. However, in a later study Riddell and Weedon (2014) noted that whilst receiving a formal 'diagnosis' may help, mature students may still feel ashamed of the 'label.' The chronosystem may also be used to analyse changes in the education system across time. The participant in Riddell and Weedon's (2014) study noted how she was made to feel intellectually inferior when in school. Interestingly, she compares this negative experience to her daughter's school life as a child with dyslexia, and notes that her daughter was supported and did not see dyslexia as a barrier to her achieving in a formal education setting. Scothon (2005) found also that the mature students in his study felt that supports were better in HE than when they were in secondary school. This may lead to mature students not being aware

of their rights or the provision of supports when they arrive in HE, causing a delay or reluctance to engage with support services (Langørgen & Magnus, 2018; Scothon, 2005). In this regard it appears that time matters for older learners with disabilities, not only life stage in returning to education, but also systemic advancements since they last engaged in formal education.

As well as this temporal aspect, the literature would seem to suggest that identity and limitations differentiate older and younger disabled students (Riddell et al., 2005; Jacklin et al., 2007). In terms of identity, there are salient factors beyond their impairment or learning difficulty that influence how they see themselves. For instance, in Riddell and her colleagues' (2005) study, one participant felt that being a single parent with financial issues was much more important than her disability. Similarly, Jacklin et al. (2007) noted how one participant felt that it was having a young family and not living on campus that led to his social isolation, rather than the fact that he is a wheelchair user. The evidence suggests that being older with a disability adds another layer of difficulty in fitting into contemporary HE systems that are geared towards provision for the mythical 'average student' (Riddell et al., 2005). Mature students with disabilities are also more limited in their choices when compared to younger peers (Jacklin et al., 2007; Riddell et al., 2005;). The older participants in Jacklin et al.'s (2007) study went to their local or nearest HEI, not the one that might be best for them or provide the best courses. When older disabled students did move in order to attend HE they noted considerable difficulties involved in the move (Riddell et al., 2005). These factors tie in with Hopkins' (2011) conclusion that limited choices are a form of discrimination. Take for example, older disabled people living in rural or under-resourced urban areas, should they wish to attend HE it may involve a move that would be extremely difficult or simply unfeasible.

Beyond these factors of identity and limitations, staff attitudes influenced mature students with disabilities' experiences in HE (Caskey, 2019; Langørgen & Magnus,2018; Riddell et al., 2005; Scothon, 2005). As noted above, lack of awareness seems to be key here. In terms of mental health issues, a participant in Riddell et al.'s (2005) work who suffered from depression was told that he was experiencing 'normal stress' by a lecturer. Whilst Scothon (2005) reported how a participant was told that his assistive technology (AT) was a nuisance and was disrupting the class. Some lecturers even saw AT as cheating or gaining an unfair advantage. Others felt a degree of shame in having to disclose a difficulty to a staff member and ask for an accommodation (Riddell et al., 2005; Scothon, 2005). Within this, the evidence suggests that flexibility from staff is essential in supporting older learners with disabilities (Riddell et al., 2005; Scothon, 2005). This may mean flexibility in terms of delivery and assessment, again pointing to a Universally Designed solution to these problems.

Equally, there may be a power dynamic in play here for older learners with disabilities that is not as salient for their younger peers. Langørgen and Magnus (2018) found that the older learners in their study wished for more equal partnership with support staff. In this regard they sought to flatten the power imbalance when dealing with HEI staff. Similarly, Caskey (2019) found that older learners with dyslexia wanted teaching and support staff to be more like 'critical friends' than the traditional 'authority' in the classroom. Their younger peers may not be as aware of these dynamics as they come from school settings where power is very clearly and unevenly delineated between teacher and pupil.

In summary, the literature suggests that power, time, identity and choice may all differentiate the experience of older and younger learners with disabilities in HE. Whilst mature students with disabilities are not entirely absent from the wider literature, their

learning experiences are yet to be explored as distinct from their younger counterparts. As this study is sited in a HEI with a history in the provision of adult education in Ireland, it would seem appropriate to focus on the experiences of older learners. Furthermore, the HEI has twice as many mature students registered with the Disability Support Service (25%), compared to the national average (12%) (AHEAD, 2020). For these reasons, coupled with the apparent 'gap' in the literature, this study will explore the learning experiences of mature students with disabilities in Higher Education.

2.6 Research Questions-

In light of this 'gap' in the research, the following research questions were devised in order to guide this inquiry:

How do mature students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties experience their learning in Higher Education?

- What impact do these students' prior educational experiences have on their learning journey in HE?
- What are the challenges that mature students with disabilities or learning difficulties face as learners in Higher Education?
- How can mature students with disabilities overcome these challenges?

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a review of literature across a number of areas and topics that all relate to the research study. The concept of disability was explored as it has changed and developed over time. Following this, the policy context at a global and national level was examined, followed by a review of scholarly contributions on the topic of 'inclusive

education.' Penultimately, studies that explored the experience of students with disabilities in HE were synthesised and analysed. Lastly, works related to the experience of mature students in HE were reviewed. The following chapter presents the methodological design of the study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes and explains the research methodology used to explore the learning experiences of mature students with disabilities in Higher Education (HE). The chapter begins with a description and justification of the research tradition used to frame and guide the study. In conjunction with this, the theoretical lens used to design the study is described and discussed. With a focus on the stories that we use to make sense of experience (Caine et al., 2013), the narrative underpinning of the research led to the use of semi-structured interviews to gather the data. Coupled with conversational style interviews, a creative 'found poetry' technique was selected and is explained below. Following the rationale for the use of these methods, the processes of participant selection and data analysis are outlined. Within this outline, issues of quality and rigour are examined. Lastly, ethical concerns and the position of the researcher within the study are explored.

3.2 Research Tradition & Rationale

As detailed in the previous chapter, this study is concerned with the experiences of mature students with disabilities in Higher Education (HE). While exploring this area and refining the research questions, it seemed that 'Narrative Inquiry' was the research tradition best suited to answering these questions and exploring this group of students' experiences in HE. The narrative research tradition emerged as the most appropriate fit, as it is concerned with experience and making sense of experience through storytelling (Cresswell, 2006).

Figure 1- Bison, Cave of Altamira, Spain (Open access image obtained from https://pixabay.com/photos/bison-cave-of-altamira-1171794/)

Stories are a powerful medium through which we make sense of our experiences (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Throughout human history we have used stories to make meaning and define who we are, where we come from and what we do. In many ways "we are our narratives, and our stories are who we are," (Lewis, 2014, p. 5). Our ancestors, who, circa 20,000 years ago, created the cave paintings displayed in Figure 1, were at once creating aesthetically pleasing art and forming a narrative of their experiences as hunter gatherers (Britannica, 2010). Equally, the bifolio (Figure 2) from Paul's Letter to the Romans (Chester Beatty Library, 2021), dating from circa 200 CE, provided a narrative that would help to form the basis of early Christian beliefs. Both the cave painting in Spain and the early Gospel kept in Dublin utilise the power of narrative to share and display aspects of human experience. The narrative research tradition uses the same dynamics to generate data for the creation of new knowledge and the formation of deeper understanding (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000).

Narrative researchers focus on stories of human experience to better understand our social worlds, indeed, to better understand who we are (Lewis, 2014).

Figure 2- Bifolio from Paul's Letter to the Romans and Paul's Letter to the Colossians, from a codex containing the Pauline Epistles c. 200 CE (CBL BP II ff.14&91; Reproduced with permission of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. CC BY-NC 4.0 under Creative Commons Licensing)

It was seen that this narrative research tradition fitted in evenly with the interpretivist paradigm (Scotland, 2012). Indeed, some scholars consider narrative inquiry to be a distinct branch of the interpretive research tradition (Smith & Sparkes, 2009; Moen, 2006). Others have gone as far as to describe this approach as being aligned with the 'interpretive narrative paradigm,' whereby narrative inquiry is very much interwoven with the interpretivist lens (McQueen & Zimmerman, 2006). Researchers working within this belief structure discern reality as being constructed by the individuals who inhabit an environment (Durdella, 2017). This reality is constructed by individuals via their interactions with others and their environment. As researchers we inductively arrive at understanding or new knowledge by

exploring this constructed reality. It appeared evident that this paradigmatic lens was best suited to this project. Other stances, such as the post-positivist paradigm would not have been sufficient in obtaining the depth of data needed (Taylor & Medina, 2013). Furthermore, it was felt that a critical or transformative lens may have tilted the focus too far away from lived reality as perceived by the participants, towards the power dynamics within institutions and bureaucratic structures of modern HE systems (Scotland, 2012).

The interweaving of an interpretivist lens with the narrative approach presents a particular dilemma in relation to the interpretive authority of the researcher, as the researcher's interpretation of a story may differ from the participants' (Moen, 2006). It was felt that this was of particular concern in this project as researchers in the area of disability have been criticised for doing research *on* people rather than *with* or *for* them (Nind, 2019). To combat this dilemma, a participative aspect was added to the project in the form of collaborative 'found poetry' sessions. These are described in greater detail below, however, they served as a space for the participants and the researcher to 'co-create' and 'co-interpret' the data in the transcript. In this regard the project utilises an 'arts-based narrative research' approach which can use art forms at any stage in the research process (Knowles & Cole, 2008).

The ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this project are of course in keeping with narrative sensibilities. Ontology here refers to the nature of reality or *being*, while epistemology refers to knowledge or *knowing*. Narrative ontology is influenced by the work of John Dewey (Dewey, 1934; referenced by Caine et al., 2013). The Deweyian understanding of *being* focuses on the interaction of individuals with others and their environment, this interaction is the 'essence' of experience. Following this interaction, we use language to make sense of these experiences by constructing it into stories (Lewis, 2014;

Caine et al., 2013). For narrative inquirers, *knowing* is experiencing and then storing this knowledge in the form of stories or narratives (Caine et al., 2013). Thus, as researchers, if we want to find out about the experience of mature students with disabilities, we must listen to, analyse and interpret their stories. In this sense, it was seen that the story was both data and a core element of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the research project.

In focusing on the students' stories and the narratives they constructed to make sense of their experiences, it was intended that a picture of their experience as learners could be painted. The researcher was also aware of the limitations of this narrative approach. It can be labour intensive (Cresswell, 2006), as it requires the gathering of in-depth data on the life stories of participants. This means that narrative inquiries must have smaller numbers of participants. At an ethical level, the ownership of the data and the stories comes into question (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; referenced by Cresswell, 2006). The researcher listens to, records, analyses and ultimately disseminates the participants' stories, all the while imposing their own meaning onto the narratives of others (Josselson, 1996). Researchers in other qualitative research traditions such as Ethnography or Grounded Theory must grapple with similar quandaries, but it is the nature of story as philosophy, data and method that makes this a particular concern for narrative inquirers (Lewis, 2014).

3.3 Theoretical Framework

Alongside the provisions of narrative inquiry, this study used a theoretical framework to help guide the research design and data analysis. While this study draws on theories pertaining to disability and inclusive education (as outlined in Chapter Two), in keeping with other work exploring the experiences of students with disabilities in HE, it is framed by bioecological systems theory (Rath, 2021; Hewett et al., 2016; Doyle, 2015; Anderson et al.,

2014; Doyle et al., 2013; Swart & Greyling, 2011; May & Bridger, 2010). The bioecological model developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1989) provides the theoretical lens and foundation of this study. In approaching this research, it was important to identify and implement a theoretical framework that at once placed the student at the centre of the process, and was capable of understanding the systems within which the student finds themself. The bioecological model emerged as a means of achieving both these goals. Equally, this theoretical lens suited the narrative underpinnings discussed in the previous section. Like the model, the participants' experiences of HE are multidimensional and complex (Swart & Greyling, 2011). The model provided the means to make sense of the participants' narratives and also offered guidance in designing the study in a methodological sense, as the interview questions were composed with the model in mind.

Originally proposed as a way of understanding child development, the bioecological model has been used by a number of researchers exploring the experiences of students with disabilities in HE (Rath, 2021; Hewett et al., 2016; Doyle, 2015; Anderson et al., 2014; Doyle et al., 2013; May & Bridger, 2010). These researchers value the model as it places the learner at the centre (Anderson et al., 2014) and it can analyse 'layers of influence' within the education context (May & Bridger, 2010). Practitioners providing supports in HE, have gone as far as to use the model to design support structures and systems in a HEI in Ireland (Doyle et al., 2013), perhaps proving Lewin's (1951, p. 169) frequently cited contention that "there is nothing more practical than good theory."

The model focuses on the process of development of individuals within specific contexts and across time (Tudge et al., 2009). It allows researchers to take a 'holistic' view of student experience within HE. Placing the individual at the centre of the process, Bronfenbrenner

(1989) then describes the interactions of the individual with their environment as they develop across time and context. These interactions are then categorised into various systems that impact the life of the individual. These systems are displayed visually in Figure 3.

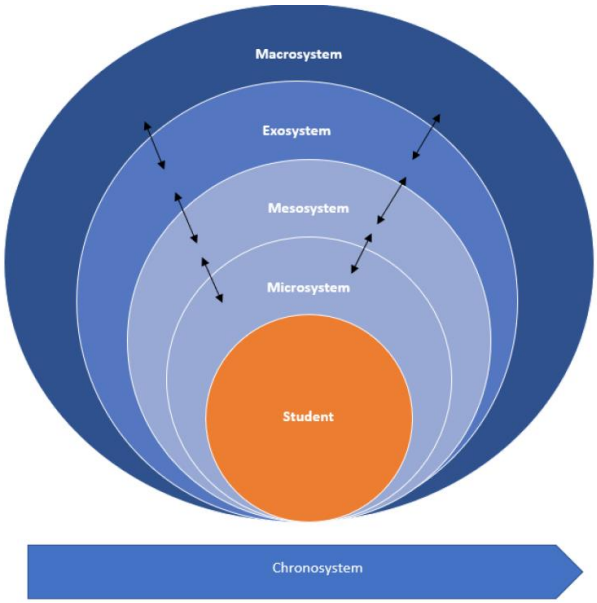

Figure 3: Bioecological Model as adapted from Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) by Rath (2021)

With the student at the centre of the model, the first system described by Bronfenbrenner is the 'microsystem.' This is the student's immediate environment. Within an educational context, this would include the student's peers, lecturers or support staff. Beyond the HE context, the microsystem also includes colleagues, family and friends. The next layer, the mesosystem, focuses on interactions between microsystems. This is a key focus within this study as it aims to capture the experience of mature students. Research has shown that this cohort may have to cope with the competing demands of college, work and family life within the microsystem (Graham, 2015; Kearns, 2014; Farrell, 2012; Reay, 2002; 2003). The mesosystem allows the researcher to conceptualise the interactions within the immediate environment of the student.

This is followed by the exosystem, an important 'layer' within the model which pertains to the decisions made by policy makers or administrators that indirectly influence the life of the student. A funding body such as the Higher Education Authority (HEA) may be placed here; the decisions of the HEA will have an impact on the student, but the student is far removed from the decision-making process of the funding body. The penultimate layer is the macrosystem, which provides the larger cultural or societal context within which the individual lives and learns. This aspect is important to students from marginalised groups such as students with disabilities, as how disability is seen and understood by society has a major impact on those with impairments (Tomlinson, 2017). Within this study, the macrosystem may also include the culture of the Higher Education Institution (HEI) which will filter down into the classroom and day to day experience of a student with a disability.

