I Don’t Suffer from Dyslexia, I Suffer from Other People:

A Study on Students with Dyslexia and Stigma Experiences in Canadian Universities

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Abstract

This thesis examines how students who identify as dyslexic experience academic accommodation systems in Canadian universities, and how these systems shape experiences of stigma, disclosure, identity, and belonging. Guided by an intersectional disability studies framework, the study analyzes eight semi-structured interviews with students across Canadian post-secondary institutions. Findings reveal that accommodation systems, while legally mandated and necessary, operate within and often reproduce ableist institutional norms that position neurotypical ways of learning and performing as the standard. Experiences of stigma and identity negotiation were produced through accommodation processes themselves, shaped by intersecting systems of ableism, racism, and gendered and classed expectations embedded within higher education. Access depended not only on accommodations themselves but on the institutional conditions, relationships, and ongoing labour required to activate them. This study contributes to Disability Studies and the sociology of education by centering diverse students' voices within Canada's fragmented disability policy landscape.

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Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACA – Accessible Canada Act

AODA – Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act

BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, Person/People of Colour

CHRC – Canadian Human Rights Commission

DSO – Disability Support/Service Office

DS – Disability Studies

LD – Learning Disability/Disabilities/Disabled

Chapter 1: Introduction

Higher education institutions are often framed as spaces of opportunity, mobility, and intellectual growth. Yet for many students with disabilities, particularly those with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, these environments can also reproduce barriers that are structurally and culturally embedded within institutional beliefs, policies, and everyday practices. While universities are positioned as sites of inclusion, the realities of access and participation are uneven, shaped by longstanding assumptions about ability, productivity, independence, and academic success.

By law, Canadian universities are required to ensure that their services are accessible to students with disabilities (Mullins & Preyde, 2013). Since the 1990s, various universities in Canada have steadily implemented policies to accommodate learning-disabled students (Cox & Walsh, 1998). These policies modified existing requirements or conditions, enabling equal opportunity for the demonstration of learning (Cox & Walsh, 1998; Hibbs & Pothier, 2005; Mullins & Preyde, 2013, as cited in Waterfield & Whelan, 2017). This legal commitment to accessibility was reinforced by a landmark Supreme Court of Canada decision ruling that "students with learning disabilities must receive an education that allows them to reach their full potential" (Moore v. British Columbia, 2012, SCC61, as cited in Easterbrook et al., 2015, p. 1506). At the same time, post-secondary institutions across Canada are reporting an increase in the number of students with disabilities requesting academic accommodations (McCormack, 2025; Vogelsang-Decoteau, 2023). This increased demand for services has highlighted a broader transformation within the Canadian post-secondary landscape: while the student population has become significantly diverse across lines of disability, race, gender, sexuality, and

socioeconomic background, accessibility services and inclusion policy frameworks have not expanded at a corresponding pace (NEADS, 2018; Lanthier et al., 2023).

The organization of disability support in Canadian universities is further shaped by a fragmented policy landscape. Disability policy falls across federal and provincial jurisdictions, with provinces and territories holding primary responsibility for education. Federal legislation such as the *Accessible Canada Act* (2019) has broadened how disability and barriers are defined at the national level, but its regulatory scope does not extend to most colleges and universities (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2023). As a result, how accommodations are defined, implemented, and funded varies considerably across provinces and institutions, producing significant regional disparities in what students can access and how they must navigate bureaucratic systems to do so (Howard & Edge, 2014). These jurisdictional complexities are examined in further detail below.

In practice, universities fulfill their legal obligations through Disability Service Offices (DSOs), which coordinate accommodations such as extra time on exams, assistive technology, note-taking services, and deadline extensions. Initially developed primarily for students with physical disabilities or sensory impairments (De Beer et al., 2022), Disability Service Offices (DSOs) are increasingly tasked with providing academic accommodations for those with learning disabilities. However, these offices operate under significant resource constraints, including limited funding, high caseloads, and uneven institutional support (Dolmage, 2017; Lanthier et al., 2023). These conditions shape not only what supports are available but also how accessible the process of obtaining them feels to students seeking assistance. These institutional constraints are not merely logistical; they also reflect broader sociological patterns in how

societies organize, access, distribute resources, and determine which bodies and minds are treated as belonging within post-secondary institutions.

Despite institutional commitments to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, many Canadian universities continue to struggle to recognize and respond to the diverse needs of students with disabilities. Moreover, they are often inadequately equipped to accommodate people whose experiences within the university are structured by their intersectional identities, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. This leaves many students vulnerable to ongoing experiences of stigma, discrimination and marginalization within institutions that formally position themselves as inclusive.

In contrast to primary or secondary education, where schools are often responsible for identifying and supporting students with disabilities, university students are confronted with the additional burden of voluntarily disclosing their disability, providing medical documentation, and advocating for their own accommodations. This shift places more responsibility on students and positions disclosure as a prerequisite for support and a potential site of stigma. As a result, students must not only navigate academic expectations but also concerns surrounding legitimacy, competence, and belonging while demonstrating that their disability warrants accommodation. The burden of navigating these processes is particularly significant for students encountering disability support systems, diagnosis, and self-advocacy in higher education for the first time.

Universities are therefore not simply spaces where disability is accommodated but also institutional environments where disability is actively produced, regulated, and managed through policy, practice, and everyday interaction. Legal obligations, accommodation systems, and institutional practices shape not only how students access support but also how disability itself is recognized and understood within the university. These dynamics point to a central tension at the

heart of post-secondary disability support: while accommodations are framed as mechanisms of inclusion and educational equity, the institutional processes through which they are accessed may simultaneously reproduce exclusionary experiences. Understanding this tension requires situating the everyday experiences of students who identify as dyslexic within the broader policy and institutional landscape that governs how disability is defined, documented, and accommodated in Canadian universities.

1.1 Rationale for the Project

This project emerged from a place of intellectual and personal curiosity. As a graduate student with a learning disability, I have had a range of experiences accessing academic accommodations and accessibility services in higher education at two Canadian universities, Dalhousie University and the University of Ottawa. I have also received a formal diagnosis and have undergone the psychoeducational assessment process on more than one occasion. Alongside these experiences, much of my academic work has focused on disability and the sociology of education. Thus, it was a straightforward decision to take on this work as it remains largely under-researched.

This thesis examines the lived experience of students who identify as dyslexic, with particular attention to how (if) academic accommodation systems shape their experiences of stigma. While dyslexia is a lifelong condition, existing research on disability stigma has largely focused on younger children in education or adults in non-educational settings (Akin & Huang, 2019). Consequently, relatively little is known about how stigma is experienced, negotiated and reproduced within higher education institutions, particularly through the very systems designed to provide support. As increasing numbers of students with dyslexia enter higher education (Benedetti et al., 2022; Stoeber & Rountree, 2021), there is a growing need to critically examine

how accommodation processes operate in practice and how students experience these institutional structures in their everyday academic lives.

This study addresses these gaps in the literature by examining how students who identify as dyslexic navigate academic accommodations within Canadian universities, and how these processes shape and are shaped by experiences of stigma, disclosure, self-advocacy, and coping strategies. Despite increasing numbers of students with dyslexia in higher education, limited attention has been paid to their experiences within Canadian universities or to the ways in which these experiences are mediated by broader institutional structures, normative expectations, and intersecting social identities. Examining these dynamics requires moving beyond individualized understandings of disability to analysis of how disability is embedded within, and produced through, institutional practices, temporal expectations, and accommodation processes.

This project also seeks to avoid reproducing the limitations of what scholars have identified as white disability studies (Bailey & Mobley, 2019), which have historically positioned the white heterosexual male student as the implicit norm. Accordingly, this work considers how experiences and accommodations might be mediated by one's racial, gender, class, and other intersecting identities. In doing so, it situates students' lived experiences within the broader social, cultural and institutional context that structures higher education. Importantly, participation in the study did not require a formal medical diagnosis, allowing for the inclusion of students whose experiences may fall outside the institutional definition of disability.

Research question(s)

This thesis poses the following research questions:

1. How does the academic accommodation system in Canadian universities affect or influence the ways students with dyslexia experience their disability?
2. To what extent do students feel the need to mask their symptoms, or "pass" as non-dyslexic?

To explore these questions, this study is guided by an intersectional disability studies framework, which provides conceptual tools for analyzing how disability is shaped by overlapping systems of power and inequality. Drawing from Disability Studies (DS) and the sociology of education, this work examines how students with dyslexia interact with the accommodation system, their professors, and fellow students, while also attending to the broader values and institutional norms that regulate and restrict how individuals are expected to learn, perform, and succeed within academic institutions.

This study argues that academic accommodation systems, while legally mandated and necessary for educational equity, operate within and often reproduce ableist institutional norms that position neurotypical bodyminds as the standard and disabled (neurodiverse) bodyminds as exceptions requiring verification, management, and accommodation. From this perspective, accommodation processes are not neutral administrative systems but institutional sites where ableism, stigma, and intersecting social identities converge to shape students' educational experiences. Experiences of stigma, disclosure, and identity negotiation are therefore not incidental consequences of accessing accommodations but are produced through accommodation processes themselves, as students navigate institutions grounded in ableist, racialized, gendered, and classed assumptions about normalcy, competence, and academic ability. While universities present accommodations as mechanisms of inclusion, this study argues that these same systems simultaneously require repeated acts of disclosure, self-advocacy, and proof of disability,

reinforcing the very assumptions they are intended to mitigate rather than transforming the institutional structures that produce exclusion.

To fully understand these processes, it is necessary to move beyond individual experience and to examine the broader institutional and policy structures that shape how disability is defined, governed, and accommodated in Canadian universities. Situating these experiences within their structural context requires an examination of the Canadian disability policy landscape itself, how disability legislation is organized across federal and provincial jurisdictions, how that division of responsibility shapes the delivery of accessibility supports, and how the resulting system produces the conditions under which students must seek and receive accommodations. Attention is given to key shifts that have influenced contemporary approaches to disability governance and the "duty to accommodate", the fragmented nature of the Canadian system and its implications for equity and accessibility in post-secondary education, how learning disabilities and dyslexia are defined within policy and educational contexts, and the legal and institutional conditions that shape how universities interpret and respond to their obligations to students with disabilities.

Disability policy in Canada is best understood as a "complex web of legislation, regulations and programs" (McColl et al., 2017, p. 4), designed to protect the rights, inclusion and accessibility of people with disabilities. However, like many other countries, Canada has struggled to implement a comprehensive and coherent system that meets the needs of individuals who identify as disabled (Cameron & Valentine, 2001). Unlike other Western democracies, such as Britain, Australia or the United States, Canada has no explicit national disability legislation (Cameron & Valentine, 2001; McColl et al., 2017). Instead, disability legislation in Canada falls within federal and provincial/territorial purview, crossing multiple layers of jurisdiction (McColl

et al., 2017). Each province and territory in Canada has provincial human rights legislation that protects against discrimination on the grounds of disability, including learning disabilities (Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion, 2018). This jurisdictional fragmentation has direct consequences for how accommodations are organized and experienced across institutions.