Lastly, Bronfenbrenner (1989) added a temporal aspect to the model in the form of the 'chronosystem'. This accounts for the importance of when events occur in an individual's life. Again, the model fits this study well as it aims to explore the experience of older learners in HE. The chronosystem also accounts for how disability has been viewed in HE across time, which was explored in the previous chapter.

The theory is particularly suited to this narrative inquiry for a number of reasons. Firstly, narrative ontology grounds itself in Dewey's theory of experience (Caine et al., 2013). For narrative inquirers, to be in the world requires interaction with others and the environment. Similarly, in the bioecological model, interaction with others and the environment is fundamental. Secondly, the chronosystem is useful here. As was described in Chapter Two, the provision of HE in Ireland has changed dramatically in the past thirty years, as participation rates of people from educationally disadvantaged groups has increased. Equally,

this study focuses on the experience of mature students, making a temporal or chronological understanding of experience imperative. Lastly, the bioecological model is an active theory that can identify barriers, and then allow HEI's to remove them (Rath, 2021). This study aimed to highlight barriers and impact positive change within the HEI.

3.4 Identifying and Engaging Participants

A 'key informant' selection strategy was employed here. Key informants are not selected at random, rather they are purposefully identified as being the best people to speak to on a certain topic or issue (Lavrakas, 2008). In this regard the participant is seen as an expert in this area and can provide the best insight into this topic. To select and identify these 'key informants' a number of criteria were used. These criteria were designed to identify mature students (aged 23 and over) who were registered with the Disability Support Service at a Higher Education Institute (HEI) in Ireland. All participants were drawn from the same HEI where I am employed. The criteria stipulated that prospective participants are those: registered with the Disability Support Service (DSS), aged 23 or over at the time of commencement of studies and those attending Higher Education after a substantial period of time out of formal education. This reduced the potential participant list to 49 individuals. From there I approached three students who I felt would be interested in participating and the Disability Officer helped to engage two others who were not known to me.

The participants varied in terms of nationality, age, programme of study and reason for registering with the Disability Support service. The participants are also varied in terms of their stage of completion, with some in first year, one in second and one in final year. It was important to have this variation amongst the participants, as it was hoped to add to the depth of the findings as well as reflecting the diversity of students who register for disability support

in Irish HEI's. Equally, the literature reviewed in the previous chapter found that students with disabilities should not be viewed as a homogenous group (MacLeod et al., 2018; Spassiani et al., 2017; Kioko & Makoelle, 2014; Wray 2012; Madriaga et al., 2010; Fuller et al., 2004). Thus, it was felt that the participants should represent the heterogeneity of this group of students.

Once the participants were selected, the next stage was contacting and engaging with them. This was planned out carefully and utilised lessons from the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principle, related to 'Multiple Means of Representation' (CAST, 2021). This principle stipulates that information should be shared in a variety of modes to ensure the maximum number of people can access it (CAST, 2021). For this reason, a project information video (available here) was created to compliment the Project Information Sheet (see Appendix ii). This video was shared with participants in the initial email exchange, and briefly outlined the focus of the study and what would be required of participants. As well as this, an audio version of the information sheet was also made available. Once the students had agreed to take part, they completed and returned the Research Project Consent Form (See Appendix v). This approach aimed to align with the values espoused by Nind and Vinha (2014), who stipulate that research related to disability must be inclusively designed and conducted.

3.5 Methods

While *methodology* can be understood as a lens for exploring phenomena and answering research questions- the architectural blueprint of the study; *methods* can be seen as the overall approach- the nuts and bolts (Durdella, 2017). In this section the overall approach is outlined and justified. The methods used were interviews and a creative 'found poetry' technique.

3.5.1 Interviews

Narrative inquiries utilise a range of interview strategies, foremost here is that of narrative interviewing. These principles were explored and adapted to answer the research questions. Narrative Interviewing was first developed in the social sciences in the 1970's by the German researcher Schütze (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). In a narrative interview the researcher facilitates participants to narrate an experience (Kartch, 2018). The interviewee-interviewer dynamic is replaced by a 'narrator-listener' relationship (Kartch, 2018). A key aspect of this mode of interviewing is that the researcher should not interrupt the narrative, nor should they ask 'why questions' which require the participant to justify their narrative (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Advocates of this approach dictate that the traditional interview schedule, with a list of topics and questions is not suitable in narrative interviewing. The researcher explains the project, then asks one question that prompts a long narrative from the interviewee (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000).

Whilst narrative interviewing presented a possible approach here, there were also some envisaged challenges. Namely that the research questions outlined in the previous chapter did not seem to suit such an approach. The method outlined above is more suitable for studies of a single life event, such as women's experience of free-birthing in nursing and midwifery research (McKenzie & Payne-Gifford, 2021). Further exploration of the research literature provided an alternative view. For instance, Chase (2003), accepts that this narrative interview technique is an ideal, but certain research topics and participants may need more questions, separated into themes from general to specific, in order to facilitate the telling of stories. Equally, other leading authors in Narrative Inquiry (Caine et al., 2013; Clandinin, 2007) posit that semi-structured interviews, with open-ended questions, are well suited to narrative

research. Furthermore, there is ample evidence that semi-structured interviews are used by narrative inquirers in the field (Aydin & Avincan, 2020; Leigh, 2019; Cheng, 2016; Haydon & van der Riet, 2014). Whilst the 'pure' narrative interview may be very well suited to studies focusing on single events, this study aimed to explore the multi-component experience of being a mature student with a disability.

Having considered the above contentions and guides, semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate and feasible method to answer the research questions. The interviews were designed in a 'conversational' style which focuses on rapport building and 'everyday' discourses and language (Roulston, 2012). Other studies utilised this approach of conversational, semi-structured interviews within a narrative framework (Ominde et al., 2020; Cousik & Hickey, 2016; Anderson et al., 2015). In this regard it is contended that semi-structured interviewing suits narrative inquiry, as it allows flexibility for the participant to tell their story as they please (Anderson et al., 2015). This allows a researcher to use prompts in order to encourage participants to elaborate on stories or segments that are relevant in terms of answering research questions (Ominde et al., 2020). In preparation for the interviews, a schedule was drawn up and formulated using the steps outlined by Gibbs (2011), focusing on key topics related to the research questions and based on the outcomes of the literature review. These topics were then compiled into an 'interview matrix' (see Appendix i), as recommended by Roulston (2017). The interviews were conducted with five participants using the Microsoft Teams platform, were recorded, and transcribed shortly afterwards.

3.5.2 Found Poetry

Narrative inquiry can be viewed as an 'an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches and both traditional and innovative methods – all revolving

around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them' (Chase, 2005, p. 651). The nature of narrative inquiry offers an exciting, creative capacity to the researcher. Indeed, arts based narrative inquiry allows a researcher to operate within the narrative framework, but employ creative methods to enhance the study (Knowles & Cole, 2008). With this in mind I set about exploring creative methods that would enhance the research experience and outcomes.

The study included a creative, participatory aspect to data analysis in order to ensure that the voices of participants are both seen and heard. A 'found poetry' technique was employed to achieve this (Szto et al., 2005). I felt that this approach complimented the interview process as it allowed the participants to actively engage in the study, whilst also capturing and distilling their experience in HE into poetic form. Poetry as research method was first experimented with by anthropologists and ethnographers in the late 1980's and 1990's (Sjollema et al., 2012). This may have been in part due to the rejection of positivism by many social researchers at the time (Brady, 2004). Brady (2004) suggests that we need not look at it in terms of paradigmatic extremes; rather the use of poetry in qualitative research can be understood as 'artful-science'.

The 'found poetry' technique utilised in this study allows the researcher and participant to work together. Found poetry is produced by reviewing interview transcripts and using the responses of the participants to construct poems that convey the sentiment of their contribution (Butler-Kisber, 2002). In other works that have used this technique (Richardson 1993; Poindexter, 1998), the researcher alone organised the data into poetic form. This study diverged slightly in that it was a participative, collaborative process whereby the participants and researcher met after the interview to construct the poems together. This gave the

participants and researchers a co-creative capacity and also provided a reflective space for participants, as they reviewed their transcripts and what they had said purposively. These sessions were very much participant led as they chose which aspects they felt to be most important or nicely expressed. My role here was to support them in finding their own words and make suggestions on length and structure.

This technique has a number of benefits for the research process. Firstly, it allows the researcher and participant to work collaboratively. This collaboration is a key principle of participatory research (Reason & Heron, 1986). 'Doing research inclusively' was a priority in designing this study. Within inclusive research, participants should be allowed an active role as far as possible, working with the researcher in the co-creation of new knowledge (Nind, 2019). The resulting poems offer a powerful medium that can express a participant's experiences in a clear and authentic manner. The fact that the poems in this study were co-created adds to the credibility of the study, as the participants chose the words that were most important to them. This is a powerful way of presenting findings in social research. The poems allow the participants' responses to be 'seen and heard' by the reader, in the absence of annotation or discussion by the researcher. In much social and educational qualitative research, the responses of participants may get lost amongst the (wholly necessary) comments from the researcher. In this project the participants' own words and experiences are presented, in the form of a poem, alongside more in-depth analysis of the transcripts, as found conventionally in research dissertations. In this way, the project will be no less rigorous in its gathering and analysis of the data, however the learner voice will be presented and hence seen and heard in a powerful medium.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Those conducting social and educational research have a duty of care towards the research participants and the participants' data. In this study, ethical consideration was viewed as an ongoing and evolving process (Ramcharan & Cutliffe, 2001). This process was guided by the principles of respect and trust espoused by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) guidelines.

At a practical level, ethical attention was paid to informed consent, confidentiality and data protection. In order for the consent to be truly 'informed', participants were offered information on the project in a multi-modal manner as outlined above. Participants could choose to read the Project Information Sheet (see Appendix ii), access a project information video (available here) or listen to an audio description of the project. It was important that 'informed on-going consent' was achieved (BERA, 2018). In this regard consent did not begin and end with the Consent Form; rather participants were continuously reminded of their rights, specifically their right to withdraw at any stage without judgement or penalty.

As well as informed, ongoing consent, confidentiality was a key concern. Pseudonyms were used in the study to ensure anonymity of the interview participants. In the reporting of extracts from the transcript, care was taken to ensure that no information was used that could potentially identify an individual. This follows BERA (2018) guidelines as, according to the BERA (2018); "Researchers need to be aware of the possible consequences to participants should it prove possible for them to be identified by association or inference." (p. 23). It should be noted that this guarantee of confidentiality would only be broken if it were felt that a participant was at risk of harm (Hickey, 2018). In terms of data protection, the BERA (2018) guidelines were followed. These guidelines were drawn up in alignment with the EU's General

Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The GDPR rules stipulate that it is my responsibility as the researcher to maintain and safely store the participants' data (BERA, 2018). In order to do this, all data was kept in password protected files on a password protected personal computer. On the transcripts, all information that could identify a participant was removed.

Beyond these more practical ethical concerns, my position and the wellbeing of the students were also considered. Within narrative inquiry, the research must recognise the story as having a sacred value to the participants (Lewis, 2014). It is possible to consider the stories shared here as integral to the identity of the participants. For this reason, the participant must feel respected and listened to at every stage of the process, placing their wellbeing at the centre of the research process. To help with this I tried to schedule interviews during 'reading weeks' without lectures, so that participation was not seen as a burden. Equally, I informed myself on the support services available to students should anything particularly sensitive have arisen that required professional support. The participants were made aware of this information before, during and after interviews and found poetry sessions. Within this, my position as a staff member created a possible conflict of interests at times, as I sought stories of students' experiences of accessing a service that I work as part of. I was aware that this imbalance in the power dynamic may impact the participants' responses. With this in mind, students who access services and those that do not were interviewed. To try to balance this, I reminded students that nothing they shared would be used to discriminate against them, nor would it be shared directly with anyone else in the Disability Support Service. I reminded the participants that all information would be de-identified and the final iteration of the dissertation would be available via the library after submission.

3.7 Data Analysis

The nature of narrative inquiry affords researchers a broad range of options in terms of data analysis, as the research tradition can be seen as a "family of methods" (Riessman, 2008), or an "amalgam" of approaches (Chase, 2005). The options available here include a biographic focus, that analyses the chronology of an individual's lifespan (Cresswell, 2006). This could be complemented by a literary style analysis that aims to draw out plot, settings and characters from the data (Cresswell, 2006). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) meanwhile recommend that narrative inquirers should analyse participants' stories based on their interactions with others, temporal aspects (past, present, future) and the situation where the story takes place.

While these approaches represent valid modes of analysis, it was felt that thematic analysis would be the most appropriate and feasible tool to use when analysing the data gathered in this study. Thematic analysis is one of the many options available to narrative researchers who wish to focus on 'what' is spoken in the data gathering phase. This has been termed as 'narrative thematic analysis' (Riessman, 2008) and it has been well utilised in other narrative inquiries (Aydin & Avincan, 2020; Held et al., 2019; Chan, 2010). Riessman's (2008) version of thematic analysis does differ from Braun and Clarke's (2006), however, Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach was favoured, as it is both highly accessible and rigorous. This focuses on the multi-component experience of being a mature student with a disability in HE. Beyond these slight differences in approach, thematic analysis served as the best means to capture varying aspects of experiences as they relate to the research questions.

For these reasons, thematic analysis was identified as being the most apposite and feasible approach for analysing the data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance on this method was used in this phase of the research project. Thematic analysis is essentially the process of

identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within qualitative data sets (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is a flexible mode of data analysis that can be used across a range of research traditions. Other studies utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines in their narrative studies (Bradford, et al., 2019; Wilcox et al. 2019). The stories captured in narrative inquiries often relate to similar topics, but have the potential to produce differing stories of varied experiences. Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance is helpful, in that they provide a manageable way of making sense of this varied data and allow a researcher to begin to see commonalities in a structured and rigorous manner.

At a basic level, a theme can be defined as a category that relates to the research focus, built on codes identified in a transcript (Bryman, 2004).

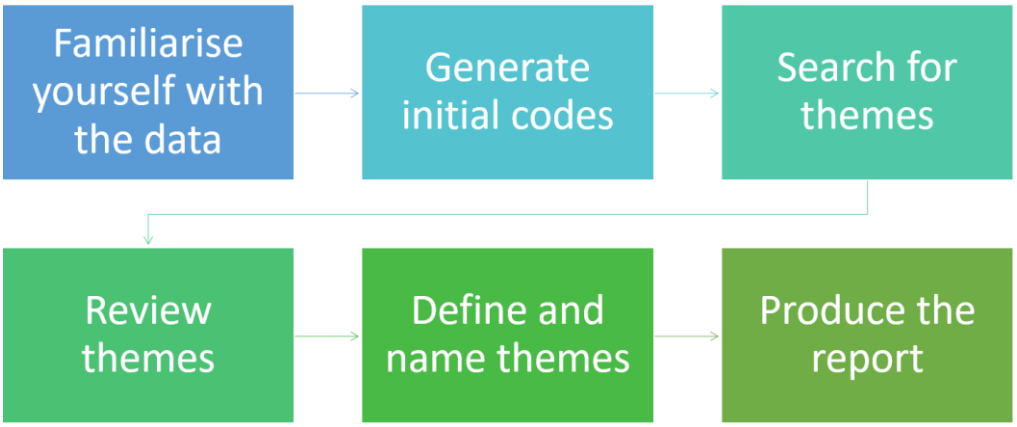

Figure 4- Braun & Clarke's (2006) Six Steps of Thematic Analysis

In order to identify and analyse the themes within the collected data, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of data analysis were followed (as seen in Figure 4). Initially, I familiarised myself with the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. Points of interest

were noted, and points were added to the reflexive journal at this initial phase. Next, I started generating initial codes. This helped to organise ideas into meaningful groups. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), I coded for as many potential themes as possible. Once the transcripts were fully coded, I searched for themes. The long list of codes was organised thematically. This was very much an inductive thematic process (Bennett et al., 2019). In this regard I was guided by my research questions and my chosen theoretical lens: Bronfenbrenner's (1989) Bio-ecological model. Having produced a number of 'candidate' themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I reviewed these outputs. By reviewing the transcripts, some candidate themes were discarded or combined with others. These themes were then refined and named by attempting to reach the 'essence' of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Lastly, these themes were expressed and reported on in the findings and discussion chapter of the dissertation. This process is evidenced and mapped out in Appendix vi.

Within the above approach, there exist limitations and potential pitfalls. Much of the analysis may be somewhat semantic, in that it analyses 'what' was said, not 'how' it was said. This means that some meaning, or perhaps the true meaning, is not imparted or present in the analysis. This potential pitfall was avoided by retaining the audio files of the interviews and listening intently to them whilst coding. Equally, when using thematic analysis researchers must be honest about where the theme came from. Braun and Clarke (2006) warn against naïve, realist interpretations of themes being objectively 'present' in the data. Themes do not simply 'emerge', they are constructed in the dialectic relationship between researcher and data. I was aware of this during the analytic process, and used reflexive journaling (see 3.9 below) and conversations with a 'critical friends' researcher group to become more aware of subconscious biases impacting the creation and reporting of themes.

3.8 Trustworthiness

Ensuring quality and rigour were of utmost concern throughout the planning and execution of this project. As in quantitative research, qualitative research must be conducted according to standards of quality and rigour (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The difference here may be that within qualitative research studies, full transparency may never be fully achieved (Treharne & Riggs, 2014). Especially within narrative research, full transparency may be replaced with the concept of 'trustworthiness,' as trust is a key indicator of quality within the narrative research tradition (Lewis, 2014). With this focus on trustworthiness, a number of other matrices and guidelines on quality and rigour were used to guide the design and development of the study (Treharne & Riggs, 2014; Elliott et al., 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) specified a number of markers of quality qualitative research. Within their matrix, credibility is a key factor for qualitative researchers to consider. Here, credibility is linked to authenticity. It is felt that the 'found poetry' technique used in this study adds to the credibility of the findings. As outlined above, the participants and researcher met subsequently to the interview in order to construct poems. These poems and the process of their construction allow for the participants to reflect on their contribution. The poem produced then helps to represent their experience more accurately. It is felt that the poems also achieve a degree of 'resonance' with the reader, as their narratives, distilled into poetic medium, aim to convey their experience in a succinct and powerful manner. Authenticity may also relate to the study's impact after its completion, and its resonance with 'end-users' (Treharne & Riggs, 2014). For this reason, the Disability Officer in the HEI was involved throughout the process, and (anonymised) findings were shared with staff in the Teaching and Learning department in the HEI.

Transferability is another key quality indicator according to Lincoln and Guba (1985; referenced by Treharne & Riggs, 2014). In this regard it is important that the findings can, to some degree, be applied to similar settings. This standard was met by logically composing the research questions in light of the findings of other researchers (See Chapter Two), and embedding the study within the existing literature. At a deeper level, transferability may refer to the ability of the research to relate to the experience or 'thought-world' of the reader (Tracy, 2010). This can be achieved by gathering first-hand accounts of phenomena (as is the case in this study), with rich description and in-depth analysis (Tracy, 2010). Transferability also equates to how a researcher disseminates or presents their findings, or how the research transfers findings from the study to the mind of the reader (Tracy, 2010). The found poetry created in this project supports the transferability of the study. The reader can choose to read both the poems and in-depth discussion that follows, or simply read the three poems presented here, and get a true feel for the participants' experiences as the poems serve to both resonate and disseminate information.

Dependability was another factor that was considered throughout the project. Dependability is a marker concerned with the production of explicit, well supported findings and the presentation of a research process that is as repeatable as possible (Morrow, 2005). To ensure that the findings and processes could be depended on, an Audit Trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was conducted and can be viewed in Appendix vi. As in a financial audit, the research audit presents a sample of key documents that were created throughout the study. As well as dependability, confirmability was a key consideration. This was achieved by using 'thick description' in the reporting of findings with direct reference to the transcript. Braun and Clarke's (2006) 'Step 4- Review Themes', focuses on confirmability. After developing

'candidate themes', the transcripts, codes and extracts were reviewed to determine whether these themes were genuinely supported by the interview transcripts.

3.9 My Place in this Story

As in all qualitative research, the position of the researcher and subjectivity must be addressed (Van Heughten, 2004). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posit that in narrative inquiry "you write yourself into the research" (referenced by Lewis 2014, p. 5). Whether we do this consciously or unconsciously, all researchers write themselves into their work. It is important to approach this conundrum in an honest and reflexive manner and acknowledge our position within the social world of the study. To do this Holmes (2020) recommends that researchers should reflect on their position from three perspectives: (1) within the context of the study, (2) in relation to the participants and (3) in relation to the subject matter.

Within the context of the study, I am an 'insider' as I work as part of the Disability Support Service team in the HEI where the study took place. There are both advantages and disadvantages to being an 'insider' in the research context (Holmes, 2020). Van Heughten (2004) has referred to this as the "spectre of insider bias". It is a presence that must be acknowledged and reflected upon, as it impacts the direction, scope, participants' narratives and findings of the study. I felt it was most important to reflect and act on the impact my position as an insider had, on the participants in the study. I was acutely aware of the imbalance in the power dynamic between the participants and myself. This power imbalance cannot be eliminated; it can however be 'flattened' by a dual process of reflexivity and methodological design. In terms of methods, I conducted the interviews in a 'conversational style' (Roulston, 2012). This was intended to reduce the formality of the conversation and remove connotations of authority that may be present in conversations between staff and

students. I argue that the 'found poetry' technique helps to flatten the power imbalance, as it invites the participants to take an active role in how the new knowledge we co-created is presented in the findings chapter. These techniques serve to address the insider nature of the research, they do not eradicate the issue. I was aware that my role as a staff member may have altered the participants responses and, indeed, altered the questions and prompts I put to them.

Beyond considering my position in relation to the research participants, I also reflected on my position in relation to the subject matter or overall topic of this project. My interest in the area of inclusive education stems in part from personal family experience. A number of my close family members have been identified as having dyslexia. Having dyslexia can have a long-term impact on an individual's self-esteem and confidence in formal educational settings. At a professional level, my experience working in the areas of English language teaching, Adult and Further Education also influenced me to explore this area. My experience in these sectors has led me to adhere to a 'community- based' definition of inclusion (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). I feel it is the role of all staff in an educational setting to work towards creating environments that make students feel welcome, valued, seen, heard and respected.

Passions drive research interests but may also cloud judgement or unduly impact the research process. The concept of 'transference'- being aware of emotional reactions to subject matter- borrowed from psychoanalysis has been helpful here (Van Heughten, 2004). In the literature analysis phase, this meant consciously questioning why I was reading certain papers; questioning whether I was only reading accounts that confirmed my world view and, particularly, my views on inclusion. Equally in the interview space, transference and

countertransference can happen (Van Heughten, 2004). I remained aware of this process during the data gathering and analysis phase, noting my direction of thought and questioning what was leading me to code or notate certain things but not others.

With these positionality considerations, I engaged with a process of reflexivity throughout the project. This reflexive process was both personal and collegial. At a personal level, journaling is used by many qualitative researchers (Treharne & Riggs, 2014). I regularly added to a reflexive journal throughout the project, considering how my identity, personal circumstances and privileges impacted my decisions and my thinking on the subject matter (Extracts from this journal can be read in Appendix vi). At a reflexive, collegial level, I joined a 'critical friends' group with two classmates. We met regularly throughout the research process to discuss ideas and concerns related to our research studies. As well as this my supervisor conducted peer de-briefing sessions throughout the project's duration. These processes did not eliminate bias or subjectivity, but rather helped me to better understand how my identity, position and beliefs impacted the research process (Holmes, 2020).

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an account of the research methodology of this project. The study was firmly grounded in the narrative research tradition. In line with this tradition, the research focused on the learning experiences of mature students with disabilities, as manifested in the stories they shared in conversational style interviews. The interviews were complimented by a collaborative 'found poetry' process. This method actively included the participants in the process of distilling their experience into a research poem. The transcripts were also the basis of analysis, using the thematic approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Throughout this process, ethical considerations were made as the project evolved

with the help of reflexive journaling and critical friends. The subsequent chapter will present the findings of the study along with a discussion of these.

Chapter 4: Findings & Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter illustrates storied accounts of the participants' experiences in Higher Education (HE). As narrative research holds that stories are sacred to participants (Lewis, 2014), the accounts imparted here have been carefully and respectfully chosen so as to truthfully represent the experiences of the students who took part. These stories were gathered in order to answer the overall research question, which aimed to explore the learning experiences of mature students with disabilities in HE. Within this broad question, the study sought to assess the impact prior educational experiences had on the participants. Beyond this, the study also intended to find out what challenges these learners faced and how they overcame these challenges. In answering these research questions, themes and sub-themes were generated from the transcripts and are presented in what follows.

The 'found poems' are placed alongside the findings, these poems were co-created during the data gathering phase of the project. In Latin, the word 'respect' translates directly as 'to look again' ; when co-creating these poems, the participants and I looked again at what had been said in the interviews in order to produce a piece that gave due respect to the story that they had kindly shared. These poems aimed to distil the participants' learning experiences and represent the essence of what was important to them. Each poem serves as a 'spotlight' between themes, to be read as an integral part of the findings and discussion, not as an interlude between acts. The first poem, composed by Gavin, is presented below.

Poetry Spotlight 1

Gavin

Got through my schooling somehow,
Wilted away or been hot and cold,
Creating a lot of conflict- not what I wanted,
I wasn't there to have conflict.

26 years of age, diagnosed with ADHD,
I was angry. I looked back,
I should be in college.
I should be finished.
I should be set up right now.
But I'm not.

Took a bit of time to work on myself,
And then I said, okay,
I want to go back to education.
Psychology.
Didn't want another child to be misdiagnosed,
Left with all these other problems.

Back to education.
I'm way out of my league here.
Way out of my depth,
What am I doing here?

It's a constant battle, the academic setting,
Intense internal battles-
Doubt and fear, not trusting yourself.
A lot more battles behind closed doors,
Can be so damaging.

All things that were ingrained in me,
Took a lot of work to undo,
But, look at me now,
Three or four weeks away,
From a psychology degree

4.2 Theme 1: The Impact of Prior Educational Experiences

The participants' prior educational experiences clearly had a significant impact on their learning in HE. These previous experiences caused a degree of fear and self-doubt for the students in this study. This led some to question whether they truly belonged in HE. Coupled with these fears, the participants' stories illustrated a lack of awareness around supports and the help they are entitled to as students with disabilities. It was clear that this 'potential blindness' to support processes, their rights and entitlements as students with disabilities, originated from their experiences in primary and post-primary education. In light of this, two subthemes were developed, the first focuses on self-doubt and fear, while the second relates to awareness of the provision of supports.

"What am I doing here?"- Self-doubt & Fear

As Gavin's poem demonstrates, self-doubt can be a major challenge for some students in Higher Education (HE). The poem also conveys how secondary school had been a struggle for Gavin, "wilting away" in the classroom and creating unwanted conflict. In analysing the stories of other participants, it became clear that self-doubt was linked to negative prior experiences of education. For instance, Rose had left school following the Junior Certificate, after her parents discouraged her from continuing her studies- "my parents were kind of like, you know, 'you're, not going to go on to college, you're not good enough to go to college,' hence where all my self-doubt and low self-esteem comes from." After starting her programme, this began to have an impact on Rose's self-belief, "my insecurities really started to come back again. Because I always had that voice in the back of my head telling me that 'you can't do this, you can't do that'." Grace had also left school early after not feeling like she could achieve in that environment, "I said no, I can't do it. Left school." As a result, she felt

that she was not used to the “academic situation.” There is evidence in the wider literature that also found that previous experiences of education can cause feelings of self-doubt (Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Riddell et al., 2005). The participant in Riddell and Weedon’s (2014) single participant case study noted how she had been made to feel intellectually inferior whilst at school, and this had impacted her self-belief when returning to education in later life.

In this study, these feelings of self-doubt triggered an element of fear in some cases. For Rose, assessments caused a degree of trepidation for her and her classmates- as the first skills assessment was “frightening for all of us.” For Grace, it was a fear of failure and letting her family and colleagues down- “I was a bit scared when I started this because I was like everyone at work is rooting for me, like, I have a child she knows I'm going to school.” Likewise, for Gavin, starting off was characterised by anxiety- “when I came into [HE] first I was quite timid. I didn't know what to expect. I was frightened, obviously.” Jessica meanwhile was concerned about failing and worried that other factors may impede her progress- “I'm always scared that […] at some point, I'm going to fail, and I won't be able to finish, some things can happen, and that life's going to become too busy.” Whilst some students seamlessly transition into HE, others struggle and even experience fear in the initial stages of a programme (Reay et al., 2001). Indeed, Tett et al. (2012) also found that mature students were particularly daunted by the first few summative assessments. Conversely, the wider literature suggests that some students may be less daunted; they may be following a path that was laid out for them early on in life. The social and cultural capital these students enter HE with helps them to feel like they belong (Reay et al., 2001; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). For the students in this study, this was not the case; the HE environment was not familiar and brought with it feelings of fear caused by their prior experiences of education. Whilst a

significant proportion of students may feel a degree of fear in beginning a new programme, the fear described in this study seemed to be driven by negative experiences in secondary school and the resulting self-doubt.

Some students in this study also feared discrimination in the HE setting. Jessica was finding it difficult to meet deadlines due to work and family commitments. She was aware of the accommodations available to her, however, she felt that she may be judged differently to her peers for accessing and using supports- “I always feel like, oh, if I go and I actually access the support, maybe I won't be treated the same or I won't be seen the same […] when they are correcting something.” Gavin, meanwhile, had been concerned about disclosing his disability when first applying for a place on his programme, as “it might stand against me, and they might not accept me onto the course.” He was also worried about being judged by peers for accessing supports- “I was nervous going in obviously and then I was thinking of the stigma, all the other students seeing me walking in there [student support office] and they'll be like, 'Oh, I wonder what's wrong with him’.” This suggests that fear of failure and discrimination were significant challenges for the participants in this study. This is an important finding as learning in a state of fear is particularly difficult, if not impossible (Shonkoff et al., 2010). This has been explored in relation to school settings (Fritzgerald, 2020; Shonkoff et al., 2010) but there seems to be a lack of research into the impact of fear on learning in HE settings. This may represent an important finding, as the seemingly composed adults on campus may be experiencing “intense internal battles” (Gavin) as they deal with fear of failure and, particularly for mature students with disabilities, fear of discrimination.