At the federal level, Canada has several laws to protect the rights of persons with disabilities, including *the Accessible Canada Act (ACA)*, *the Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, and the *Employment Equity Act*. Generally, these policies aim to reduce barriers to participation in society, including those related to "accommodation (physical, communication, etc.), language and communication, learning and training, and safety and security" (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2013, p. 3). Legislation, like the Accessible Canada Act, came into force in 2019 as a key piece of federal legislation aimed at achieving a barrier-free Canada by January 1, 2040. Building on existing disability related legislation, the ACA broadens the definition of disability and introduces a more expansive definition of barrier, one that includes "anything physical, technological, communicative, or attitudinal…that hinders the full and equal participation in society" (McVicar, 2025, p. 62). In doing so, the Act shifts the focus from reactive accommodation to proactive inclusion. That said, the ACA's scope is limited to federally regulated sectors and does not extend to provincial and territorial governments or to private organizations and businesses governed at those levels, including most colleges and universities (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2023). While the Act signals an important shift in how disability is conceptualized at the federal level and may shape broader accessibility norms, its direct regulatory influence over post-secondary education remains limited. Provinces and territories, along with individual institutions, retain responsibility for implementing accessibility standards and accommodation practices within their own

jurisdictions. As a result, provincial policy frameworks and institutional practices are more directly relevant to understanding how students experience accommodations in Canadian universities.

Provinces and territories hold primary responsibility for policy domains such as education and health care, while the federal government retains jurisdiction over areas such as national defence and foreign affairs (McVicar, 2025). Disability policy exemplifies this jurisdictional complexity, as it spans multiple sectors, including education, healthcare, transportation, civil rights, and social services, thereby involving both federal and provincial levels of government (McVicar, 2025). One area where this shared yet uneven distribution of authority becomes especially visible is post-secondary education.

In Canada, provinces and territories have direct control over policies and regulations governing post-secondary education (Howard & Edge, 2014), including academic accommodations and accessibility services. While this allows for provincial autonomy over institutional and educational priorities, it also means that the delivery of post-secondary education is shaped by each province's history, regional demographics, and the political priorities of its government (Howard & Edge, 2014). As a result, significant regional differences and disparities exist across provinces and institutions as to how accessibility and accommodations are 'defined, implemented, and funded'. These disparities have important implications for students with learning disabilities (LDs), particularly those from marginalized communities, as they must navigate vastly complex bureaucratic systems.

While disability policy and institutional structures shape access to supports, they are also underpinned by how learning disabilities are defined and understood. These definitions can affect whether students are recognized as eligible for support and what form that support takes.

The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) defines learning disabilities as biological impairments resulting from "genetic and/or neurobiological factors or injury that alters brain functioning in a manner, which affects one or more processes related to learning" (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2021, para. 6). Multiple definitions of learning disabilities exist, including those outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-5 and the International Classification of Diseases-11 (Vidyadharan & Tharayil, 2019). These definitions are primarily grounded in the medical model of disability and typically require evidence of at least average overall cognitive ability alongside impairments in neurologically based information processing (McKenzie, 2024).

Learning disabilities encompass a range of different conditions. While there are many different types of learning disabilities, this thesis focuses on dyslexia, the most common learning disability in the world (Brazeau-Ward, 2001). Dyslexia currently affects between 10 and 20 per cent of children in Canada (Dyslexia Canada, 2023), many of whom may attend university one day. Accounting for 85% of all learning disabilities, it is no shock that dyslexia "is more apparent at the university level" (Brazeau-Ward, 2001, para. 6), as it affects one's ability to read and write (Sunil et al., 2023; Dyslexia Canada, 2023). While most other learning disabilities "do not affect reading after the student reaches the grade 5 level" (Brazeau-Ward, 2001, para. 6), dyslexia becomes more apparent in university as individuals are often required to complete lengthy reading and writing assignments (Brazeau-Ward, 2001; Stoeber & Rountree, 2021).

Given its prevalence and significance in educational contexts, particularly post-secondary, it is important to examine more closely how dyslexia is defined and understood. It is commonly "characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word reading and/or poor decoding and spelling abilities…may also result in problems with reading comprehension and

can limit learning vocabulary and background knowledge from reading" (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022, p. 9).

There are many definitions of dyslexia, some of which appear contradictory. Some scholars conceptualize dyslexia from a medical perspective, while others view it through a social or educational lens (Brazeau-Ward, 2001). For example, the Canadian Dyslexia Association suggests:

> Dyslexia results from a different brain organization, which may cause a problem with reading, writing, spelling and/or speaking, despite average or superior intelligence, traditional reading instruction and socio-cultural opportunity. It is genetically inherited and its cause is biological. (Brazeau-Ward, 2001, p. 2)

Dyslexia also varies in types and severity among individuals. Three main types of dyslexia exist: Dysnemkinesia/dysgraphia (motor), Dysphonesia (auditory), and Dyseidesia (visual), and any individual with dyslexia may also have a combination of the three types (Brazeau-Ward, 2001). To understand current definitions, it is also necessary to briefly examine how the concept has been historically constructed and medicalized. The term dyslexia gained widespread usage in the 1960s when it was adopted by both psychological and medical disciplines to describe individuals with high Intelligence Quotient (IQ) scores and 'limited literacy abilities' (Macdonald, 2009). As a medical label, dyslexia replaced the earlier term 'word-blindness' (difficulty with reading and writing; could see letters but the brain could not process them into meaningful language), which had been prevalent from the late nineteenth century until the mid-1970s (Macdonald, 2009). This reinforced dyslexia's positioning as an individual deficit. Even when dyslexia's strengths were acknowledged, such as superior visual-spatial skills, they were framed in contrast to deficits in other areas, reproducing a binary between ability and impairment (Brazeau-Ward, 2001).

These competing understandings shape how dyslexia is identified, assessed, and accommodated within educational settings, and in turn, influence how institutions interpret and implement their legal obligations related to accessibility. For the purposes of this thesis, dyslexia is understood not as an individual deficit but as a form of cognitive difference that becomes disabling through interactions with specific social and institutional environments. From this perspective, neurological diversity is a natural form of human variation, while disability arises when educational systems and institutional practices privilege certain ways of learning and exclude others. This understanding informs the analysis presented in the findings and discussion chapters.

How definitions are operationalized within universities depends on the legal obligations that govern institutional responses to disability and on the offices tasked with translating those obligations into practice. Since the early 1990s, academic institutions in Canada have been legally obligated to provide reasonable accommodations that promote equity for people with disabilities, including learning disabilities (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2009; Waterfield & Whelan, 2017; Logan, 2009). In 2012, the Supreme Court of Canada handed down a landmark decision on disability rights, ruling that "students with learning disabilities must receive an education that allows them to reach their full potential" (Moore v. British Columbia, 2012, SCC61, as cited in Easterbrook et al., 2015, p. 1506). The case dealt with the denial of meaningful access to education to a student with dyslexia and has had significant implications for all students with learning disabilities across Canada (Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, 2013). Moore (SCC) "'reaffirms that human rights law requires education providers to make their services accessible to persons with disabilities'" (Inclusive Education Canada, 2020, para. 4). As a result, any student with learning disabilities has "a right to a post-secondary

education in an accessible environment" (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2009, para. 2).

The purpose of academic accommodations is to guarantee that students with disabilities have equal access to education. So, how do universities adhere to these mandates and ensure their services are accessible to persons with disabilities? This is done through processes of accommodation, or the "process of adapting the way in which services are provided to eliminate or reduce the barriers that certain individuals experience when attempting to access those services" (Alberta Human Rights Commission, 2021, p. 3); for instance, students who identify as learning disabled accessing the educational services provided by post-secondary institutions. To adhere to their legal obligation, provincial and territorial governments provide publicly funded colleges/universities with operating funds to develop special services for students with disabilities (Drover, 2015). These services are provided through accessibility or accommodation centers that "assist, support, and integrate students with disabilities into the environment" (Waterfield, 2019, p. 1). By coordinating disability-related supports, accessibility centers act as intermediaries between students, faculty, and institutional administration (Dolmage, 2017).

While most universities and colleges have Disability Service Offices (DSOs) to assist students with disabilities, some universities offer more comprehensive services for students with learning disabilities than others (Drover, 2015). Because no specific federal or provincial governmental standards exist, policies and procedures for accessing accommodations vary across colleges/universities (Gulli, 2016). In turn, the budgets of disability service offices and staffing levels fluctuate, as does the knowledge and understanding of faculty and administrators (Gulli, 2016; Dolmage, 2017).

In Ontario, for example, Disability Support Offices "rely on institutional funding as well as special purpose grants provided by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU)" (Lanthier et al., 2023, p. 6). Yet, funding for such special purpose grants was static from 2016 to 2022, "resulting in a 23% decrease per student" (Lanthier et al., 2023, p. 6). In the United States, the most recent Association of Higher Education and Disability (2008) survey found that "the average annual DS office budget was $257,289 (SD=$306,417)" (Harbour, 2008, p. 41), with comparable figures in Canada (Dolmage, 2017). This figure represents the disability service office's entire annual operating budget, an amount roughly equivalent to the average salary of a dean at an Ontario university (Dolmage, 2017). Except that while the dean's salary climbs precipitously, the same does not apply to the budgets of Disability Support Offices. Resource limitations are further evidenced in staffing levels. Across Canadian colleges and universities, slightly more than 200 professionals are responsible for providing disability accommodations, producing an estimated "staff-to-student ratio…somewhere between 1:125 to 1:250" (Fitchen et al., 2003, p. 73, as cited in Dolmage, 2017, p. 22). Moreover, while "one in seven Canadians has a disability, only 2 percent of Canadian students actually seek disability accommodations" (Fitchen et al., 2003, as cited in Dolmage, 2017, p. 22).

It is evident from such figures that Disability Service Offices (DSOs) are already operating beyond capacity and may have underlying incentives or limitations, or both, that restrict the support they can provide and the ways in which students can access it, thereby influencing both the uptake and accessibility of accommodations (Dolmage, 2017). This constrained capacity, alongside funding limitations and procedural barriers, also conveys to the broader university community that disability is of low importance (Dolmage, 2017).

Taken together, the policy and institutional landscape outlined above reveals a system in which legal obligations coexist with significant resource constraints, jurisdictional fragmentation, and institutional variation in how disability is understood and supported. It is within this landscape that students who identify as dyslexic must disclose, document, and advocate for their needs, often repeatedly, and often under conditions of uncertainty about what supports will be available and how they will be received.

With this institutional and policy context established, the remainder of this thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature on disability in higher education, with particular attention to how disclosure, stigma, faculty and peer attitudes, and the lived experiences of students who identify as dyslexic have been conceptualized and studied to date. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework and methodology. Chapter 4 presents the findings, and Chapter 5 discusses their implications for disability policy, accommodation practices, and future research. Chapter 6 concludes the research, discusses its limitations and offers directions for future work.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Disability in Higher Education (Medical vs Social Models of Disability)

This section reviews existing literature on disability in higher education, with a focus on how disability is conceptualized, institutionalized, and experienced in post-secondary contexts. It begins by examining the dominance of medicalized approaches, critiques from disability scholarship and the effects of these frameworks on students' experiences.

Disability in higher education continues to be viewed through medical frameworks that shape how universities implement policies and practices (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2022). Within this approach, commonly referred to as the medical model of disability, disability is understood as an impairment or abnormality located in the individual body that requires diagnosis and treatment (Dolmage, 2017; Price, 2011). Although medicalized understandings of disability, including learning disabilities, have been widely adopted across Canadian society by a range of individuals, institutions and public platforms, they often overlook the ways in which impairment itself is shaped by the historical development of biomedical discourses and classification systems that prioritize scientific inquiry and objective truths (Waterfield, 2019).

Within this framing, dyslexia and other learning differences are frequently understood as a neurological condition. Medical researchers, for instance, have consistently documented inherent differences in the brains of dyslexics, altering visual perception, phonemic processing, semantic understanding, working memory and muscle coordination (Denhart, 2008). However, social scientists in the field of disability studies argue that diversity in brain structure and brain function can be misunderstood and misinterpreted as disability or deficiency (Denhart, 2008).

Building on this critique, Price (2024) further argues that academic institutions structurally marginalize people with disabilities by embedding ableist assumptions into their

policies and practices. Accommodation systems are often organized around expectations that "disability is stable and knowable, not only in moments…but in *predictive* ways" (Price, 2024, p. 6). In this way, disability is treated as an individual issue that can be managed and fixed through stable, standardized accommodations. This critique of scientific objectivity will be further discussed below.

While the medical model plays a dominant role in how we understand disability in higher education, it has also been widely critiqued within disability scholarship (Orsini, 2012; Price, 2024; Dolmage, 2017; Dawson, 2022). Rather than treating disability as an individual defect requiring diagnosis and treatment, the social model of disability reframes disability as a product of social organization (socially produced), shifting the focus to the social and institutional contexts that foster disadvantage (Orsini, 2012). From this perspective, neurological diversity is understood as a natural aspect of human variation, and individuals are disabled only by societal attitudes, institutional practices and existing educational structures. Understanding this neurological diversity is crucial because it challenges dominant societal norms by promoting an ideology that values individuality, equity, and autonomy (Dawson, 2022). Building on this shift, neurodiversity has been taken up by self-advocates and the broader disability community to further challenge medicalized understandings of cognitive difference (Orsini, 2012). Rather than positioning learning disabilities such as dyslexia as deficits to be fixed, a neurodiversity approach emphasizes the need for the state and society to accommodate cognitive differences and "support for forms of diversity that are rooted in 'differently wired' brains" (Ortega, 2009, as cited in Orsini, 2012, p. 807).

Despite these critiques, universities continue to privilege norms of ability, speed, productivity, and performance. Higher education is structured around ableist ideals that assign

values to specific bodyminds. This system is best described as one in which human bodyminds and their labour are assigned economic value based on their productivity or potential for future contributions (Dolmage, 2017). Within this context, economic motivations and institutional priorities are often concealed behind 'liberal values' such as autonomy, freedom and responsibility, enabling universities to distance themselves from their function as economic enterprises (Dolmage, 2017).

This exclusion is not simply a matter of individual prejudice or inaccessible buildings; it is deeply entrenched in the very design, architecture, policies and pedagogical practices of academic institutions, or what Jay Dolmage (2017) identifies as "academic ableism". At its core, academic ableism refers to how higher education is systematically structured around able-bodied and able-minded norms that determine and shape who (which bodies) is perceived, recognized, and valued as capable, intelligent, and deserving of inclusion. As Dolmage (2017) notes, "the ethic of higher education still encourages students and teachers alike to accentuate ability, valorize perfection, and stigmatize anything that hints at intellectual (or physical) weakness" (p. 3). In this context, universities privilege specific forms of performance, speed, productivity, rationality, and excellence, treating them as inherent indicators of belonging and merit (Dolmage, 2017). These characteristics and values are often upheld as objective markers of merit and academic rigour, but in reality, they reflect narrow, historically situated/shaped assumptions about how learning and intelligence should appear and be performed.

From this perspective, the 'typical' student is neurotypical, can study by themselves, achieves excellent grades, engages in classroom discussions, requires minimal support, and consistently submits work by the deadline. It is in this way that the university "hides ableism behind idealism" (Dolmage, 2017, p. 48), framing exclusion as the natural outcome of academic

excellence rather than as the product of ableism. This is an identity that the university has embraced throughout its history (Dolmage, 2017).

Ableism, in this sense, can be understood as "a set of beliefs that guide cultural and institutional practices ascribing negative values to individuals with disabilities whilst deeming able-bodied and able-minded individuals as normal, therefore superior to their disabled counterparts" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 1279). Importantly, the prevalence of ableism within higher education is not by coincidence; it is a product of a much longer historical trajectory. To fully understand how these norms became embedded within the university, it is necessary to situate contemporary practices within their historical foundations.

Higher education is deeply ingrained in eugenics history, as it is the place where dividing lines of discrimination were first established, where disability emerged as a negative concept and as a form of disqualification (Dolmage, 2017). Throughout history, higher education institutions have been key sites for controlling the lives of people with disabilities. As the arbiters of ability and inventors of disability, universities have been selecting and sorting bodies into geographical areas, classes and regimes of discipline (Dolmage, 2017).

As noted earlier, although medicalized understandings of learning disabilities have been widely adopted by individuals and institutions across Canadian society, they often overlook how impairment and disability are shaped by the historical development of biomedical discourses and classificatory systems that prioritize scientific inquiry (Waterfield, 2019; Dolmage, 2017). These institutions were where eugenic science gained its funding and legitimization, where eugenic beliefs and values could be transferred to future teachers, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals (Dolmage, 2017).

Getting eugenics into the curriculum at North American colleges and universities was the first step to promoting such ideas and reshaping how North Americans thought about bodyminds; however, it was not the only way to do so. Universities also participated more directly in eugenic practices; in many cases, universities would ask students to record their family trees and mail these to the Eugenics Records Office (Dolmage, 2017). The university became the research lab for 'positive' eugenics, where controlling and editing the 'right' combinations of genes could be done to create 'better families' (Dolmage, 2017). Eugenic rhetoric used disability to justify discrimination against disabled people, women and minority groups by attributing disability to them (Dolmage, 2017; Erevelles, 2015). If higher education was the space for the most 'able' and mentally 'fit,' the "mental asylum or school for the feeble-minded was the space for the least" (Dolmage, 2017, p. 15). These institutions, often referred to as 'idiot schools', were designated for those deemed unfit, and housed disproportionate numbers of African Americans, Indigenous people, Eastern Europeans, women, and lower-class children -- all expendable in the eyes of eugenic thinkers (Dolmage, 2017). Individuals imprisoned in these institutions were frequently abused, experimented upon, forcibly sterilized, and sometimes killed (Dolmage, 2017). In Canada, thousands of people with intellectual disabilities were forcibly sterilized (Inclusion Canada, 2019). The rationale was that these individuals would not taint or infect the general population.

This legacy of eugenics is closely tied to what is now understood as the medical model of disability. Rather than redefining disability, the medical model reproduces these earlier logics and beliefs by continuing to conceptualize disability as a deficit that requires diagnosis and treatment (Dolmage, 2017; Price, 2011). It is within this historically rooted, medicalized

framework that dyslexia emerged as a diagnostic category, shaped by efforts to classify, measure and regulate cognitive difference.

While this historical and medicalized model helps explain how learning disabilities such as dyslexia have been constructed and institutionalized, it does not capture the extent to which disability is experienced in everyday academic life. The following section reviews the existing literature on how students who identify as dyslexic experience academic accommodations in higher education, with particular attention to disclosure processes, experiences of stigma, and interactions with peers, faculty, and disability service staff.

2.2 Disability, Disclosure, and Identity in Higher Education

This section focuses on disability disclosure and identity in higher education, examining how students navigate disclosure decisions, how stigma shapes these processes, and how these experiences influence their sense of self and belonging within academic contexts. Studies have shown that disclosing a learning disability and obtaining academic accommodations is a complex process for the individual and can have a damaging effect on one's university experience (Liasidou, 2014; McGregor et al., 2016; Waterfield & Whelan, 2017; Condra et al., 2015; Pino & Mortari, 2014; McKenzie, 2024; Pfeifer et al., 2021). This complexity arises because accessing accommodations is structured through a formal process of self-disclosure and documentation.

While great benefits are offered through accommodations, such as extra time to complete tests and assignments, audio versions of texts, and note-taking and writing technologies, universities throughout Canada, such as the University of Toronto, University of Guelph, and Concordia University, to name a few, all adhere to the medical model, which pushes responsibility onto students to identify as disabled before attending university (Waterfield & Whelan, 2017; Vickers, 2010). Whereas primary and secondary schools are mandated to identify

students with a disability and ensure that each of their needs is met, in post-secondary institutions, the burden is placed on the student to disclose and document the disability (McGregor et al., 2016; Waterfield & Whelan, 2017; Condra et al., 2015). While not always the case, learning disabilities are often identified prior to entering post-secondary education (Logan, 2009). In this way, the university can never be responsible for causing disability; disability must have existed beforehand, remain external to, and be addressed through the "arm's-length accommodations of a blameless and secure academic institution" (Dolmage, 2017, p. 189)

Most students seeking accommodations are required to go to the Disability Service Office and provide their diagnosis, or what Ellen Samuels (2014) calls the "biocertification" of disability. This process entails the belief that disability is a fixed, scientifically verifiable condition that is located in the individual, and can only be verified by medical professionals, or the 'experts' empowered to diagnose, categorize and "authenticate a person's biological membership in a regulated group" (Samuels, 2014, p. 9). In this context of the medical model, self-disclosure becomes an additional challenge, as students are compelled to advocate for their own needs and rights by registering with Disability Support Offices and requesting accommodations and support (Mohler & Godin-Jacques, 2023; Condra et al., 2015).