The fear and self-doubt caused some to question whether they truly belong in HE. This feeling was driven by participants comparing themselves to peers, who they saw as being

more able and better equipped. As her classmates introduced themselves in the first lecture Rose commented: “jeez, these people know all of this, I don't know any of this, why the hell am I here? I don't bring anything to the table.” She said this was not helped by the fact that “most of them were younger [than her]. And most of them were already working in the area.” Gavin also questioned why he was in HE, a feeling illustrated so profoundly in his poem (above). This lack of belonging was felt acutely at the start of his programme-

> I remember. I think it was the third week of the first year of my degree, it was a Friday evening, and I remember just sitting out in my back garden, and just, just thinking to myself, ‘I'm way out of my league here.’ I was like, ‘I have gotten way out of my depth.’ I was like, ‘Dude, what am I doing here?’ […] because people were asking questions in class, and I was like, ‘I don't even know... how did they even think of that?’ (Gavin)

Similar doubts around belonging were evident in other studies that included mature students with disabilities (Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Riddell et al., 2005). The older learners in these studies made similar comparisons between themselves and their peers and felt that their programmes were “doubly difficult,” (Crozier et al., 2008, p. 107) as they learned content and tried to gain the ‘academic skills’ that they felt their younger peers had arrived to HE with.

Fear, self-doubt and comparing themselves to others made the participants in this study question their ability and whether they truly belonged in HE. The narratives clearly illustrate that these negative emotions originated from their previous experiences in education which had isolated and excluded them. The challenge here is that “trauma in students is often invisible,” (Fritzgerald, 2020, p. 56), the outwardly calm adult in our classes or offices, may be experiencing the “intense internal battles” that Gavin articulated in his poem. In this, staff can work with students to build self-belief and extend a welcome that creates a feeling of

belonging. The students themselves are active agents within this process of adapting to HE as well. This is evidenced by the resilience their stories portrayed. The participants in this study all managed to overcome these challenges and build self-belief. This will be explored further in the chapter under Theme Three.

"I didn't know"- Length and Breadth of Supports

Whilst prior educational experiences contributed significantly to the fear and self-doubt outlined above, these experiences also had more practical implications for some students when they returned to education. The participants' stories of their previous involvement in formal learning environments suggested some returned to education not knowing what supports were available to them and their classmates. Even within the past ten years, the system of student supports within HE in Ireland has changed quite rapidly (Quirke et al., 2018) as HEI's adapted to increased diversity of learners on campus (AHEAD, 2020). John completed post-primary education in the 1990's and went on to third level afterwards. He remarked that "there was limited supports available for students" when he was first in HE. He could see that-

> As a mature student I suppose the educational supports have advanced so much. You know, I suppose the way in that sector before it was just, you just got on with it, it was a different environment, it was a different setup. (John)

The experience of this somewhat less supportive environment was also referenced by other participants. Rose commented that there was no learning support when she was in secondary school-

> There wasn't anybody that you could go to, unless, you know, your head teacher, and if you went to a head teacher and said sir 'I'm having problems with x y and z,' you were told 'well, look it, you've just got to keep your head down and work more.' (Rose)

Rose saw a marked difference in the approach taken in the HEI where "they actually listened to you." Likewise, Gavin spoke about the changes to the education system since his school experience- "As an older student, so back when I would have been in school and it probably was different, you know. There was no such thing as these learning supports. There was no SNA's or anything like that."

Interestingly, John could see these changes from his daughter's perspective also, as they happen to be studying at the same HEI- "she's studying during the day and I'm studying at night." He could see that her HE learning experience was markedly different in terms of support:

> I can see that from talking to her. And from what I can see it's much more supportive. She's now in year two, but in year one, much more supportive in that transition from Leaving Cert. to college with assignments and supports. (John)

There are parallels here with the wider literature explored in Chapter Two. Like John in this study, the participant in Riddell and Weedon's (2014) study could see the change in the education system from her daughter's perspective. Comparing her experience to her daughter's, as a learner with dyslexia, she could see that the culture and systems had become more supportive over time. These advances in our systems and culture may lead to a lack of awareness of the availability of supports for mature students with disabilities. For instance, John only accessed supports by "naively popping in and going, 'Look, I have this situation. Is there anything by chance you can help with?' To be fair, I was only thinking of audio books,

as being the only possibility, available to me." He was then amazed by the "length and breadth of supports available," (John). Not knowing about supports had also impacted Gavin while he was on a HE Access Programme at a Further Education (FE) college- "there was certainly a part of the course, that I'd missed that I could have gotten help on, but I didn't know I was entitled to [support]." It would seem that for these participants, the systems of supports had developed so much since they had left formal education that they were effectively blind to the possibility of getting help in certain areas.

In exploring these changes further, Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1989) bio-ecological theory is useful (See Chapter Three for more detail). The foundation of the model rests on the 'chronosystem,' or how changes over time impact individuals and their environment. Here the chronosystem may be seen as a barrier for mature students with disabilities in accessing support, as they may not be aware of what provisions are available due to systemic changes since they last accessed formal education. This differentiates this cohort from their younger peers, who may enter HE via the DARE route (HEA, 2008). Whilst younger students with disabilities arriving via the DARE route will be identified and contacted directly by the support services (Quirke et al., 2018), older learners may have to rely on their own agency to identify their needs and seek support.

Not knowing about supports can have a considerable impact on the outcomes for older learners with disabilities. Gavin shared his story of failing a module on his FE course because he had not accessed the support he was entitled to. This caused Gavin considerable anger and frustration-

> that summer I actually was like, 'I never want to feel this way again.' Like, I've just completed everything to the best of my ability and then one module I missed and it's

> going to hold me back and it might stop me from going on. […] I was like, I can't have this anymore and I won't have it anymore. (Gavin)

Likewise, it was only after receiving a low grade that Grace was forced to disclose her dyslexia to a lecturer, who advised that "there is help out there," (Grace). Prior to this she was not aware of supports for students with dyslexia in the HEI. The participants in this study all eventually found their way to support services and got the help they needed. However, we may wonder whether mature "students [are] aware of the comprehensive supports that are available to them, be it physical disabilities or otherwise," (John). As mentioned in Chapter Two, other researchers have focused on disabled students' or mature students' HE experiences, with some cross over in these studies that included mature students with disabilities (Langørgen & Magnus,2018; Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Jacklin et al., 2007; Riddell et al., 2005). Such work shows that mature students may not be aware of their rights or the provision of supports when they arrive in HE, causing a delay or reluctance to engage with support services (Langørgen & Magnus, 2018; Scothon, 2005). This is an important finding as it may be an issue that impacts older learners with disabilities particularly, as their younger peers are more accustomed to accessing supports and are easily identified by the HEI as applicants through the DARE initiative.

Poetry Spotlight 2

Grace

I was diagnosed later,
Not until my Junior Cert,
All through school, struggling.

Made it as far as 5th Year,
Can't sit in this environment again,
I tried. I tried my best.

If you're gonna do it, do it now,
I'm going to college,
I'll try it for them and see.

I was nervous,
The people around me- 'You can do it,'
I'll try it for them and see.

It's a bit degrading,
One-on-ones with our lecturers,
Explaining I have dyslexia.

Admit again that something is wrong with you,
Because I'm thick and I can't do this,
To prove that I'm thick.

Having to go into every single one.
If I didn't, then nobody would know,
I just have to, go slow and carry on.

It's overwhelming. It's all or nothing.
Got my grade back, shocked myself,
I can do this. I've done it once.

4.3 Theme 2: Diagnosis & Disclosure- Seeking Support

Grace's poem illustrates how the process of disclosing and registering can be difficult for some mature students. For the students in this study like Grace, where diagnosis 'came later' and was the culmination of an educational journey heretofore characterised by struggle, declaring and disclosing a disability was a significant experience. Once a mature student with a disability has become aware of the supports available to them, they must then register with the Disability Support Service. Students with disabilities in Ireland must disclose the nature of their disability and provide evidence to support their registration (Quirke et al., 2018). Whilst straightforward for some, this process can present barriers for mature students with disabilities and can cause a degree of pain or discomfort (Smith et al., 2019; Kendall, 2016). Within this theme, two sub themes were developed. The first looks at the varying impact of the medically modelled system on the participants. The second, explores participants' experiences of accessing supports

Evidencing Disability in a Medically Modelled System

As mentioned above, in order to gain access to support in HE in Ireland and globally, students must disclose the nature of their disability and even provide written evidence from a medical professional or psychologist (Bartz, 2020; Smith et al., 2019; Quirke et al., 2018; Kioko & Makoelle, 2014). As Grace's poem demonstrates, this may not be a straightforward process and may cause past traumas to resurface. The fact that students must produce written evidence of a disability highlights the medical nature of accessing support systems in HEI's in Ireland and elsewhere (Rath, 2021; Tomlinson, 2017). In many cases this necessitates a disclosure that can often be difficult for some individuals (Smith et al., 2019; Kendall, 2016).

Grace, a participant in this study, faced particular difficulty in registering with the service after disclosing that she has dyslexia. As a teenager she was “diagnosed later. I wasn’t diagnosed until I was doing my Junior Cert. And so, I went all through school, struggling.” When she commenced her programme in HE, she did not register with the Disability Support Service at first. When she did try to register it was “tricky,” (Grace). She did not have a psychological report that could serve as ‘evidence’ of dyslexia and was told “you're going to have to re-register and go through the whole process again of getting tested again,” (Grace). Faced with excessive financial costs and delays due to the pandemic, she was unable to obtain an official diagnosis. This caused Grace considerable frustration and brought up feelings from her prior experiences of diagnosis-

> It was kind of like you have to admit again that something is wrong with you. Do you know that kind of way? I don't know, like I don't know what I'm doing, so I have to go get tested again because I'm thick and I can't do this and I have to prove that I'm thick, that kind of thing? (Grace)

The repercussions of not being registered meant that Grace had to disclose to each of her lecturers individually, rather than faculty being discreetly informed of her dyslexia by support staff. This caused further difficulties as she felt this was a degrading experience-

> having to go into every single module and when we have our one-on-ones with our lecturers explaining like ‘look, I have dyslexia, I'm struggling with this bit.’ […] it's kind of a bit degrading that I’m going to have to say ‘look I can, I can do it, but I'm not going to be very good at it.’ It's like I already have it in my head that I know that I can't do it and they're just like ‘OK,’ but having to go into *every single one* [emphasis]. (Grace).

The wider literature suggests that having to speak to staff in this way creates a degree of shame, as students were forced to ask for accommodations from lecturers rather than this being arranged by support services (Riddell et al., 2005; Scothon, 2005). In this regard, registering with a Disability Support Service helps to avoid this situation, as it provides the convenience of faculty being discreetly and automatically informed (Watson, 2002).

Grace's account of registering provides a marked contrast to the other participants in the study who could easily obtain evidence of disability in order to register with the Disability Support Service. Rose, when asked about her experience registering, said it was "very easy actually" and that "dealing with student support has been more straightforward and more easier then actually dealing with my GP." Rose also mentioned the benefits of her registration as she "never actually had to approach a lecturer and say 'look it, you know what, for whatever reason I need time, an extension.'" Equally, John felt that "inside the system […] everything ran extremely smoothly" after registering. Although registration ran smoothly for other participants, it is still evidence of a system that is medically designed and administrated. In this regard, the focus of the provision of supports remains on an individual's impairment (Rath, 2021; Tomlinson, 2017) and not on the role of the HE systems in a process of disablement (Barton, 1996).

Once again, Bronfenbrenner's (1989) model provides a useful lens for analysing this finding. The appropriate level of the model here is the 'exosystem.' This is an outer layer of the model, and bureaucratic bodies such as the Higher Education Authority (HEA) could fall under this category. Bodies within the exosystem make decisions that impact individuals, however, the individual may not be aware of the body or have an awareness of the impact of its decisions (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Conversely, the bureaucratic body may not be aware of

the impact of its decisions on individuals (Swart & Greyling, 2011). The relevant body here is the HEA, which administers the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) on a per capita basis. This means that HEI's must request evidence from disabled students in order to secure funds to provide them with support (Quirke et al., 2018). Grace's difficulty illustrates how this system has the capacity to discriminate against mature students returning to education with insufficient or outdated evidence of a disability or learning difficulty. For this reason, there have been calls for a movement away from the current, medical model, towards a system of generalised supports based on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (McCarthy et al., 2018; Quirke & McCarthy 2020). This will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter. The stories of disclosure and registering from this study illuminate the potential difficulties that this 'specific-individualised' model of inclusion can cause (Göransson and Nilholm, 2014) (For more detail on definitions of inclusion see Chapter Two). This 'specific individualised' model of inclusion stipulates that learners with disabilities are present in educational settings, and the setting is then adapted to meet individuals' specific needs. This model is predicated on a medical definition of disability, that focuses on individual impairments rather than systemic improvements that could create more inclusive and accessible environments. Irish HE's current model is juxtaposed to systems whereby programmes are designed flexibly, and supports are open to all. These are environments where 'inclusion' means meeting the social and academic needs of all students (Göransson and Nilholm, 2014).

Seeking Support

After registering, other barriers and challenges may arise. One such barrier may be staff awareness and practices. This barrier was evidenced by John's experience of trying to obtain accommodations. John was struggling with note taking and writing, a situation that became somewhat worse through the academic year. This led him to seek supports that might help and he was provided with some assistive technology (AT). Unfortunately, due to staff attitudes he could not use this equipment-

> I did encounter some blockages from some lecturers, who clearly said from the start, no recording, no recording, no exemptions […] that kind of put me off, saying anything, or even, to be honest, using it [lecture recording device] because there was no point if I can't, if I can't use it. That was frustrating. (John)

This resonates with Scothon's (2005) findings: in their study some participants were told that lecture capture technology was a nuisance, or even that assistive technology provided disabled students with an unfair advantage. Other studies noted that a lack of staff awareness presented barriers to disabled students' learning (Bartz, 2020; Lister et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019; MacLeod et al., 2018; Moriña et al., 2017; Redpath et al., 2013). This may have been the case here, as the lecturers concerned may not have been aware that lecture capture is essential for some students. Staff awareness was found to be a barrier to learning in a number of studies reviewed in Chapter Two (Caskey, 2019; Langørgen & Magnus,2018; Riddell et al., 2005; Scothon, 2005). This suggests that the path to greater inclusion is more complex than disclosing an impairment and providing adjustments, and may need to be focused on staff awareness and teaching practices (Quirke & McCarthy 2020; Bartz, 2020; Lister et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019; MacLeod et al., 2018; McCarthy et al., 2018; Fuller et al., 2004).

Without the benefit of lecture capture technology, John was unable to take notes in the classes he could attend, and then missed a number of classes for health reasons. This created further challenges “because it was pre-Covid. So obviously none of those lectures were online for recording. So, I was only reading PowerPoint notes […] from Moodle.” This period coincided with an on-campus exam that he could not attend. John inquired whether he could “somehow do the exam [at another time]. And it was clearly definitively ‘no’.” He felt disappointed at this outcome as he did not want to fall behind in an intense and fast paced programme- “I was very disheartened to be honest with you. I was very disappointed. It was like, 'No,' that was it,” (John). Instead of some degree of flexibility around the format and time of the assessment, John ended up under pressure doing a repeat exam whilst working on the new semester’s content. He also came up against a barrier when he suggested that lecturers provide multiple means of representation for independent learning activities, as he felt that “recommended reading shouldn't be about just reading,” (John). However “some of them [lecturers] didn't seem too overly keen,” (John). Greater flexibility would have clearly benefitted John in this instance, and again points to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a possible solution to these issues (Bartz, 2020; Smith et al., 2019; Quirke et al., 2018; Moriña et al., 2017; Wray; 2012; Kioko & Makoelle, 2014; Madriaga et al., 2010).

Equally, Jessica had negative experiences of a potentially rigid system of assessment. Jessica is a part-time student, juggling home and work commitments as well as studying. Her story was an example of ‘time poverty’ as Reay (2003) phrased it, whereby mature learners have limited time compared to peers, and sacrifice self-care in order to complete course work. A lack of time was identified as a barrier by a number of researchers exploring the experiences of mature students in HE (Graham, 2015; Kearns, 2014; Farrell, 2012; Reay, 2002; 2003). Like the participants in these earlier studies, Jessica put herself under a lot of pressure to submit

assignments within tight time frames, and did not want to get a time extension- “maybe if I had acknowledged that I wasn't ready to deliver, and I actually asked for, for an extension, maybe I would have delivered a way better essay than I actually did.” As mentioned earlier, it seemed she had not requested extensions as she felt she may be prejudged by the lecturer:

> But I think that maybe the lecturers will be mad if I get an extension. I think that maybe in the future if I have an exam, or maybe they will correct my essay differently, because I got an extension. And it's not like, I have a visible disability, you know […] And it's more fear of being stereotyped, I'd say. (Jessica)

This contrasts slightly with findings from Riddell et al. (2005) and Scothon (2005) who found that students feel a degree of shame in asking for accommodations. It did not seem that Jessica felt ashamed of her disability, but that requesting an extension may incur discrimination and hence she worried about “being judged and reflecting that on my grades,” (Jessica). This fear was echoed in earlier studies by mature students with disabilities, who were under time pressure (Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Redpath et al., 2013; Hopkins, 2011; Riddell et al., 2005; Fuller et al., 2004). As mentioned earlier, this ‘time poverty’ may have significant consequences for adult learners in HE (Reay, 2003). These consequences can be better understood by returning to the ‘chronosystem’ (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1989). As individuals within the HE system, mature students with disabilities interact with time constraints, and these time constraints in turn impact on individuals. Faced with less time due to other commitments, older learners in HE may be under greater pressure to complete assignments.

The power dynamic here is skewed heavily toward the lecturer, as Jessica felt “it's, like, if they do it, they're doing me a favour. They might just say 'No'. Or no, so your problem might

not matter enough, to get an extension." Jessica's story suggests that we need to consider the language used around accommodations broadly, and extensions specifically- "words change a lot of things. You're an adult, you don't want to be treated as a child… I'd say, just feel acknowledged and respected and heard." Further, with regard to students with disabilities obtaining extra time or extended deadlines, Jessica suggested that the language used here should be changed. She felt the current system of 'requesting' an extension that may be 'granted' or 'denied' is in some way infantilising for adults in a formal learning environment. This is of particular relevance to older learners with disabilities, as mature students prefer more equal partnership with support staff when compared to their younger peers (Langørgen and Magnus, 2018). Younger learners entering HE for the first time may be more used to uneven power distribution between staff and pupil (Alsobaie, 2015), whilst adults wish to be "acknowledged and respected and heard" (Jessica) in the learning environment.

Poetry Spotlight 3

Rose

There reaches a point in every mammy's life where your kids don't need you anymore,
I have reached that point, best way forward was by doing a course.
I left secondary school after doing my junior cert,
My parents: 'You're not going to go on to college, you're not good enough.'
I said 'no to hell with it, I'm leaving.' And I left.

September and we started getting our first assignment,
Overwhelmed- I can't do this, there's no way I can do this,
Me. I was definitely the main challenge,
Nobody's gonna want to know what I'm saying.
Why the hell am I here?

The two devils on your shoulder,
One is saying: 'Yeah, you can do this.'
And the other- 'No, you're stupid. You're worthless.'
That was tough to try and do that,
To get rid of that other devil.

I don't share the same experiences as them,
But I do have my own experiences that I can bring,
Stopped putting myself on mute.
Connected with a few of the others-
Students having the same struggles as I was having.

Student support was like a torch in the darkness,
You're not a number. You're seen as a person,
Because they actually listened if I was stumbling.
But it was still so frightening and still so scary,
Shaking like a leaf, but confidence wise I knew I could do it.

My experience of education, like chalk and cheese-
I wish I had gone back earlier, done the degree.
You know, I might still do that yet.

4.4 Theme 3- Building Self-Belief

Rose's poem charts her journey from self-doubt to knowing she could achieve in Higher Education (HE). Likewise, Gavin and Grace's poems, which featured earlier, also followed a similar pattern; the poems illustrate challenges but also speak to the self-belief that each of the participants developed across their HE learning journeys. Whilst the previous two themes have focused on the challenging aspects of the learner experience which participants faced in HE, Theme Three centres on how participants overcame these challenges. The stories gathered in this study provided accounts of resilience, as well as accounts of success and fulfilment. This final theme focuses on how and when the participants built self-belief. A number of sub-themes were developed which focus on the role of assessment and supports in building confidence. The final sub-theme explores how the participants developed a new self-image as they overcame challenges and built self-belief.

Assessments

Assessments present challenges and opportunities for learning and feedback to students. The students in this study felt a degree of pressure or self-doubt when faced with assessments, a feeling which is reflected in the wider literature also. Tett et al. (2012) found that assessment often presented barriers to mature students learning, equally, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Spassiani et al., (2017) found assessments to be the least enjoyable aspect of a course for a group of disabled students. As illustrated above, assessment was a source of fear for Rose- "I suppose when I think back to September and we started getting our first assignment, I felt very overwhelmed. I felt 'I can't do this, there's no way I can do this.'" Whilst assessments were daunting, the participants in this study also spoke of their value to their

learning and shared stories that conveyed how assessments helped to build confidence, even if they were overwhelming at first.

Like Rose, Grace initially felt overwhelmed by the assessments and felt that “the main challenge” she had was “the assignments being 100% of the modules […] it's all or nothing.” In these initial stages Grace felt she “had no clue what was going on” in terms of referencing and structuring assignments. When asked how she overcame these initial challenges it was clear that the grade and assignment feedback played a key role in building her confidence-

> it was the grades that I got. I shocked myself and the first one was [introductory module]. And the whole way through it, I was like I don't know what's going on. I have no clue what we're doing, and when I got my grade back I got 70 and I was like ‘I can do this. I've done it once. I can do this.’ Even though it was only the second module, that was the boost I needed to say ‘no, keep going, you can do it.’ (Grace)

Likewise, Gavin felt that getting a grade back reassured him of his ability in his subject area in the face of self-doubt and excessive self-criticism. Before getting a result back, self-doubt would creep in- “There'd be a lot more battles behind closed doors of going 'Oh my God, I'm not able to do this or not good enough for this’,” (Gavin). It seemed that even verbal feedback and encouragement could not alter this mindset- “People are telling you 'Look, you're a great student and you have so much potential' and I'm kind of sitting there going 'what?' Because these are all things that I never would have heard before.” For Gavin, an assignment grade was a much more powerful demonstration of his ability- “And then you get the result back and it's a first and you're sitting there, and you're going ‘I was having such an intense battle.’” As seen in her poem, Rose charts a similar journey from the start of her programme to the end, whereby comparing her first assessment to the “one [she] did last week was like chalk

and cheese.” It seems that for Rose, confidence was a key factor in her performance in the assessment- more recently feeling “An awful lot more comfortable, an awful lot more at ease still, shaking like a leaf, but you know, confidence wise I knew I could do it.” In all three instances, for Rose, Gavin and Grace, assessment grades and feedback were key to building their own self-belief and recognising their own ability in HE. In this regard, this finding departs from other research, whose participants focused more on the negative aspects of assessment (Tett et al., 2012; Riddell et al., 2005). Contrary to the findings of Tett et al. (2012), the stories shared in this study demonstrated the power of meaningful assessment in building self-belief.

Of course, some participants did highlight the negative aspects of assessments. Jessica recounted a negative experience of what she viewed as poor-quality assessment. This story was from another HEI which she had studied at a number of years prior to beginning her current programme of study-

> the lecturer just wanted me to write a lot. So, the following exam I didn't study, I just wrote a bunch of things that quite frankly I don't think, made much sense, but then I got a good grade, so I was like 'what's the point?' (Jessica)

Jessica remarked how disheartening this was, and it was a factor in her not completing the programme. She felt that quality in assessment and learning experience is different for older and younger learners. She said that “when you're going through school you just want to pass,” whereas, as an adult, you are “trying to learn and to be a good professional in the future,” (Jessica). John also spoke of quality in assessment and noted enforced changes to assessment since the outbreak of the pandemic. The exams he took pre-COVID were seen as a “brain-dump” and did not represent “sustainable lifelong learning,” (John). For John, assignments were far superior as they could be used in the workplace afterwards, whereas exams

reminded him of the Leaving Certificate and were "of no benefit." For this reason, it would appear that quality in assessment, that supports learning and builds self-belief, is even more pertinent for mature students who are more discerning of the value of an assessment. Assessments can help to build confidence but must be of a recognisable quality and value to learners (Sogunro, 2015; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012).

Supports

As the participants' stories detailed their growing self-belief, it appeared that external support was significant. Support structures can play a key role in enabling disabled students to achieve and be successful in HE (Doyle et al., 2013; Getzel & Thoma, 2008). There is evidence to suggest that a student-centred model, focusing on the barriers experienced by individuals is the best way to provide formal supports (Doyle et al., 2013). Others have used Self-Determination Theory to support learners who access disability supports, in that developing self-advocacy was found to be a key skill disabled students used to be successful in HE (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). The participants in this study utilised a range of supports to navigate their way through programmes. This support came formally from student services and also informally from colleagues, friends and classmates. Grace noted the importance of her manager in encouraging and supporting her learning. Her manager encouraged her before she commenced her programme, telling her "You know you can. You can do it," (Grace). He helped her with assignments and taught Grace "so much about the English language and grammar and spelling." His support and encouragement were key factors in Grace enrolling for the programme. Peers also played a major role in supporting the participants through their studies. Gavin's "core group of friends […] all mature students," helped in the course of his learning journey. It was important that they were all a similar age and background as "the

younger ones are great, but it's just different," (Gavin). Likewise, Rose "connected with a few other students," which helped her grow her confidence. Meeting these peers helped her to see that she was not the only one finding the course difficult at times as the "other students having the same struggles as I was having," (Rose).

It would seem that the informal connections that provided support were an essential part of the participant's learning journeys. We now know the importance of social connections for disabled students; these connections help students to have fulfilling and successful journeys in HE (Rath, 2021). However, having a disability can be socially isolating (Rath, 2021) and being older and having a disability may add another layer of difficulty here (Jacklin et al., 2007). A participant in Jacklin et al.'s (2007) study felt that being older, having a family and not living on campus was more socially isolating than his use of a wheelchair. Indeed, in this study, whilst Gavin valued his "core group of friends," he still struggled with "aloneness or loneliness." This feeling of isolation stemmed from the fact that he did not know any other students with a similar condition to him. Gavin suggested some form of 'meet-up' or support group would have helped as "it's just a difference when you have someone who actually understands what you're going through." Again, the bio-ecological model can be used here to understand the role of supporting the achievement of the participants in this study (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). This support can be viewed as important influences from within the students' 'microsystems.' Microsystems are other people or services that individuals interact with directly. In this study, the people closest to the students, helping them to achieve in an educational setting, is an example of microsystems supporting learning and achievement in HE.

Formal supports, provided by the HEI also played a role in helping students navigate their learning journeys. Assistive technology (AT) played a big part here in building independence and supporting learning. John was struggling with note taking and typing. Voice-to-text software "helped both, in the assignments, and it also helped in the exam," (John). At this stage in his programme, this software proved to be essential for John. Other students, who had not been struggling with reading or writing also found AT to be useful. Rose was shown how to use 'text-to-voice' software which she felt was a "godsend". It meant that she could correct her grammar herself. This helped to build confidence and independence as she no longer felt the need to access proof reading support provided by the HEI's library, "I don't have to do that [access supports] anymore. I have the confidence to know that I can actually do this, and then can hear it [her assignment] back." Equally, for Rose, "having the classes recorded has been a massive benefit." Lecture capture was formerly provided only for those deemed to need it. However, recorded classes were made possible by the swift pivot to online delivery in response to the pandemic.

Rose's experience using AT demonstrates that what was once considered to be tools for those with impairments or specific difficulties, can be used by all students to support their learning. This insight underlines the call for ending the 'separateness' of disabled students. The needs of students who require support due to a disability should not be viewed as separate or different to the needs of the entire student body (MacLeod et al., 2018; Spassiani et al., 2017; Kioko & Makoelle, 2014; Wray 2012; Madriaga et al., 2010; Fuller et al., 2004). The stories gathered in this study and the wider literature demonstrate how AT was once considered a support for disabled students only, but now offers value to all students (Wilkinson et al., 2021).

As well as the practical supports provided in terms of AT, student support services provided a degree of reassurance and emotional support also. Some spoke of the relief of finding out that supports were available. For Rose, "student support was just like this torch in the darkness" at a time when she was under pressure with assignments. As Jessica said, "knowing that you guys [student support services] are there for us is very good." It seemed that the supports provided reassurance but also the space for students to be seen and heard. John felt that the "welcome, the environment in the seating area, the relaxed attitude," in the student support office helped. He also valued "being given the time in the office to tell my story," (John). Likewise, Rose felt listened to, which was a key element in quality support provision for her- "You're not a number. You're seen as a person […], you know? this is what your issues are, and this is how we can help you overcome those issues." This emotional, compassionate side of supports did not seem to get as much focus in the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, however, it is important to recognise its value here. More practical supports such as AT are essential, but equally valuable is the time and space for people to be seen and heard. These stories suggest that there is much more to support than disclosing a difficulty or impairment, identifying barriers and implementing adjustments (Kioko & Makoelle, 2014; Fuller et al., 2004). Quality student support services provide a welcoming space for students to tell their story- this is a core, if somewhat intangible, function of support services.

A New Self-Image Emerges

This theme has centred on the participants' stories of building self-belief across the course of their journey in HE. Supports, both formal and informal, and assessment feedback helped to build this newfound self-belief in a formal education setting. The result of this process was that some began to adapt to a new way of seeing themselves in education and

life. For Gavin, this journey began with a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) as an adult. Having struggled in school and "gotten through [his] schooling somehow," he was left with a feeling of "low efficacy" (Gavin) in an education setting. This later diagnosis created much anger and frustration-

> I was angry when I got diagnosed because I was 26 and I looked back and went 'I should be in college. I should be finished all of my... I should be set up right now at 31 years of age. I should be set up and working and on that other part of my life, but I'm not." (Gavin)

This pain and anger are also conveyed in his poem at the beginning of this chapter.