Central to this process is self-advocacy, defined as the "ability to assertively state wants, needs and rights, determine and pursue needed supports" (Izzo & Lamb, 2002, p. 6, as cited in Pfeifer et al., 2021, p. 2). Self-advocacy is essential for accessing academic accommodations in post-secondary contexts and constitutes a multifaceted process that involves not only coming to grips with and accepting one's disability, but also developing awareness of one's rights to accommodations, the academic impact of the learning disability, and identifying appropriate supports, alongside the confidence to request them (McKenzie, 2024; Pfeifer et al., 2021). The

emotional and psychological dimensions of this multifaceted process are equally significant. For instance, Pino & Mortari (2014) found that the initial diagnosis of dyslexia may generate an immediate shock or disorientation, making it difficult to come to terms with and accept that one has dyslexia. Such difficulties further restrict and limit the confidence of the student for fear of showing any non-normative signs.

Research consistently identifies self-advocacy as a key factor in enabling students with learning disabilities to access necessary accommodations and achieve academic success (McKenzie, 2024; Pfeifer et al., 2021). For instance, McKenzie (2024) found that students with strong self-advocacy skills are more likely to access the accommodations and supports needed for achieving academic success. However, gaps remain in critical aspects of self-advocacy. Some students who identify as learning disabled may be aware of their right to academic accommodations but lack the knowledge about what support and accommodations are available, or which are best suited to their needs (McKenzie, 2024; Pfeifer et al., 2021).

Importantly, self-advocacy, although designed as a tool to benefit the student, can also increase cognitive load and, in turn, sustain the very issues of discrimination, labelling, and legitimacy that accommodations aim to address (National Educational Association of Disabled Students, 2018). Supporting documents like psychoeducational assessments (which assess the psychological abilities and educational performance of an individual compared to the performance of similar-aged individuals (Logan, 2009, p. 2)) further complicate the process because these documents are required to gain access to all other aspects of accommodations for learning-disabled students (Waterfield & Whelan, 2017; Condra et al., 2015). In this context, disability must have existed beforehand, remain external to, and be addressed through arm's-length accommodations provided by an academic institution that maintains an image of

neutrality and blamelessness (Dolmage, 2017). Together, these requirements place a significant burden on students, reinforcing the individualized responsibility embedded within the medical model of disability.

2.3 Stigma and Lived Experiences

Beyond these structural and procedural challenges, students' experiences with accommodations are also shaped by social dynamics within the institution, including stigma and interactions with peers, faculty, and disability service staff. A growing body of scholarship (Waterfield et al., 2017; Waterfield & Whelan, 2017; Clarke, 2022; Clark, 2024; Dolmage, 2017; Akin & Huang, 2019; Easterbrook et al., 2015) within disability studies has drawn on the concept of stigma to critically examine how students with learning disabilities, including dyslexia, experience and navigate academic accommodations in higher education.

People with learning disabilities such as dyslexia are at a heightened risk of experiencing disability-related stigma that shapes their academic identities and overall experiences in university, in part because their challenges are often invisible and not immediately apparent to others (Pino & Mortari, 2014; Dolmage, 2017; Akin & Huang, 2019; McGregor et al., 2016). As Pino & Mortari (2014) note, this invisibility creates the conditions in which such disabilities are frequently misunderstood or dismissed, and can lead peers to misinterpret, underestimate, or even disregard any barriers that these students might face. Students with learning disabilities, like dyslexia, often must continuously justify the legitimacy of their accommodations and requests for support (Dolmage, 2017). These dynamics may be further intensified for students who occupy multiple marginalized identities, as assumptions about competence and intelligence are not only shaped by ableism but are also racialized and gendered, reproducing broader

hierarchies of ability, legitimacy, and belonging (Portillo, 2026; Annamma et al., 2013; Gesser et al., 2025).

These perceptions are not formed in isolation but are embedded within broader institutional and social dynamics. There is a growing body of literature exploring how racism and ableism intersect to shape students' experiences in higher education at both macro and micro levels (Portillo, 2026; Annamma et al., 2013). At the macro level, Portillo (2026) demonstrates how institutional policies and dominant disability frameworks are embedded within racialized hierarchies of ability, reinforcing normative assumptions about productivity, competence, and belonging. At the micro level, these same assumptions are reproduced in students' everyday interactions with Disability Service Office staff, faculty, and peers (Portillo, 2026). In this sense, as Dolmage (2017) contends, universities are no less racist than they are ableist; the two systems are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. This is further reflected in unequal conditions under which students manage and navigate campus, where minority students must often contend with racism and microaggressions alongside academic demands, while white students can focus solely on their studies (Dolmage, 2017).

These stigmatizing patterns are further reflected in empirical research on how students with learning disabilities are perceived in post-secondary settings. For instance, Akin and Huang's (2019) report that students with learning disabilities, including dyslexia, are often viewed less favourably than individuals who were physically disabled. One reason for this was that students without disabilities doubted the 'fairness of academic accommodations' for students with certain disabilities, suggesting that accommodations are being granted too freely. This familiar trope frames students with dyslexia as trying to take advantage of or scam the system for their failure to take responsibility for their academic success.

Some individuals believe that specific disabilities can be managed by the individual student. This notion that learning disabilities, like dyslexia, "are controllable may lead to animosity and resentment toward classmates who receive academic accommodations, which in turn may harm the university environment" (Akin & Huang, 2019, p. 23). Such perception of students requiring accommodations continues to be tarnished by misinformed notions that these students are less deserving of academic accommodations than students with physical disabilities (Akin & Huang, 2019). Because dyslexia is an innate, yet often situational condition that remains invisible to casual observers, individuals with this learning disability can appear to be 'non-disabled' and not in need of academic accommodations (Akin & Huang, 2019; Clark, 2024). These students are far too often suspected of malingering (McGregor et al., 2016). For example, McGregor et al (2016) found that some students report feeling misunderstood, undervalued, and marginalized. These experiences can discourage students from seeking accommodations as they fear being viewed as getting special treatment, exploiting the system, or anticipate a lack of empathy in response to their requests (McGregor et al., 2016). Over time, these interactions can shape students' self-perceptions, leading some to internalize stigmatizing narratives because they are consistently treated as 'dumb' or 'slow' by university faculty and peers alike (Pino & Mortari, 2014; Akin & Huang, 2019; McGregor et al., 2016). A lack of confidence may further affect their academic performance, especially in social situations/contexts where they need to read or write in front of others (Pino & Mortari, 2014). In this discursive terrain, students with dyslexia are responsible for requiring academic accommodations because they are less academically competent (Akin & Huang, 2019).

In response to these stigmatizing dynamics, students often make careful decisions about disclosure. In more recent work, Clark (2024) found that students made strategic decisions about

disclosing dyslexia to manage associated stigma. Many students feared negative perceptions from peers as well as skepticism or outright dismissal of their disability by lecturers, particularly when such views were expressed in front of their peers (Clark, 2024). Similarly, Easterbrook et al. (2015) characterize selective disclosure as a strategy to manage both real and perceived judgments that might call their abilities into question, sustaining their credibility as capable students and future professionals. Many students also attempt to 'pass' as non-disabled, downplaying their disability while emphasizing similarities with their peers without dyslexia, framing differences in terms of everyone having their own strengths and difficulties (Easterbrook et al., 2015). Ultimately, these strategies reflect an underlying, yet persistent anxiety that disclosure may negatively influence how others assess their competence, as students strive to fit in and be accepted within academic environments.

These concerns are not unfounded, as the experiences of students who identify as dyslexic are not only influenced by the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of Disability Support Offices and their peers but also by faculty members (Černickaja & Sokolova, 2024; Madriaga, 2007; Ryan, 2007; Becker & Palladino, n.d.). Disability Support Offices may be the gatekeepers through which students must pass, but faculty members are the ones whom students need to interact with most to acquire knowledge and have equal opportunities to demonstrate their learning (Becker & Palladino, n.d.). While some faculty have been very vocal against accommodating students whose condition warrant 'special treatment', many others have publicly or privately voiced complaints about the hierarchical "power and secrecy" of Disability Support Offices (DSOs) and their decisions on whether a student is to be accommodated (Vickers, 2010). Regardless of what certain faculty members think about accommodations, Vickers (2010) reminds us that their role in the "accommodations process is one of implementation" (p. 9); they

are not the ones who get to evaluate or judge the validity of the accommodation request. Yet, studies suggest this is not always the case. In fact, it is not uncommon for students who identify as disabled to find themselves in a challenging position of explaining to faculty the specifics of the accommodation process (e.g., about their eligibility for accommodations or the range of available support/services on campus) (Dolmage, 2017). McGregor et al. (2016) note that receiving accommodations often entails additional work and responsibilities: students must meet individually with each course instructor at the start of the term to explain their needs and accommodations, and they often have periodic follow-ups to coordinate schedules and deadlines. These additional interactions, while a necessary part of receiving accommodations, can feel burdensome and place students in vulnerable positions.

For instance, a study by Madriaga (2007) found that students (*who identify as dyslexic*) may feel stigmatized when accessing and utilizing accommodations from faculty members. Students feared that if they revealed that they had dyslexia to faculty and staff, they would be perceived negatively or deemed intellectually inferior (Madriaga, 2007). This fear is justified because some faculty members, like other students, also believe that accommodations afford the student an unfair advantage (O'Shea & Meyer, 2016). This belief persists in academia despite evidence showing that providing accommodations, such as extra time, to students without learning disabilities does not significantly affect their grades (Logan, 2009).

How students perceive faculty knowledge of disabilities and their willingness to make accommodations may influence their decision to seek out services (Baker et al., 2012). In their study among undergraduate students, Baker et al. (2012) found that one-third of students voiced concerns that faculty members would look at them differently if they disclosed their disabilities (Baker et al., 2012). While most faculty members show a positive attitude towards students who

identify as learning disabled and see them as capable as their peers, some faculty members have suggested that providing classroom accommodations to students who identify as learning-disabled compromises the quality of the learning environment (Baker et al., 2012). In academic settings, including higher education, dyslexia and the need for accommodations may be associated with loss of status and assumptions of dependency on help (Clark, 2024). As a result, students may choose not to disclose their learning disability to lecturers because they want to avoid being viewed as a 'problem' in need of fixing (Madriaga, 2007). Non-disclosure of dyslexia may avoid or mitigate anticipated or associated stigma; however, this means one has no access to necessary support, which can significantly impact the student's grades, retention in their studies, and overall self-esteem (Clark, 2024). By actively hiding an identity aspect (dyslexia) from their peers or faculty, students may also increase their consciousness of difference, "inducing a fear of discovery and resulting in conflict between different identities (outwardly acknowledged and hidden), which also impacts mental well-being" (Orth et al., 2009, as cited in Clark, 2024, p. 4). This added stress and cognitive overload can significantly change the trajectory of a student's educational journey.