After reflecting on and learning about his diagnosis, Gavin returned to education. He spoke of how this experience changed the way he viewed himself and his own ability. His perceived lack of self-efficacy in education came from his experiences at secondary school where he "would have been told maybe 'you're not so great at maths'," (Gavin). This meant that "statistics [modules] would have been a big worry," when beginning his studies. Feedback and results from statistics assessments demonstrated that this "couldn't have been further from the truth" as Gavin received first class grades across all of his statistics modules during his programme of study. He also discovered that he has a "really good ability for academic writing" (Gavin). These successes helped to build confidence and a new self-image, which was a stark contrast to his experience in secondary school. The culmination of this journey for Gavin is completing his degree, which, for him, highlights how Ireland's secondary school system, centred on the Leaving Certificate exams, is potentially flawed-

> Sometimes all them things aren't right like the Leaving Cert points system and all that. It just shows like, if I had been going off that, who knows where I would have been.

> But look at me now like, I'm three or four weeks away from securing a high degree in psychology, a highly academic subject like that. No one probably would have ever expected prior. So, it just shows that them systems can be wrong and they are wrong. (Gavin)

Developing new academic skills in terms of formal writing and critical thinking helped build this new self-image as he came to realise his potential. This demonstrates the damage that a lack of expectation, coupled with a high-stakes exam-based points system can do (Giersch, 2018).

Others in the study also spoke of changing perspectives and building a new, more confident self-image. Like Gavin, Grace had a difficult school experience which led to fear and doubt when starting her programme, but by the end of her first semester in HE she was achieving first class results and told herself: “keep going, you can do it!”. As mentioned earlier, Jessica wanted to use her studies to become a “good professional”, not simply to pass an exam, which had been her focus when she was younger. In this regard the programme served to help her build a new professional identity. Rose, meanwhile, was very reluctant to engage or offer opinions in class at the start of her programme. However, after speaking up in class one evening she “stopped putting [herself] on mute and […] started engaging more in the classes.” Rose even went on to appoint herself as “the questioner” for her group of friends from class and communicated with lecturers on behalf of her peers.

Each of these examples demonstrate some degree of change in self-image. As many mature students with disabilities may have had negative experiences in primary and secondary school, they often return to education with a lack of self-belief or fear of failure (Reay, 2003). Gavin carried a feeling of lacking efficacy with him long after finishing secondary

school. However, this evidence points to the fact that people, such as those who shared their stories here, can turn this around and use formal learning experiences for self-discovery and to build self-belief. It may not be that education transforms people, much more that resilient and committed people can transform themselves within a supportive education setting. As Rose's poem captured, part of returning to education for adults involves overcoming self-doubt and believing that you have your own experiences that you can bring to the table. Like Rose, the others in this study had their own battles with the "devils on their shoulders" (Rose), however, the persistence and ability to overcome these challenges was evident in all of their stories.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings of this study. The stories shared by the participants were analysed and synthesised into three themes, which were developed in order to address the research questions. These themes focused on the impact of previous educational experiences, diagnosis and disclosure, and building self-belief. Alongside these themes, three 'found poems' were placed in order to give voice to the participants' experiences. In this regard this chapter presented and discussed findings, but also gave due respect to the sacred stories that were shared with me. The following chapter provides a conclusion to the dissertation.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The fifth and final chapter provides a conclusion to the study. Drawing on the findings that were presented and discussed in Chapter Four, overall conclusions will be drawn as well as a reflection on the contribution of the research. Whilst the chapter focuses on the strengths and value of the work, limitations are also reflexively and honestly considered. As in most educational or social research, the implications of the findings are outlined. In this regard, the implications for policy and practice are explained, followed by a more reflective piece on the implications of the research process for my own learning, at a personal and professional level. Lastly, the chapter ends with a conclusion to the project in a holistic sense, that aims to bring the dissertation and research process to a close.

5.2 Addressing the Research Questions

From the outset, this study aimed to explore the learning experiences of mature students with disabilities in Higher Education (HE). Within this broad aim, and having reviewed relevant literature, a number of research questions were developed in Chapter Two. These questions are presented below with a brief note on how the findings addressed each question.

- **Research Question 1**: What impact do mature students with disabilities' prior educational experiences have on their learning journey in HE?

In addressing this first question, it was found that prior experiences of education had led some participants to feel a degree of fear and self-doubt when entering HE. Their stories illustrated how negative prior experiences in a formal learning environment impacted their self-belief

when they returned to HE. This caused some of the participants to question whether they truly belonged in an educational setting. Previous experiences of education also led to a lack of awareness of the supports that are currently provided in Irish HEI's. Using the 'chronosystem' within the bioecological model helped to make sense of this finding (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The chronosystem refers to the impact of changes over time on individuals. For the participants in this study, between leaving formal education and returning to HE, the system of support for learners with disabilities had changed significantly. The participants' narratives illustrated how there was more support available to them in HE now than there had been when they were in post-primary school. These systemic changes over time, led to some not being aware of the support that HEI's currently provide, nor were they aware of the supports they are entitled to as students with disabilities.

- **Research Question 2:** What are the challenges that mature students with disabilities face as learners in Higher Education?

With regards to this question, there was some overlap with the findings stated above. Beyond the challenges summarised, other barriers arose. Grace's story highlighted how registering with disability supports services can be particularly challenging for mature students when compared to their younger peers (the implications of this finding are discussed later in in this chapter). Other narratives gathered in the course of this study revealed how a potential lack of flexibility in assessment can create barriers for students with disabilities. This challenge was compounded by the 'time poverty' faced by mature students, as conflicting responsibilities impact their ability to meet deadlines and learn programme content (Reay, 2003).

- **Research Question 3:** How can mature students with disabilities overcome these challenges?

Assessment grades and feedback were found to be important in building self-belief and confidence. This finding ran contrary to other studies reviewed in Chapter Two, which found that assessments were seen as a challenge or barrier to achievement (Spassiani et al., 2017; Tett et al., 2012; Riddell et al., 2005). Alongside assessments, support, both formal and informal helped the participants to overcome challenges. Again, the bioecological model was useful in making sense of this finding, as the support systems around the participants can be seen as 'microsystems' which enabled achievement and success in an educational setting for the individuals in this study (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). With the help of feedback and support, the narratives gathered in the study resembled a journey. This journey began with fear and doubt, and ended with the emergence of a new, more positive self-image in an educational setting. This journey was illustrated profoundly in Gavin, Grace and Rose's poems, which can be read in Chapter Four.

5.3 Contribution to the Field

The intrinsic value of the study stems from the methodological approach taken, which was chosen to address the research questions. In setting out on the research journey, it was important to capture the students' experience in an authentic manner, and in a medium that could produce rich data. The use of narrative inquiry in this study achieved this aim by asking participants to share their stories of success and struggle whilst in HE. For narrative inquirers, stories encapsulate experience (Lewis, 2014). By collecting their stories, this study gained a window into the participant's educational world. The 'sacred stories' (Lewis, 2014), that were shared as part of the project were then analysed rigorously, using Braun and Clarke's (2006)

guidelines. Following their six-step process (see Chapter Three), credible and trustworthy themes were produced and were presented and discussed in Chapter Four.

Combined with this thematic analysis, was an arts-based 'found poetry' technique. The poems were co-created with the participants by looking again at the interview transcripts and extracting lines to make poems. These poems paid due respect to the participants' stories and the impact of the finished pieces was self-evident in Chapter Four. For me, the poems resonated strongly, as both pain, hope and anger ran through them in equal measure. Three of the five participants decided to create poems after the interviews. Two participants opted not to create poems. The poems created and shared by Grace, Gavin and Rose added voice and depth to the study, and these contributions demonstrate the power of poetry to encapsulate experience.

Beyond methodological considerations and the particular findings of the project, this study contributes to the body of research on the experiences of disabled students in HE in Ireland. Whilst previous research in this area included some mature students within their sample (Rath, 2021; Langørgen & Magnus,2018; Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Jacklin et al., 2007; Riddell et al., 2005), this study was novel, in that it focused on the experiences of mature students with disabilities specifically. As mentioned in Chapter One, I felt that this was a worthy topic of inquiry, as older learners approach education differently, return to education for myriad reasons, and often carry the weight of negative experiences from an inflexible education system (Fleming et al., 2012; Waller, 2006; Reay, 2002; 2003). Their perceived differences to their younger peers and the impact of prior educational experience were borne out in the findings and were discussed in Chapter Four.

5.4 Limitations

While the previous section outlined the contribution this study has made, the limitations of the research must also be considered. As this study was completed as part of a Master of Arts in Education Programme, the scope of the project was naturally constrained. Two resulting limitations were time and the number of participants involved in the study. Beyond time, another resource that was somewhat limited was my own experience as a researcher. As a novice, I was acutely aware of my own limitations in this regard. This was mitigated by extensive reading in the area of research methodology and by expert guidance from my supervisor. The impact of this limitation was felt during the semi-structured, narrative interviews. By using my reflexive journal after each interview and reflecting on how to improve or correct mistakes I worked on my interviewing style. I felt that by the third interview I had refined my technique significantly and was far more comfortable. The reflexive journal was an essential tool throughout; it also helped to guard against my own conscious and unconscious biases (See Appendix vi 'Audit Trail' for extracts from the reflexive journal). Two such biases that emerged were my previously negative attitudes towards the value of educational assessment, and learning difficulty diagnosis. The data gathered here, and my own reflections helped me to understand and see the value which a formal diagnosis of a disability can have for some people. The data also demonstrated the value of assessments in building confidence.

Beyond this, a further limitation was the lack of prior research dealing directly with the experiences of mature students with disabilities in HE. As mentioned previously, some studies did include mature learners within broader participant groups, however, none looked specifically at the experiences of this cohort. This presented a challenge when discussing the

findings in Chapter Four, as it was at times difficult to relate the findings to other studies where mature students were mentioned tangentially. Limits in terms of scope, experience and the absence of similar research do not diminish the value of the study. These limitations were either mitigated against through reflection and discussions with my supervisor, or consciously accepted and honestly admitted.

5.4 Implications, Recommendations & Future Research

Based on the findings, presented in Chapter Four, a number of implications can be drawn, and recommendations pointed to. In terms of policy related to the registration of students with disability support services, the stories gathered in this study suggest that procedures related to registration need to be considered. As seen in Grace's poem, registering without sufficient 'evidence' of disability can cause considerable pain and frustration, a finding which resonated with similar studies from the UK and USA (Smith et al., 2019; Kendall, 2016). Obtaining evidence can also be costly. Grace mentioned that a dyslexia assessment would incur significant financial costs. This is noteworthy as a recent report found that the most significant barrier to accessing HE for prospective mature students is the financial burden involved (HEA, 2021). Whilst Grace was willing to pay for the assessment herself, she was not able to attend a psychologist due to the pandemic, so was unable to fully register. The knock-on effect of this is outlined in the previous chapter, Grace had to disclose her dyslexia to each lecturer, an experience she described as degrading. The 'exosystem' layer of the bio-ecological model is relevant here (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The exosystem can relate to bureaucratic structures that impact individuals. The HEA requires the provision of evidence in order to provide funding for supports for disabled students. So, whilst support structures immediately around the student may function appropriately, the overall experience is still

heavily impacted by structures beyond their control. These structures are designed and administered using a medical model of disability (Rath, 2021; Tomlinson, 2017). Redesigning these structures and aligning them with a social or rights-based model of disability may pave the way for Irish HEI's to become more inclusive, and closer to a 'community based' definition of inclusion (Göransson and Nilholm, 2014).

In the Irish educational context, Further and Higher Education are arguably lagging behind the rest of the sector in this movement towards a more progressive, social definition of disability. In 2020, the State Exams Commission, a body responsible for administering exams in the post-primary sector in Ireland, altered their Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations (RACE) policy (State Exams Commission, 2020). The RACE policy now stipulates that schools no longer need to seek evidence of a specific learning difficulty or disability in order to provide accommodations or support (State Exams Commission, 2020). RACE now prescribes that "Eligibility should be assessed based on level of need, without a requirement for a diagnosis of a specific condition" (State Exams Commission, 2020, p. 8). It would seem that it may be time for the HEA to move away from the current medical model, and to a needs-based model in line with colleagues in the post-primary sector.

This finding suggests that a more generalised system of support in HE may be optimal, whereby programmes are designed according to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, with supports open to all students (CAST, 2021). This removes the necessity for disabled students to declare a disability, whilst more flexible UDL programmes would reduce the need for some students to seek accommodations or access supports. Other findings of this study also suggest the value of incorporating more flexibility into HE programmes in order to become more inclusive. As John experienced, the rigid nature of the current system was at

times “disappointing” and “disheartening.” At some points throughout his journey, John was asking for UDL. He requested to do an assessment in another format that did not require on campus attendance at a time bound exam. Within UDL, a key principle is providing multiple means of action and expression (CAST, 2021), and if this principle is applied to programme design, the disappointment experienced by students like John could be mitigated. Jessica also experienced a rigid system of assessment and felt she could not access time extensions when under pressure. She felt that this system was overly hierarchical, in that if she was granted an extension, her lecturer was doing her a favour and may even judge her work negatively as a result of her getting extra time. Jessica suggested that the language used here be changed as the current system of ‘requesting’ an extension that may be ‘granted’ or ‘denied’, is in some way infantilising for adults in a formal learning environment.

Aside from the implications related to policy and practice, it is also appropriate to outline the implications of the study and its findings for future research. As mentioned previously, this study was the first to specifically explore the experiences of mature students with disabilities’ experiences in HE in Ireland. Further research studies may be undertaken in order to investigate and improve this cohorts’ learning experiences. A recent report on the participation of mature students in HE highlighted the need for such research (HEA, 2021). The report found that 59% of disabled mature students felt their health or disability was a major barrier to participation in HE, compared to just 15% of their non-disabled peers (HEA, 2021). This points to the fact that mature students with disabilities face barriers that their non-disabled peers do not. More in depth, qualitative research may help to explore the impact of these barriers and gather suggestions from participants, as to how to remove or lower barriers to participation. Future research may also be expanded further to include potential mature students with disabilities, that is adults with disabilities who would like to

access HE. A study of this nature may seek to identify barriers to participation for adults with disabilities and help provide solutions and suggestions to remove or reduce such barriers.

Within this, the experiences of non-declaring mature students with disabilities could also serve as a focus of further research. This is relevant as reports, such as those cited above (HEA, 2021), only include those who declare a disability. This area has been explored by other researchers (Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Jacklin, 2011). Riddell and Weedon (2014) found that disabled students may choose when and where to disclose that they have a disability. In a similar case study, Jacklin (2011) investigated the experience of a student who chose not to declare that they had a disability in university. Interestingly, both Riddell and Weedon (2014) and Jacklin (2011) used single participant case studies to gather their data, and both participants were mature students with disabilities. Further research, including more participants, could provide valuable findings here. Meanwhile, this study found that length of time out of formal education may cause a lack of awareness of support available for mature students with disabilities. This finding has potential significance for future research, as it may be that there are more mature students with disabilities or learning difficulties that do not disclose their disability in HEI's in Ireland, and thus may not receive the support they are entitled to. In future research, their voices would add much to a study of the experiences of mature students with disabilities in HE.

Thus far this section has outlined the implications of these findings for policy, practice and research, however, the research process has also had profound implications for me as an educator. I feel I have gained a deeper understanding of the students I support. I have always valued empathy as a core skill of a good teacher, however, having taken the time to explore the background literature and then rigorously analysing interview transcripts, I feel better

able to truly empathise with the experience of students with disabilities. This deeper understanding has shown me the power of quality assessments to build confidence, something I will bear in mind when deciding how students in my classes evidence their learning in the future. I have also been humbled by the willingness of the participants to share their experiences with me, and hence make an invaluable contribution to the project. Before becoming a teacher, I studied politics. Though I have forgotten much of the content, Marx's (1864) theory of alienation has always stayed with me. The central premise of the theory is that what we do in life reflects who we are as people. This project was about hearing the voices of people who had experienced difficulty in educational settings, and are part of a group of students who had not received much attention from researchers previously. Working with people who have been marginalised from education or are at risk of being excluded is very much part of my identity as an educator. This research study has helped me to realise this.

5.5 Conclusion

This study explored the learning experiences of mature students with disabilities in HE. Narrative inquiry was chosen as the most appropriate methodological means to achieve this aim. The stories that the participants shared were analysed and synthesised thematically. Within this narrative methodological framework, semi-structured interviews were utilised alongside a participative, arts-based 'found poetry' approach. Poems were co-created by the participants and myself, by looking again at the stories they had shared in the interviews. Both the findings and poems charted a journey that began with fear and self-doubt, and ultimately led to the development of a new, more positive self-image in a formal educational setting.

In gathering these narratives and creating the poems, this study gave voice to the experiences of five learners who are mature students with disabilities. Whilst some studies into the experiences of students with disabilities in HE had included mature students, within a broader group of older and younger learners, this study focused solely on the experiences of mature students. In this regard it begins to address a gap in the research literature into the experiences of a specific group of learners in HE. At a personal level, the research process has helped to improve my own practice as an inclusive educator. At a systems level, it is hoped that the study may make a positive contribution to the development of more inclusive Higher Education.

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Appendices

Appendix i: Interview Schedule

1. **Success**
    a. So, I thought we start by talking about what has gone well for you at college.
    b. Tell me about when things have gone really well for you in your programme?
    c. When you're learning went well? When you really felt you were learning and developing **competence** in the programme?
    d. When you felt you were doing really well…

2. **Challenges**
    a. What challenges have you faced while attending college?
    b. **NB** What has gotten in the way of your learning on your course?
    c. How did you overcome these challenges?
    d. What supports did you have when presented with these challenges? Were they effective?
    e. Prompt – personal, college, wider support network…

3. **Prior experience**- may need longer lead in
    a. So, what motivated you to take on this course?
    b. Could you describe your experience of education before starting this course?
        i. Tell me about primary and post-primary.
        ii. Tell me about further education or any other higher education experiences.
    c. What was it like for you?
    d. How did this affect you when you were starting your course?

4. **Disclosure and Engagement**
    The next topic we can discuss is about your experience of registering with the disability support service
    a. How was the process of registering for you?
    b. How did you feel when you registered with the support service?
    c. Besides registering, do you engage with the service? How? How do you find this?
    d. If you're not accessing support from the service – are you accessing any supports?
        i. Friends, peers, family?

5. **Towards the ideal**
    a. If you could imagine the ideal college learning experience, what would it feel/**look** like?
    b. What could we change in the college to get closer to that ideal scenario?
    c. What could **you** do to move towards this?
    d. What could the college do?

Appendix ii: Project Information Sheet for Participants

Research Project Information Sheet

Hi there 👋my name is Conor Thompson, and I am a Learning Support Tutor and master's student at the National College of Ireland. I'm looking for participants to take part in a research study as part of my master's project. If you're interested in taking part, please read on 😊

The title for this project is:

Exploring the learning experiences of mature students registered with the disability supports service.

Why I am doing this study:

It's really important that colleges and universities understand the learning experiences of all students. Since I work in the Disability Support Service at NCI, I'm particularly interested in the experiences of the students registered with us. The experience of mature students registered with disability supports service seems to be an unexplored area. I think there is a lot we can learn from the experiences of mature students at the college.

What will be explored?

The project focuses on the stories of the people who take part. I will ask you about your previous learning experiences before starting your college course. Then we will discuss the challenges you face and the success you have had as a learner. Lastly, I would like to get you thoughts on how you can be better supported on your journey as a learner.

Your Role in the Study

If you decide to participate (and this is entirely up to you, zero pressure either way!), you will take part in a one-to-one discussion with me (should take about 40 mins and max 1 hour). I'll ask you a few questions about your experience at college. This will be online, and we can use whatever system you're most comfortable with (Teams, Zoom, WhatsApp or just a normal phone call). Our conversation will be recorded, and I'll type up a transcript of it afterwards and give you the final word on what can/can't be used. If you would like to take part, I can send you the questions or the topics beforehand.

Research Poems

There is also a creative element to the project. I would like us to make poems using the transcript, this would mean meeting online at some stage after the discussion and

using your transcript to pull together a poem that sums up your experience. We would create the poem together, using the main points from our discussion. In this way, we aren't 'writing' a poem, we're 'pulling it together' using the transcript. I can give you more information on this process and it should actually be quite interesting and enjoyable. The idea is that a poem can give the findings more of a 'voice' and can then be used to make positive changes. You will have the final say on how the poem looks and whether you want it to be included in the dissertation or not.

Why Take Part?

I am passionate about inclusion in education, and I hope that this project can help to improve my own practice as an inclusive educator, and possibly make a difference to the supports for students with disabilities. By taking part , you will play a vital role in the project and hopefully help to make some positive changes to our system. You might also enjoy reflecting on your experiences, sharing your stories and making a poem to sum it all up.

Confidentiality

If you decide to take part, any information you share with me will be treated with the highest care. It will be stored in a secure location and will not be accessed by anyone else. If some of your stories are published in the dissertation, nobody will be able to identify you. I won't use your name and won't include any details that may reveal your identity. As well as this, you will have the last word on what can or can't be used in the transcript or poem.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch. If you do agree to take part, you can change your mind at any time and leave the project.

If you need any more info or want to have a chat about possibly taking part, you can email me at conor.thompson@ncirl.ie or contact me by phone (text, call, WhatsApp) on 0877862835

Thank you for taking the time to read about my project!

Conor Thompson

Appendix iii: Research Project Information Video for Participants

Following UDL principles, participants were given a choice between reading the information sheet in Appendix ii or watching this information video.

Appendix iv: Initial Contact Email Sample

Hi ……,

I'm a Learning Support Tutor and master's student at [redacted], My colleague, [redacted], passed on your contact details to me.

As part of my master's in education, I'm doing a research study into the experiences of mature students registered with the Disability Support Service. I am looking for some students to participate in the study and I was wondering if you would be interested in taking part?

If you are interested, we would meet on Teams (or Zoom or WhatsApp, whatever is easiest), to talk about your experience in college, your previous educational experience and what you would recommend we need to change to make improvements. There would be a follow-up meeting afterwards for a creative element that aims to sum up the first meeting. All of this would be completely confidential and if you do decide to participate you would not be identifiable in any way.

I've made a short video explaining the focus of the study and what would be involved if you would like to participate. If you're interested in taking part have a look at the video here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iF2UGUVy1Z5COdX2xHNVEsuv9tF1ydPt/view

Participant Information Video.webm

drive.google.com

If you have a spare 10 minutes this week or next, we could have a quick meeting on Teams, and I can explain what would be involved and answer any questions you might have. Feel free to contact me at any time on Teams, email or by phone on [redacted].

Kind regards,

Conor

Appendix v: Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

As in all social research projects, it is essential that the researcher gets written consent from the participants. Please read through the questions below and answer Yes or No. If you have any questions or aren't sure about something, please don't hesitate to get in touch at Conor.thompson@ncirl.ie or 0877862835.

Please type 'Yes' or 'No' to these questions in the box provided:

Questions:	Answer: **(type 'Yes or 'No')**
I have read and understand the 'Research Project Information Sheet'	
I have been told what the research is about	
I understand that my real name will not be used in the final report and a fake name will be used	
I understand what I have to do in this study (one meeting to discuss your experience, followed by another meeting at a later date to make a poem together)	
I agree to allow the meeting to be recorded	
I have had an opportunity to ask questions about the project	
I am happy to take part in this project	
I know that I can leave at any time, before or during the project	
I understand that the findings may be published in Journals or presented at Conferences	

Participant Signature:

I have read and understood the information on this form on the attached information sheet. I understand that all data collected from this study will be treated with full confidentiality and, if published, the data will not be identifiably linked to any individual. My questions have been answered by the researcher. I have a copy of the consent and therefore consent to take part in this study.

Name: (type name here)

Signature: (please add digital signature, the researcher can assist if you are not sure how to do this)

Date: (type today's date here)

Contact Email: (type your email address here)

Researcher Contact Details:

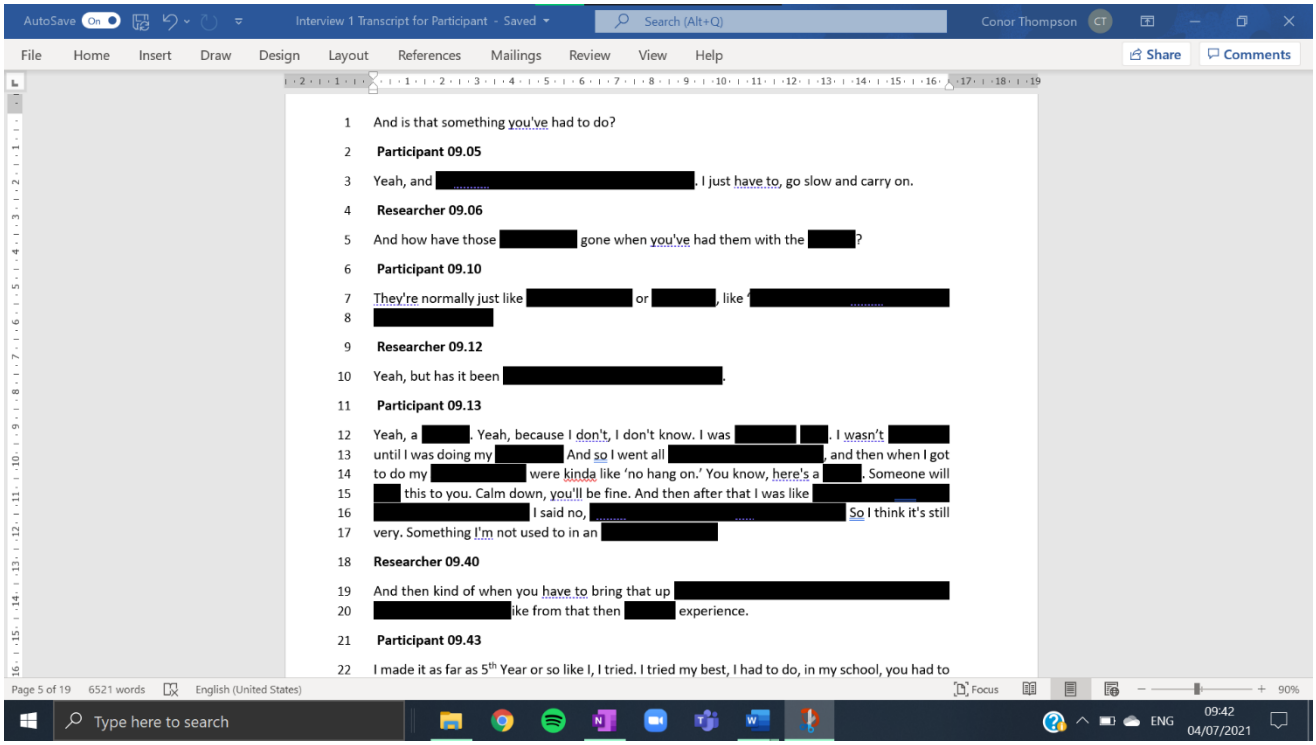
Conor Thompson Conor.thompson@ncirl.ie 0877862835

Appendix vi: Qualitative Research Audit Trail

The following documents have been compiled in order to produce an Audit Trail for qualitative research as set out by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

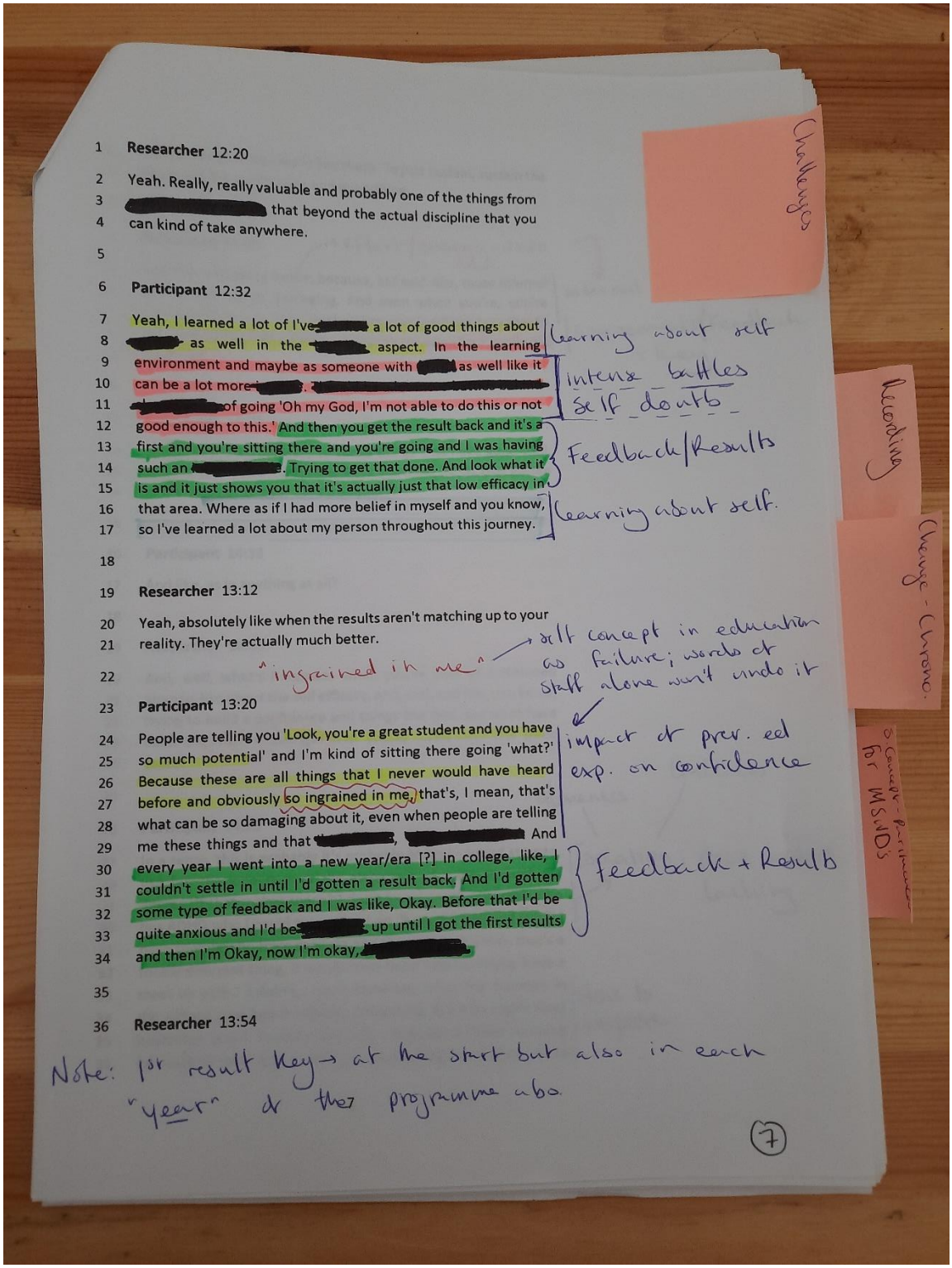
1. Raw Data

Step 1 in Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidlines is to present the raw data. The entire data set is not reproduced here in order to preserve the anonymity of particpants. Instead, an example of the raw data is presented below. (Note- file has been redacted to avoid identifying participant)



2. Data reduction and analysis notes

The second step in the audit trail aims to demonstrate how data was reduced into manageable, meaningful 'chunks' and then analysed. As the example displays below, this was first done by hand using colour codes and notes in the margins, which were later converted to digital format. (Note- file has been redacted to avoid identifying participant).