In contrast to primary or secondary education, university students are confronted with the additional burden of voluntarily disclosing their disability. This shift places more responsibility on students and positions disclosure as a prerequisite for support and a potential site of stigma. Despite growing numbers of students with dyslexia in higher education (Benedetti et al., 2022; Stoeber & Rountree, 2021), limited research has examined the experiences of dyslexic students in Canadian universities, particularly regarding the use of accommodations and coping strategies. Moreover, existing research has not sufficiently accounted for how these experiences are shaped by broader institutional structures, normative expectations and intersecting social identities.

Addressing these gaps requires moving beyond individual understandings of disability to consider how it is embedded within, and produced through, institutional practices, temporal expectations, and a system of accommodation. To avoid reproducing the dangers of white disability studies (Bailey & Mobley, 2019), which have always taken the white student as the starting point, I also explore experiences that might be mediated by one's racial and gender experiences. In doing so, it situates students' lived experiences within the broader social and institutional context that structures higher education.

To explore the study's research questions, this study is guided by an intersectional disability studies framework, which provides conceptual tools for analyzing how disability is shaped by overlapping systems of power and inequality. This study contributes to the fields of Disability studies and the sociology of education by rigorously analyzing how students with dyslexia interact with the accommodation system, their professors, and fellow students. Further, employing a sociological lens uncovers the social nature of such phenomena and the societal values restricting how an individual's brain is allowed to operate (Denhart, 2008). Additionally, this research focuses on the role of stigma and ableism in shaping students' experiences. The following section outlines the theoretical framework that informed these research questions and the ways in which dyslexia interacts with other aspects of a student's identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, or class.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Intersectional Disability Studies

The overarching framework guiding this study is intersectional disability studies (Bailey & Mobley, 2019; Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Erevelles, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Baynton, 2001; Gesser et al., 2025; Banks & Hughes, 2013), which offers the conceptual tools to examine how disability is shaped by overlapping systems of power, including ableism, racism, sexism, and class. Drawing primarily on Bailey and Mobley (2019), intersectional disability studies move beyond a singular focus on disability to situate disability within multiple, intersecting systems of power and inequality.

A key dimension of disability in higher education is how disability interacts with other aspects of one's identity ('markers of difference'). Crenshaw (1991) coined the term intersectionality to "denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's experiences" (p. 1244). While intersectionality has profoundly shaped contemporary understandings of inequality, much of its application has focused on race and gender, often overlooking other axes of oppression such as ableism (Bailey & Mobley, 2019). Similarly, Disability Studies (DS) has traditionally sidelined considerations of race, gender, sexuality, and class, limiting understandings of how social hierarchies intersect to shape lived experiences.

An intersectional disability studies framework asserts that disability, race, and gender are inseparable and must be considered collectively in any research or analysis (Bailey & Mobley, 2019). It considers the "historical, social, cultural, political, and economic reverberations of disability" (Bailey & Mobley, 2019, p. 19) and addresses the tendency of dominant narratives and discourses to focus on a single axis of difference, which often leaves those experiencing

multiple axes of marginalization overlooked. This neglect of intersecting inequalities is highlighted by Erevelles and Minear (2010), who note that "individuals located perilously at the interstices of race, class, gender, *and* disability are constituted as non-citizens and (no) bodies by the very social institutions (legal, educational and rehabilitation) that are designed to protect, nurture, and empower them" (p. 129).

Disability scholars extend this framework by demonstrating how disability itself operates (as a rhetorical and political tool) within and across these systems of oppression to justify and maintain social hierarchies (Baynton, 2001; Gesser et al., 2025; Banks & Hughes, 2013). Just as medical discourse constructed the disabled body in opposition to a normalized ideal, racial hierarchies have positioned whiteness as the norm and racialized bodies as deviations from that norm (Bailey & Mobley, 2019; Baynton, 2001; Gesser et al., 2025; Banks & Hughes, 2013). Ideas used to separate 'superior' white bodies from 'inferior' bodies of colour have been built on bodily judgements that treat the able white male body as the norm and ideal benchmark (Bailey & Mobley, 2019). This perspective situates disability within broader systems of inequality that continue to shape contemporary institutional practices; as Bailey and Mobley (2019) argue, "racism, sexism, and ableism share a eugenic impulse" (p. 21).

Within this context, intersectional approaches to disability further highlight how gendered and racialized stereotypes intersect with assumptions about cognitive and academic deficiency (Gesser et al., 2025). These narratives position both race and disability as deficit-based identities, fostering self-doubt, internalized stigma, and complex decisions regarding disclosure of disability (Banks & Hughes, 2013).

An intersectional disability studies approach provides conceptual tools for examining how race, gender, and class shape experiences with accommodations, including access, fit, and

stigmatization. By centring racially and gender-marginalized students with dyslexia, the study dislodges the 'white male body' as the normative standard in Disability Studies (Bailey & Mobley, 2019; Erevelles & Minear, 2010) and exposes the unequal ways accommodations are experienced. In doing so, analysis is grounded in the lived experiences of students, allowing a more critical, nuanced understanding of how academic accommodations are shaped by intersecting systems of power. Situating dyslexia and accommodations within these broader systems of power avoids treating them as isolated concerns and facilitates examination of how institutional norms, values, and practices shape both access to accommodations and students' social positioning within academic environments.

The following section outlines the key analytical concepts that guide this intersectional disability studies framework: intersectional stigma, crip time, misfit, academic ableism, and retrofit. It draws on Berger's (2004) concept of intersectional stigma to explore how stigma operates through overlapping identity categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability, and how these categories are interconnected rather than separate. The framework also uses crip time (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006; Ljuslinder et al., 2020) to examine how normative academic timelines shape expectations around ability, speed, and productivity. Garland-Thomson's (2011) concept of misfit is used to understand how disability is produced through relational interactions between bodies and institutional environments, rather than something located in the individual. Building on this, Dolmage's (2017) notion of academic ableism and retrofit extends the analytical reach of misfit by shifting focus from how misalignment is produced and experienced to how institutions respond to it, often through accommodations that adjust access without challenging underlying norms. Together, these concepts provide the

analytical foundation for examining how intersecting systems of stigma, time, and institutional design shape the experiences of students who identify as dyslexic in higher education.

3.1.1 Intersectional Stigma:

While not exclusive to disability studies, intersectional stigma aligns closely with the broader intersectional disability studies framework and provides a precise lens for examining how overlapping systems of power shape students' lived experiences in academic contexts. This thesis draws on Berger's (2004) intersectional stigma because it offers conceptual tools for understanding the ways in which multiple stigmatized identities converge, and how particular combinations of various stigmas, such as race, gender and class, shape multiple dimensions of one's experiences (Berger, 2004). Berger's (2004) concept of intersectional stigma builds upon Goffman's work by highlighting that stigma is not static and does not occur in isolation; rather, individuals experience stigma differently depending on how their distinct identities intersect (Berger, 2004).

While I will elaborate on Berger (2004) below, in Goffman's foundational work, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman (1963) outlines three broad categories of stigma: abominations of the body (various physical 'deformities'), blemishes of individual character, and tribal stigmas of race, nation, or religion. Each of these stigmas encapsulates distinct mechanisms through which individuals are socially discredited within normative systems. Of particular relevance to this study is Goffman's (1963) 'stigma of character identity', which refers to "blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering, or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty, these being inferred from a known record of, for example, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment, suicidal attempts, and radical political behaviour" (p. 4).

Students who identify as dyslexic often face this form of stigma, as their differences are frequently misinterpreted as signs of weak will, lack of effort, or intellectual inferiority.

Social environments construct ‘normative expectations’ that position those who deviate from them as ‘abnormal’, attributing labels shaped by negative stereotypes (Goffman, 1963; Clark, 2024). Within higher education, where individual achievement is highly valued, this normal-stigmatized dichotomy is particularly pronounced, and this distinction can discourage students with learning disabilities from disclosing their disability or seeking accommodations, as doing so risks marking them as different or less capable (Clark, 2022; Clark, 2024; May & Stone, 2010).

Goffman’s distinction between discredited and discreditable underscores the importance of visibility in shaping experiences of stigma and its management. When stigma is concealable, individuals must engage in impression management, deciding whether, when, and how to disclose (Goffman, 1963; Waterfield & Whelan, 2017). A primary challenge for the discreditable is to “manage the information that others have about them (who to tell, when and with what consequences?)” (Scambler, 2016, para. 1). This impression management is crucial, as anticipated stigma, best understood as the expectation of negative judgments, can influence and shape behaviour. Consequently, individuals seek to maintain and preserve a ‘normal’ identity by hiding or masking attributes and characteristics that might invite/bring stigmatization (Goffman, 1963). This is a type of stigma response, or what Goffman (1963) refers to as the ways in which individuals respond to experiencing stigma.

While stigma responses, such as non-disclosure, can mitigate immediate stigma, they often restrict access to accommodations and support, with consequences for academic performance, persistence in their studies, and overall well-being (Clark, 2024). The efforts to

hide or conceal aspects of one's identity can intensify individuals' consciousness of difference and produce a persistent fear of exposure (Clark, 2024). This dynamic may generate a prolonged tension between outwardly performed and internally hidden identities, contributing to mental strain and diminished well-being (Orth et al., 2009, as cited in Clark, 2024). Such processes illustrate how stigma functions not only through external labelling but also through internalized pressures, shaping the experiences and trajectories of individuals who identify as dyslexic over their educational journey. In this way, stigma operates not merely as a label, but as a dynamic social process that shapes self-presentation, access to supports, and lived experience.

As a concept, stigma illuminates how individuals actively anticipate, negotiate, and manage perceptions of difference within different social environments. This lens reveals both the intricate dynamics of stigma and the institutional processes that produce and sustain exclusion, while highlighting how identity management, disclosure, and perceived 'normalcy' (neurotypical) intersect with academic expectations to shape access to accommodations, belonging, and academic success.

In returning to Berger's (2004) concept of intersectional stigma, we can offer insight into the lived experiences of students who identify as dyslexic and the ways stigma interacts with other aspects of their identity – gender, race, sexuality, and class (in post-secondary institutions). More specifically, we can explore the ways in which students may not only be marginalized and socially situated (shaped by class, race or gender) in relation to the accommodation process but also by the label of dyslexic student. As noted throughout, this label of 'dyslexic student' is often loaded with negative perceptions about people with dyslexia and their capabilities and intelligence (Akin & Huang, 2019). These perceptions do not operate in isolation; they are then cemented within the axes of race, gender, sexuality and class.

Nirmala Erevelles' (2015) work is very instructive in this regard, particularly her discussion of how we cannot think of race and disability as separate but co-constituted. Rather than using an additive model that takes race and disability as separate experiences, by recognizing the conjunction of race and disability, we can see how "disabled subjectivities are racialized and racialized subjects are disabled simultaneously" (Erevelles, 2015, p. 147). In turn, we can "engage the complex ways in which race and disability are imbricated in the construction of the pathological Other" (Erevelles, 2015, p. 147). This is crucial to understand because we can observe the ways in which a student's race or gender expression is fundamental to understanding how their disability (dyslexia) is experienced, while simultaneously, their disability experience is fundamentally shaped by how their gender and race are experienced. We can't define race without defining disability and vice versa.

3.1.2 Crip Time/Approach

The second concept mobilized in this study is Kafer (2013), McRuer (2006), and Ljuslinder et al. (2020) crip time, because it draws attention to the normative temporal expectations that structure environments, such as the university. Specifically, crip time offers a critical perspective for interrogating how normative time is organized within the university, as well as the ways in which students who identify as dyslexic experience, navigate and resist these expectations.

Building on Kafer's (2013) and McRuer's (2006) notion of crip time, Ljuslinder et al. (2020) highlight how disability disrupts normative understandings of time and the life course, particularly regarding when normative life stages are achieved, whether they are achieved at all, and the time required to complete tasks. Normative linear time, or ableist time, is problematic because it rests on ableist assumptions that marginalize certain groups and individuals. Crip time

challenges these assumptions by offering an understanding of time that differs from ableist time and by unravelling the social constructions of ability (Ljuslinder et al., 2020; Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). This reflects how ability is constructed as the desirable normal state, within a "realm of compulsory able-bodiedness" (Ljuslinder et al., 2020, p. 35), where ability and able-bodiedness are the idealized standard (Dolmage, 2017; Ljuslinder et al., 2020; Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006).

This is especially evident in academia, where universities continue to mandate able-bodiedness and able-mindedness (Dolmage, 2017), rendering anyone who falls outside this hegemonic assumption culturally deviant (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006; Ljuslinder et al., 2020). Crip time challenges the taken-for-granted 'knowledge' produced by such institutions (Sitter et al., 2023), particularly regarding how these dynamics shape experiences within academic contexts. Within an intersectional disability studies framework, mobilizing crip time (as an analytical concept) is critical for examining how temporal norms intersect with broader systems of power. By deconstructing temporal norms, such as speed, efficiency, and linear progression, it reveals how these mechanisms of power shape definitions and assessments of ability, productivity, and academic success.

Through their crip approach, Ljuslinder et al. (2020) show how and why some bodyminds (in disability studies, this is the notion that body and mind cannot be separated) (Price, 2011) are normalized while others are pathologized. We can analyze how the normative life course naturalizes itself as the dominant social and cultural system (Ljuslinder et al., 2020). Because "disability has the power to extract us from linear, progressive time" (Samuels, 2017, para. 1), crip time can be understood as a form of time travel, whereby individuals can live their lives with a "flexible approach to normative time frames" (Price, 2011, as cited in Samuels,

2017, para. 1). This challenges ableist normativity (e.g., normative expectations of pace and scheduling) and acknowledges a diversity of bodyminds (Kafer, 2003; Kafer, 2013). In this way, crip time strengthens intersectional analysis by illuminating how time itself operates as a regulatory force structuring and shaping different experiences within institutional environments.

Crip time complements the overarching framework by providing an effective form of disability politics that foregrounds the need for diverse, flexible accommodations, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. By redefining time, "crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds (p. 27), rather than bending the bodies and minds to meet the clock (Kafer, 2013).

This is crucial for the study, as it enables analysis of how normative linear time and temporal expectations (e.g., deadlines, timed assessments) produce stigma and position students who require accommodations as 'abnormal' within academic environments. Moreover, this approach makes visible how society itself is disabling and that an individual is only 'disabled' when accommodations are not in place. By highlighting how time itself functions as a regulatory mechanism shaping inclusion and exclusion, crip time lays the groundwork for the shift to misfit, extending analysis beyond temporal norms to the broader relational processes through which bodies and environments become (mis)aligned within higher education.

3.1.3 Misfit

Building on the insights of crip time, this study now turns to misfit to examine how disability is produced through the relational interactions between bodies and institutional environments in higher education. The notion of 'misfit' in disability studies, put forth by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2011) in the article *Misfits: A Feminist Materialistic Disability Concept*, offers powerful conceptual contributions for thinking critically about ableism in academia. Through this concept, it becomes clear that the university is a critical site for

examining ableism, as it is within these everyday interactions (the microphysics of educational institutions) between bodies, spaces, and institutional expectations that norms of ability are both enacted and reinforced.

This concept uncovers taken-for-granted assumptions that support ostensibly neutral norms and challenges notions of "'able-bodiedness' and its conceptual opposite, 'disability'" (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 6). Rather than locating difficulty within individual bodies or cognitive abilities (body-mind), the concept of misfit shifts attention to the social, spatial, and temporal conditions/contexts that structure interactions between bodies and environments. In doing so, it reframes disability as relational and context-dependent, emerging through dynamic interplay between individuals and institutional environments.

Central to the concept is the notion that bodies and environments are co-constituted through interactive and relational processes (Garland-Thomson, 2011). It is through these dynamic processes that bodies either fit or misfit within particular environments, or, as Garland-Thomson (2011) describes, where 'material-discursive becoming' is most visible. 'Fitting' and 'misfitting' describe the quality of the relationship between a particular body and its environment (Garland-Thomson, 2011). In other words, they describe an encounter in which two things come together, either in unity or in disjunction (Garland-Thomson, 2011). A 'fit' occurs when there is harmonious interaction between a "particularly shaped and functioning body and environment that sustains that body" (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 594). When the body and environment correspond and support one another, they are considered to 'fit' (Garland-Thomson, 2011). This relational understanding of fit is further clarified through its grammatical meaning, particularly how 'fit' operates as a verb. As a verb, 'fit' means to be of "such size and shape as to fill exactly a given space…. the action of fitting involves a 'proper' or 'suitable' relationship with an

environment so as to be well adapted to the requirements of the specified situation" (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 593). Importantly, if the spatial and temporal context shifts, so does the fit and its necessary qualifications (Garland-Thomson, 2011).

A misfit, on the other hand, "describes an incongruent relationship between two things: a square peg in a round hole" (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 592-593). The challenges with a misfit do not stem from either of these two things alone, but rather from their jarring juxtaposition amid the uneasy, forceful attempt to align them (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Misfitting occurs when the relationship between a body and its environment is misaligned, such that the environment does not support and "sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it" (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 594). Repeated acts of misfitting can funnel and solidify into a highly negative, stigmatized image/identity of a "person unsuited or ill-suited to his or her environment…rejected by others for his or her conspicuously odd, unusual, or antisocial behaviour and attitudes" *(*Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 593). This shift from 'misfitting as a relational process to 'misfit as a negative and stigmatized identity illustrates how instances of misalignment can shape broader assumptions and beliefs about one's belonging and worth. Equally important, it demonstrates how social and environmental conditions, along with normative expectations of fit, become institutionalized and socially reinforced.

The conceptual strength of misfit lies in its ability to conceptualize disability as a product of mismatched relations between bodies and environments (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Its theoretical utility is born from its "semantic and grammatical flexibility" (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 593). This grammatical flexibility is not incidental but central to the concept's usefulness, because, by functioning as a verb, noun, and adjective, 'misfit' avoids denoting a fixed identity or stable condition, instead highlighting a dynamic and relational process. In this

way, grammatical flexibility mirrors 'material-discursive becoming' and captures the "dynamism between body and world that produces fits or misfits" (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 594).

The misfit concept highlights how a person's body does not align with the physical, cultural, social, or political environments in which they are situated. Fit and misfit are relational and context-dependent: when the spatial or temporal contexts change, the fit shifts accordingly, bringing new meanings and consequences (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Garland-Thomson's (2011) misfit is especially powerful methodologically, in that it conceptualizes student experiences through three dynamic/relational positions: to fit, to misfit, or to refuse to fit (challenge the system). These positions provide a way/lens for understanding how individuals navigate environments and how alignment or misalignment is experienced, negotiated, or resisted.

The value of mobilizing this concept in an intersectional disability studies framework lies in its ability to move beyond describing stigma solely in terms of individual attitudes or internalized feelings and instead analyze it as a relational and situational process. By highlighting the dynamic, relational elements of fit/misfit and how bodies and environments co-constitute one another, the concept shifts the focus from individual shortcomings to the environments and structures that produce misalignment. This provides a critical analytical tool for conceptualizing/theorizing how institutional norms, practices, and expectations shape/influence access, recognition, and inclusion, and why certain bodyminds are systematically privileged while others are marginalized (Garland-Thomson, 2011).

Taken together, the concept of misfit offers a robust analytic lens for understanding disability as emerging from the relational interplay between bodies and environments, and the ways alignment or misalignment can be negotiated, maintained, or resisted.

3.1.4 Retrofitted Solutions

Building on this relational understanding of misfit, Dolmage's (2017) concept of retrofit extends the analytic reach of misfit by shifting focus from how misalignment is produced (and experienced) to how institutions respond to it. While misfit is a concept from intersectional disability studies that helps see the dynamic friction between bodies and environments, the concept of retrofit applies that notion to academic ableism by examining institutional responses to that friction. Dolmage's (2017) concept of academic ableism can be briefly recalled as a way of understanding how able-bodied and able-minded norms are embedded in the microphysics of educational institutions, shaping everyday expectations of performance, belonging, and merit. Academia's privileging of success and marginalization of failure are themselves expressions of ableist and heteronormative values, reinforcing narrow ideals of achievement and normalcy (Dolmage, 2017).

Retrofit conceptualizes institutional responses to misfit as reactive, after-the-fact adjustments, most frequently in the form of accommodations, that grant temporary access without challenging the underlying assumptions/norms of ability, productivity, and performance that shape and structure institutional environments. In this way, retrofit makes visible how environments are not originally designed for diverse bodyminds, but are instead modified and adapted in limited and uneven ways to accommodate those who do not conform to normative expectations. Essentially, retrofits are material, institutional responses to misfit.