3. Data reconstruction and synthesis products

This step displays how the coded data was synthesised and collated into initial themes. This was again done by using colour codes, as displayed in the tables below. The codes were first colour coded and grouped by participant:

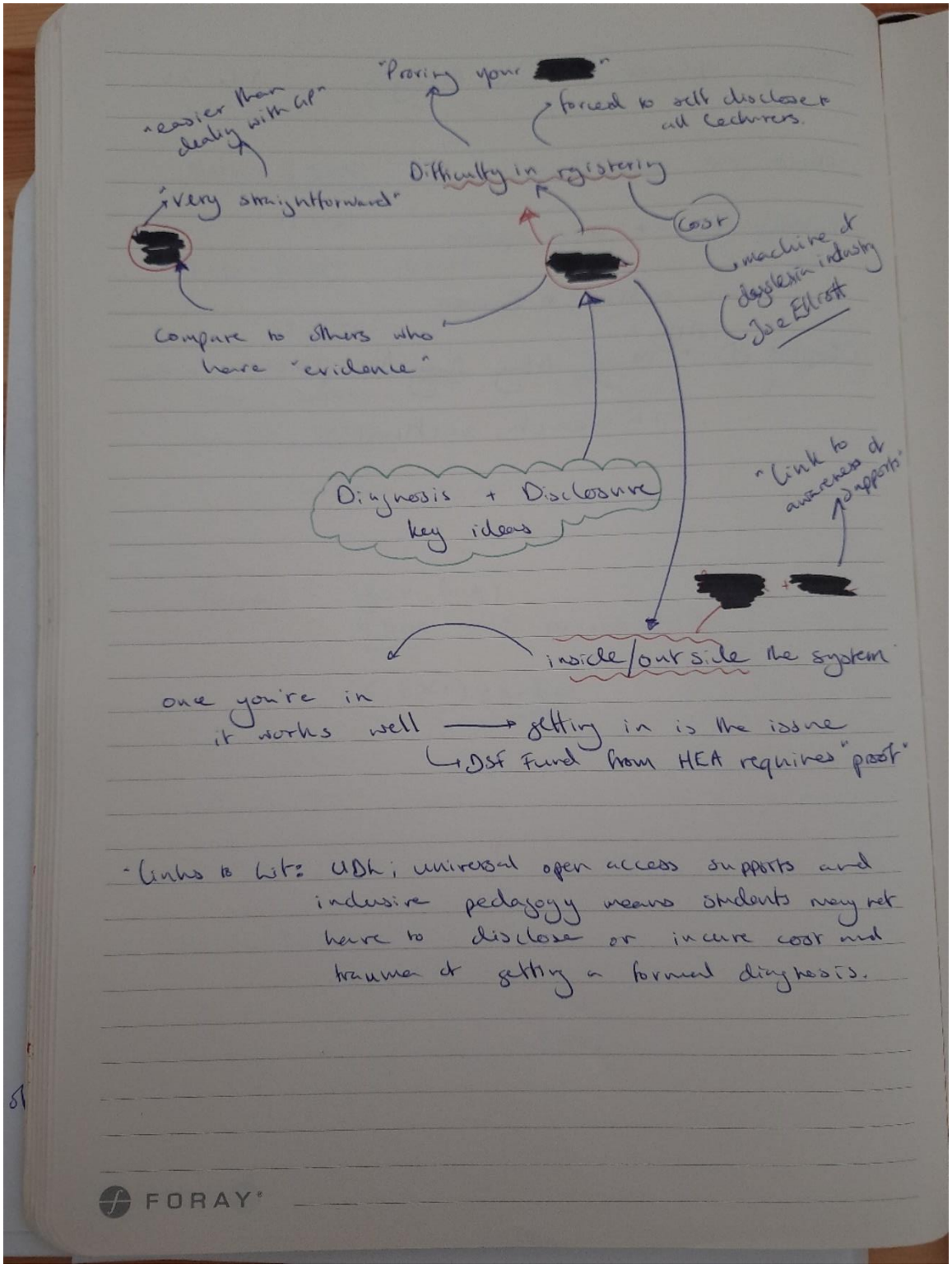
Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
Education Journey	Motvation for returning	Negative prior experience of education	Negative prior experiences in education	Journey- chronosystem
Motivation	Initial Self doubt	Unwanted conflict	- Leaving school early	Lack of Awareness of Supports-
Online Learning- very positive	Building confidence	Drawn back to education	Initial self doubt/ challenge	- Chronosystem
Time- Conflicting responsibilities	Positive change- new found belief	- Advocacy motivation	Building confidence	Positive Impact of Supports
Teachers- Good and Bad	Peer supports	Diagnosis- positive	Support network	Catching up
Pressure	- Becoming a leader!	- Anger	Assessments	Lack of flexibility from Staff
Full time vs Part time	Assessments (fear but built confidence)	- Self understanding	- Fear but built confidence	Assistive technology- benefits
Stigma	Accessing Support	- Self discovery	- Reassuring	Assessments- CA's Valued
- Requesting Extensions	Technology helps	Internal Battles	Painful Disclosure/ lack of Evidence	Assessments- Exams = brain dump
Assessments- more flexiblity	Previous experience of education- parents lack of belief	Self doubt	Difficulty Registering	Asking for UDL
Seen and heard	Impact of previous experience- self doubt	Building Self Belief	- Inside/outside system	Registering for supports
Hidden disability	Online learning	- Assessments key	- Medical model	
Positives of NCI	Awareness of supports	- New self image- maths and aca writing	Learning Environment	
Fear of Failure	- Chronosystem	Being a mature students	Online- negative	
Learning form the past	Registering- positive	Stigma	Fear	
Registering- can only help the willing	Supports = positive	Reluctant to ask for help		

Following this, the codes were grouped together by 'candidate' theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006):

LEARNING TECHNOLOGY & AT	REGISTERING & DISCLOSING	ASSESSMENTS- Blessing and a Curse	BUILDING SELF BELIEF:
Online Learning- very positive	Registering for supports	Fear	Building confidence
Technology helps	- 'Naiively' 'by chance'	Registering- can only help the willing	Positive change- new found belief
Lecture capture- pen	Painful Disclosure/ lack of Evidence	Assessments- CA's Valued	Building Self Belief
Online- negative	Difficulty Registering	Assessments- Exams = brain dump	- Assessments key
Assistive technology- benefits	- Inside/outside system	Assessments	- New self image- maths and aca writing
	- Medical model	- Fear but built confidence	Building confidence
	Registering- positive	- Reassuring	
	Stigma	Assessments- building confidence; reassurance	
	Reluctant to ask for help (FE COURSE)		
	Ready to ask for help (HE COURSE)		
	Registering- can only help the willing		
IMPACT OF PRIOR EXPERIENCES	**SUBTHEME: Awareness of Supports**	**SELF DOUBT:**	**ASKING FOR UDL:**
Education Journey	Lack of Awareness of Supports-	Initial Self doubt	Assessments- more flexiblity
Previous experience of education- parents lack of belief	- Chronosystem	Initial self doubt/ challenge	Asking for UDL
Impact of previous experience- self doubt	**Stigma**	Internal Battles	- Library website- accessibility issues
Negative prior experience of education	**Reluctant to ask for help**	Fear of Failure	Painful Disclosure/ lack of Evidence
Negative prior experiences in education	Awareness of supports		Difficulty Registering
- Leaving school early	- Chronosystem		- Inside/outside system
			- Medical model

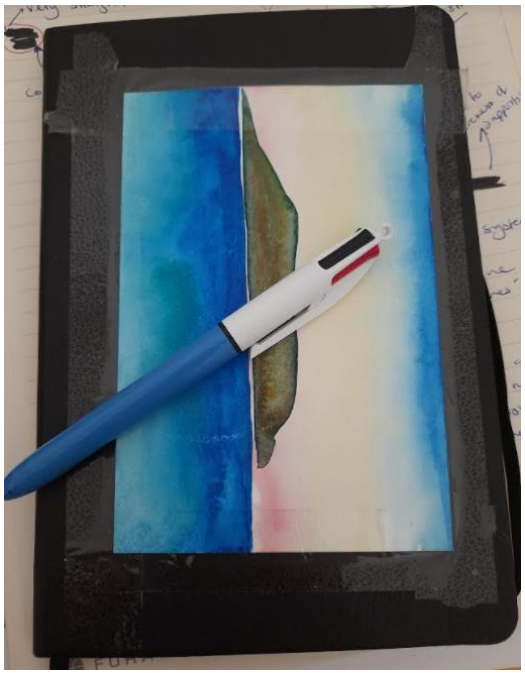
4. Process notes:

Whilst synthesising the codes above, ideas, patterns and links to the literature were noted by hand and mapped out using 'concept maps'. (Note- file has been redacted to avoid identifying participant).

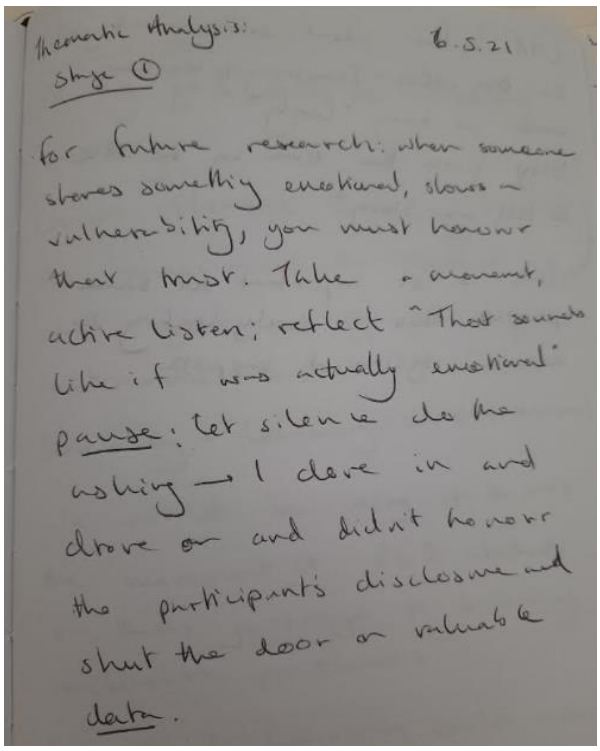


5. Materials related to intentions and dispositions

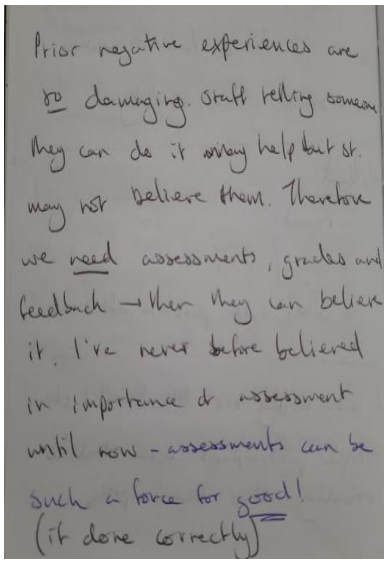
This step considers the impact of biases and preconceptions in dictating the direction of the work. As noted in Chapter Three, a reflexive journal was used throughout to guard against biases. A number of extracts from the journal are displayed below- covering quandaries around labelling students, the power of assessment and dealing with emotion in research interviews



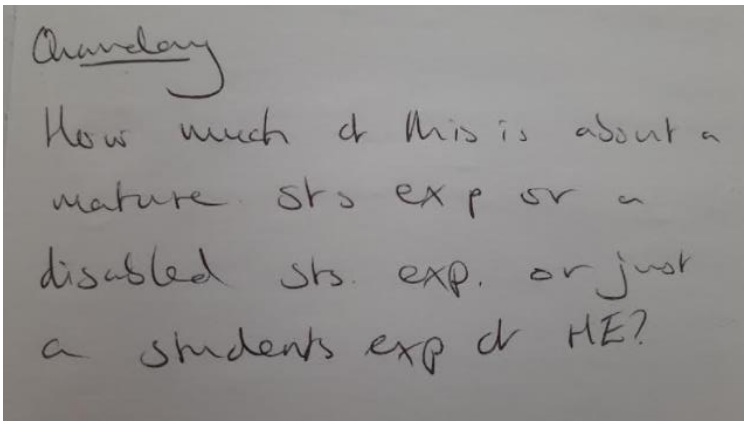
A. The reflexive journal



B. Dealing with emotion in interview sessions



C. Challenging my own negative feelings towards educational assessment.



D. A quandary about labelling people as 'mature' or 'disabled' or even 'student'.

6. Preliminary development information

This final step displays how the final themes were created. The grouped codes were synthesised into coherent themes that were well supported by the data in the interview transcripts.

LEARNING TECHNOLOGY & AT	REGISTERING & DISCLOSING	ASSESSMENTS- Blessing and a Curse	BUILDING SELF BELIEF:
Online Learning- very positive Technology helps Lecture capture- pen Online- negative Assistive technology- benefits	Registering for supports - 'Naiively' 'by chance' Painful Disclosure/ lack of Evidence Difficulty Registering - Inside/outside system - Medical model Registering- positive Stigma Reluctant to ask for help (FE COURSE) Ready to ask for help (HE COURSE) Registering- can only help the willing	Fear Registering- can only help the willing Assessments- CA's Valued Assessments- Exams = brain dump Assessments - Fear but built confidence - Reassuring Assessments- building confidence; reassurance	Building confidence Positive change- new found belief Building Self Belief - Assessments key - New self image- maths and aca writing Building confidence
IMPACT OF PRIOR EXPERIENCES	**SUBTHEME: Awareness of Supports**	**SELF DOUBT:**	**ASKING FOR UDL:**
Education Journey Previous experience of education- parents lack of belief Impact of previous experience- self doubt Negative prior experience of education Negative prior experiences in education - Leaving school early	Lack of Awareness of Supports- - Chronosystem **Stigma** **Reluctant to ask for help** Awareness of supports - Chronosystem	Initial Self doubt Initial self doubt/ challenge Internal Battles Fear of Failure	Assessments- more flexiblity Asking for UDL - Library website- accessibility issues Painful Disclosure/ lack of Evidence Difficulty Registering - Inside/outside system - Medical model

Theme 1: Impact of Prior Educational Experiences
- Fear
- Awareness of Supports (chronosystem)
- Self Doubt (initial Challenhe)

Theme 2: Diagnosis, Disclosure and Registering
- Insider- Outsider
- Asking for help
- Evidencing Disability in a medically modelled system

Theme 3: Building Confidence
- New self image
- Assessments
- Supports
    - Peers
    - DSS
    - AT