A retrofit is best understood as a temporary adjustment designed to aid an individual student with a disability, such as a ramp or extended time on an assignment. However, as Dolmage (2017) argues, these retrofits may fix space, but they also "have a chronicity—a timing and a time logic—that renders them highly temporary yet also relatively unimportant" (Dolmage,

2017, p. 70). This temporality highlights a key critique of academic ableism: retrofits (accommodations) may offer immediate support, but they do so without transforming the institutions' norms, expectations, and structures that produce and perpetuate disability and exclusion in the first place. This is because the underlying goal is not to "empower students to achieve with disability, but to achieve around disability or against it, or in spite of it" (Dolmage, 2017, p. 70). Embedded within this pursuit of able-bodiedness and able-mindedness is the presumption that disability must be mitigated or overcome, rather than affirmed as a valued and viable way of being and learning. By mobilizing this concept, we can analyze how accommodations function to temporarily minimize or manage disability, allowing existing hierarchical structures to remain largely unchanged (Dolmage, 2017). Accommodations become a retrofitted solution within an otherwise vastly exclusionary system.

Positioned as the final concept of this framework, retrofit deepens my analysis by connecting relational experiences of misfit to the institutional practices that manage them, showing/highlighting how ableism is not only produced through environmental design, but also sustained through the ways institutions respond to difference. Recognizing this distinction shifts the analytic lens from individual impairment to the institution, allowing us to examine how stigma, intersectional identities, crip time, and academic ableism intersect within higher education to shape students' experiences of academic accommodation.

By conceptualizing the university as an ableist environment, crip time and academic ableism together help us to understand how normative linear time, temporal expectations, and institutional structures produce fits and misfits. Together with stigma, intersectional stigma, and misfit, these concepts allow me to explore how these experiences are produced and reinforced through retrofits (institutional norms, policies, and accommodations) that respond to

misalignment. Taken together, this intersectional disability studies framework situates the experiences of students who identify as dyslexic within the relational interplay of bodies, environments, and institutional structures.

3.2 Methodology and Data Collection

This study employed Kirby and McKenna's (1989) 'researching from the margins' as its methodological approach. This approach is firmly rooted in the experiences of 'living on the margins' (Kirby & McKenna, 1989) and allows us to communicate aspects of experiences that often remain unsaid or overlooked. This approach positions the researcher as a member of a marginalized group/identity, challenging dominant power structures and traditional barriers that would otherwise censor the voices of these individuals (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Moreover, it allows the researcher to incorporate emotions and experiences into the research process. By adopting this positionality, the study amplifies the voices of those frequently excluded from higher education research.

I identify as learning disabled and have had a range of experiences accessing academic accommodations and accessibility services in higher education at two Canadian universities, Dalhousie University and the University of Ottawa. I have also received a formal diagnosis and have undergone the psychoeducational assessment process on more than one occasion. By disclosing my identity as a learning-disabled person to participants during the research process, I built rapport with participants and hope I generated findings that might not have been accessible to a researcher without such an identity or lived experience (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 67). Throughout the study, I remained conscious of potential conflicts of interest. I ensured the integrity of both the participants and the research by being fully transparent and disclosing any potential or perceived conflicts of interest. Rather than allowing non-labelled researchers and

practitioners to drive agendas regarding accommodations for those who are so labelled, this study is guided by the premise that knowledge about dyslexia is enriched when students who identify as dyslexic share hidden truths about their experiences of stigma. This paradigm aligns with the ethical and epistemological principles of 'researching from the margins', ensuring that the research process and findings are grounded in the experiences of marginalized individuals.

3.3 Participant Recruitment and Sampling

Participants were selected based on the criteria that they identified as dyslexic and were currently enrolled in a Canadian university or had recently graduated within the past five years (2020 cut-off year). The study included both students with and without formal assessment to ensure that individuals who were unable to seek a diagnosis for various reasons (e.g., financial costs of diagnosis and psychoeducational assessment, scheduling/timing) could still participate and share their experiences. Participants were only required to self-identify as dyslexic. To ensure sample diversity and the variety of experiences itself, the study sought to include participants of various genders, with special attention to racialized groups and women who identify as dyslexic, as these groups are often underrepresented in research on dyslexia and higher education. This sought to avoid reproducing some of the dangers of white-male-centered disability studies, which have traditionally taken the white male subject as a starting point.

Snowball sampling was employed to recruit participants from marginalized and hard-to-reach populations. Since dyslexia is an invisible disability, this group is not easy to identify or access. Snowball sampling allowed the researcher to recruit both known participants and contact otherwise hidden populations. Information about the study and interviews was shared on social media platforms, such as LinkedIn and Instagram, and through friends and colleagues. Additional recruitment assistance came from supervisor Dr. Orsini, academic accommodation

specialist Dr. Jan Swiderski, Dr. Howell from the Faculty of Education, and Director of Indigenous Affairs Tareyn Johnson, who helped disseminate information at the University of Ottawa, including the accommodation centre, Faculty of Education, and Mashkawazìwogamig Indigenous Resource Centre (IRC).

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through eight semi-structured interviews with individuals who identify as dyslexic, consisting of six women and two men. Interviews were conducted between December 2024 and November 2025. This approach allowed for a balance between some questions being determined a priori while also accommodating questions that emerged from the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As recommended by Creswell & Poth (2018), the final sample size was determined once data saturation was achieved.

While the study initially aimed to interview an equal number of male and female participants, more women were included in the sample, despite prior studies suggesting that males are diagnosed with dyslexia at a higher rate than females (Arnett, 2017). Most participants were between the ages of 25 and 35 (n= 5), with additional representation from one woman aged 20-25, one man aged 20-30, and one older male participant aged 68 years old, introducing some generational diversity within the sample.

Consistent with the study's commitment to 'researching from the margins', participants represented diverse racial, cultural, and social identities. Among the women, three identified as white (two Canadian-born and one born in Bermuda), two identified as Chinese (including one from Hong Kong), and one identified as mixed white and Indigenous (raised by a single mother). One Chinese participant was adopted by white Canadian parents and identified French as her primary language, while the second Chinese participant had resided in Canada for over eight

years. Both male participants identified as white, with the younger male participant also identifying as queer. This diversity of racial, cultural, linguistic and sexual identities provided crucial context (and nuance) for understanding how experiences of dyslexia, stigma, and academic accommodations are shaped not only by disability, but also by broader systems of oppression (power and inequality).

Interviews were conducted one-on-one, in secure locations on the University of Ottawa campus, or via Zoom or Microsoft Teams for participants who preferred remote/virtual participation or were located at other Canadian universities (n = 1 in person; n = 7 virtual). In-person interviews were not a requirement because when working with stigmatized groups, such as students with disabilities, online platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams may be less stigmatizing and reduce feelings of discomfort/exposure than face-to-face interviews (Melián & Meneses, 2022). All interview settings were selected to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

Semi-structured interviews were used to allow for both consistency across participants and flexibility to explore individual experiences in greater depth. An interview guide (see Appendix A) included questions related to participants' experiences with academic accommodations, disability disclosure, stigma, and self-advocacy within university settings. Follow-up and probing questions were used to clarify responses and explore emerging themes.

The length of the interviews varied, from approximately 30 to 120 minutes, with an average duration of 58 minutes. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time during the study without consequences. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded digitally, and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis followed systematic coding practices. Transcripts were reviewed and re-read line-by-line to identify similarities and differences, which were then grouped into major themes and patterns. This ensured that verbatim coding was consistent.

Categories were then compared to existing literature on learning disabilities, stigma and ableism, allowing for connections between participants' lived experiences and broader theoretical frameworks. Coding continued until consistency was achieved across all transcripts.

Consistent with the methodological approach of "researching from the margins", the researcher's positionality as a learning-disabled individual informed both the interpretation of the data and sensitivity to participants' experiences. Reflexivity (reflexive awareness) was maintained throughout the coding process to ensure that the interpretations and analysis remain grounded in participants' narratives while acknowledging the researcher's own standpoint.

This qualitative approach ensured that the study examined how participants make sense of and interpret their experiences, dimensions that are not so easily observable in quantitative macro-level research. This was particularly important when examining stigmatized identities and inquiring into the experiences of stigmatized groups, as it allowed for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the meanings attached to the social and cultural experience of dyslexia. Specifically, the use of semi-structured interviews provided critical insight into how participants navigate and experience the academic accommodation system in Canadian universities and how these experiences are shaped by processes of stigma and ableism.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical permission for this study was obtained from the University of Ottawa's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board (REB). In accordance/alignment with the institutional guidelines, several measures/precautions were taken to ensure the respect, safety, privacy and rights of all participants. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, that their participation was voluntary, and of their right to withdraw at any time during the study without consequences or explanation. Before participating in the study, individuals were debriefed and

provided with detailed consent forms as required by the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Committee (REB). Written consent was obtained prior to the interviews to ensure informed participation. Verbal consent was also obtained before the interview began. Participants were also notified that they could refuse to answer any question and could request the removal of any section of their transcript. Confidentiality and anonymity were kept/maintained throughout the research study. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, and all identifying information was removed from interview transcripts and final research documents. All data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and informed consent forms, were stored using password-secure, data-protected and encrypted software. Any data connected to the internet was additionally safeguarded through a secure encryption storage platform. Because the study involved participants from marginalized and stigmatized populations, particular care was given to minimizing psychological strain. Interviews were structured so individuals could set their own boundaries and guide the dialogue in ways that felt safe and secure. The researcher also ensured they practiced ongoing reflexivity, acknowledging and addressing power imbalances and the imposition of assumptions about participants' experiences. Upon completion of the study, all participants' data, including audio files, transcripts and other related documents, were securely destroyed in accordance with the University of Ottawa REB guidelines and ethical practices.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from semi-structured interviews with eight university students who identify as dyslexic and their experiences (or have experience) navigating higher education institutions in Canada. The findings explore how participants navigated higher education, including their experiences with diagnosis, disclosure, accommodation processes, academic work, relationships within the university, and perceptions of their own abilities and identities. While participants attended different institutions, programs, and levels of study, several common patterns emerged across their accounts. The findings are organized into five themes. The first theme, *Navigating Diagnosis, Disclosure, and the Accommodation Process in the University*, examines participants' experiences of receiving and re-receiving diagnoses, the emotional meanings attached to diagnosis, the role of self-disclosure and self-advocacy, and interactions with disability service offices and formal accommodations. The second theme, *Intelligence, Academic Competence, and Self-Doubt*, explores how participants understood and negotiated perceptions of intelligence, experiences of being viewed as less capable, and the ways they challenged or internalized such deficit narratives. The third theme, *Time, Pace, and Academic Workloads*, focuses on participants' experiences managing academic demands, including the need for additional time, the consequences of insufficient time, strategies for managing workloads, and the role of space in learning environments. The fourth theme, *Relationships with Professors, Peers, and Disability Service Staff*, explores how interactions with others shaped participants' educational experiences, influenced their sense of support, belonging, and access within the university. The fifth and final theme, *Identity and Educational Journey*, explores what participants reported about coming to understand dyslexia as part of who they are,

how their relationship with the label shifted over time, and how intersecting identities shaped their experiences.

The findings are organized thematically. Within each theme, recurring patterns and points of divergence are traced, and anonymized quotations are included to illustrate participants' narratives in their own words. While presented as distinct themes for structural and organizational purposes, participants' experiences frequently overlapped, with themes intersecting in complex ways. This chapter focuses on describing these experiences as they were narrated by participants. Theoretical interpretation and analysis are reserved for the discussion chapter that follows.

4.1 Navigating Diagnosis, Disclosure and Accommodation Processes in the University

Participants described diagnosis, disclosure, and accommodation as interconnected aspects of their university experiences. Access to accommodations and support was not automatic; rather, students consistently described it as dependent upon formal documentation, self-disclosure, and ongoing self-advocacy. All eight participants reported using academic accommodations and described them as necessary to their academic experiences and success. Experiences with the accommodation process ranged from straightforward and supportive to difficult, emotionally draining, and bureaucratically complex.

Formal diagnosis occupied a pivotal place in participants' narratives. All eight participants described being identified with a learning disability or dyslexia during childhood, typically between the ages of five and thirteen, though the clarity and timing of diagnosis varied. Several participants recalled receiving support through special education programs in elementary and secondary school. Sarah reported that she had "always been identified as having a learning

disability" from school age and was placed in special education classes, though she never had a clear, updated label for dyslexia. Similarly, Theo recalled attending a special education school and receiving support from a young age. Camille was diagnosed in primary school in Quebec by a speech therapist after her parents noticed she was struggling more than her peers with reading and writing, despite teachers insisting she was "fine". Margot was formally diagnosed in grade 4 after teachers and her mother, who works in special education, noticed persistent struggles with reading. Daphne reported that awareness of dyslexia emerged at approximately six years old when reading difficulties were first noticed alongside awareness of a family history of dyslexia. Theo was first diagnosed with dyslexia in Grade Three.

Other participants had delayed or less clear identification. Nora struggled through school from kindergarten, beginning assessment in grade five, but long waitlists and school moves delayed a formal diagnosis until grade eight, at age thirteen. She described going from a D student to an A student once a grade six teacher began informally accommodating her while she waited for formal testing. Glenn described growing up in the 1960s, when dyslexia was not widely recognized. Rather than receiving a formal diagnosis for dyslexia, Glenn recalled being labelled a "slow learner" or "stupid" and having learning assistants in school. He reflected upon the limited understanding of learning disabilities at the time, stating that he only later came to understand that dyslexia underlay these experiences.

For several participants, diagnosis was not a one-time event. A second wave of diagnoses and assessments occurred among several students during their time at university, often because institutions required updated psychoeducational documentation, typically within a five-year window. Iris, who was re-diagnosed after her first year of university, contrasted their childhood diagnosis with the later assessment. She described feeling frustrated during the first diagnosis

because she was young and did not understand the purpose of testing: “I was just a kid, no one wanted to do tests”. In contrast, her second diagnosis felt easier because she “understood why it was being conducted and what it was for”.

Participants consistently reported that psychoeducational assessments were expensive, time-consuming, and logistically difficult to access. Many identified the financial cost as a significant barrier and reported seeing peers who have also struggled to afford or access testing. Theo and Margot, who work(ed) in the disability service offices, reported seeing students “who needed support but could not access accommodations because they lacked the required documentation”.

Nora recounted difficulties with the process itself, describing the cost as “over two grand and up to 5 grand, paid up front”, calling it “not accessible, especially for students without insurance or parental support”. Similarly, Sarah spoke of concerns about the financial risk involved, fearing that she might “pay more than $2,000 only to discover that nothing might be found”. This made her hesitant to pursue updated testing. Several participants noted that childhood documentation did not satisfy university requirements, and scheduling appointments, securing funding, and completing assessments were described as particularly burdensome for students managing heavy course loads and employment responsibilities.

Receiving a diagnosis elicited two kinds of effects that students named side by side. For many, the diagnosis provided a validation and explanation for longstanding academic challenges. Prior to diagnosis, several participants described periods of confusion and frustration about why school felt more difficult for them than for others. They described a sort of relief and a language to speak about needs and experiences with teachers and staff. As Theo explained, “I always knew something was wrong but was just not sure what. Now I know”. Margot similarly

described diagnosis as a relief, stating that it "finally provided an answer that it's not my problem. It's my dyslexia". She described getting in a lot of trouble "for not doing homework and not 'trying' to learn to read". She explained that receiving a diagnosis shifted the responsibility away from perceived failings and provided an explanation for challenges that had previously been attributed to a lack of effort. Nora remembered feeling "relieved but also confused", because she had this "big word [dyslexia], but practically, what does it mean?" Sarah, not formally diagnosed with dyslexia, reflected that an earlier diagnosis would have provided "mental clarity" and helped her understand her struggles sooner.

Others experienced diagnosis as heavy or unsettling. For them, it landed as a difficult confirmation that school would remain effortful and challenging, despite available supports. Camille explained: "I was really frustrated because I knew I was struggling with reading and writing, and having the diagnosis was like a confirmation that I'm going to struggle my whole time at school. It was not a good feeling".

All participants located disclosure and self-advocacy at the centre of their university experiences. They understood disclosure as the gateway to accommodations. In elementary and secondary school, disclosure and advocacy were largely handled by parents and schools through Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and special education programs. At university, students learned that accessing support depended on voluntarily disclosing to Disability Service Offices (DSOs) and to individual professors. Participants described needing to repeatedly explain and "prove" their struggles to various new people in order to receive support each term. Several noted that disclosure involved sharing sensitive personal history. Theo shared:

> *"*In terms of [disclosure and self-advocacy], I have to give up some really personal information about my life to someone that I've just met in order to convince them that I'm actually deserving of some of their time and some of their effort."

For many, disclosure felt uncomfortable but gradually became normalized. Students told their story to the disability service office, then again to professors, then again in office hours. Participants spoke of "getting used" to explaining their disability in educational settings:

> "We, as disabled person, need to voluntarily expose ourselves." (Camille)
>
> "It is just what I have to do." (Sarah)
>
> "Voluntarily going and doing it is something I was just kind of used to at that point". (Margot)

She also noted that disclosure could be difficult for some students because you often have to "stick your neck out to get your accommodations and sometimes prove I need accommodations to professors". (Margot)

Patterns diverged in how openly students disclosed. Some participants, like Margot, Nora, and Theo, were open and 'nonchalant' about disclosing they were dyslexic. Margot described herself as almost 'too outspoken' about having dyslexia, often telling professors and employers directly. Nora, after earlier hesitation, now "identifies more with the label" and uses it actively in introductions and advocacy. Theo openly identifies as disabled and dyslexic and views this as part of how he navigates systems. Others approached disclosure more selectively. Iris does not bring up dyslexia "randomly in a conversation" but finds that, if it comes up, "no one really cares". Camille and Sarah were more selective and disclosed only when necessary or when the context made it natural to do so. Daphne deliberately downplays dyslexia and dyscalculia in academic settings, relying instead on ADHD documentation, because, in her

experience, “dyslexia-related concerns are not taken seriously,” while ADHD yields similar accommodations.

Views on voluntary disclosure requirements were mixed. Some participants accepted disclosure as something they needed to do to access support. Theo welcomed that disclosure in universities felt voluntary, reporting little emotional weight around it and stating that it gave her: “freedom to choose whether you want it or not”. Nora similarly suggested that students could choose to seek accommodations, but also highlighted the personal difficulties with coming to terms with diagnosis: “It gives you control over your own life. If you feel like you are identifying with dyslexic markers, then you can seek accommodations…but also, coming to terms with diagnosis is a very personal, very difficult journey. It’s really hard to advocate for yourself when it’s [diagnosis] still so fresh”.

Others described the accommodation process as burdensome and exclusionary. Camille characterized the disclosure process as institutional gatekeeping that makes accommodations more complicated to obtain and less accessible: “I think it’s really bad. I think the university do that to make sure that they’re not accommodating someone who don’t have a quote-unquote real disability. It keeps the division clear between those who don’t have special needs and those who have some needs”.

Glenn argued that if assessments were completed in middle or high school, universities should accept those records rather than requiring new, costly assessments, which he viewed as an additional barrier that causes unnecessary stress. Theo described the accommodation process as something largely left to students to manage on their own: “My accommodation process was a lot more about me finding what works for me. It’s something I think disabled people are quite used to. You’re on your own with a lot of this stuff. You have to do it yourself”.

Across interviews, accommodations were consistently described as essential to academic success. Several participants stated they "would not have been able to complete university without them" (Margot; Theo; Iris; Camille; Sarah; Nora; Daphne). All participants saw Disability Service Offices as the primary route to receiving support, but their experiences varied markedly.

For many participants, experiences with disability services were shaped by long wait times, institutional bureaucracy, and communication challenges. Margot, for example, described not being able to access accommodations in her first undergraduate semester because the "process was really long". She hoped that the process could become faster for students, noting that the system seemed simpler to navigate for students who required fewer supports. Daphne characterized the process as "ominous" and felt that institutions were not equipped to deal with accommodations:

> In an institution like Dalhousie, there is a sort of prestige, although there are gaps in their know-how to kind of take those things on. They'll just send me to this sort of place, and somebody else sends me to another place, and nothing really gets done. And it sort of ends up with me having to prove how many issues I have, and it becomes really negative.

Daphne and several other participants (Camille, Theo, Nora, Margot) described navigating accommodations as difficult, emotionally draining, and bureaucratically complex.

Not all participants encountered these challenges, however. Iris reported a comparatively smooth process at her institution. In the first year of her undergraduate degree, without an updated diagnosis, she was ineligible for formal accommodations. She stated that, despite this, several instructors were understanding of her circumstances and provided informal support, such as assignment extensions and access to lecture notes. After re-diagnosis, she found the DSO very

responsive and efficient, arranging a note-taker, permission to record lectures, extra time on exams/assignments, and access to an academic advisor who was easy to reach and could help negotiate extensions.

Participants also discussed their experiences accessing accommodations during graduate studies. Their experiences ranged from highly supportive to effectively absent. Several reported that accommodation options were more limited at the graduate level, with some being told that accommodations were not needed in graduate programs. Nora recalled being informed by Student Academic Success Services (SASS) at the University of Ottawa that "there are no accommodations for graduate students because there were no timed exams". She described proposing alternatives, extra time for essays, oral submissions, and language-error thresholds that were not implemented, leaving her feeling "left in the dark" and isolated. Camille described her history with accommodations as alternating between support and loss of support. Earlier in her undergraduate studies, she had extra time and computer-based writing tools (including the French software Antidote, which she described as the most helpful support). At the University of Ottawa, during her graduate studies, she was granted temporary accommodations based on a dyslexia diagnosis from a Quebec speech-language therapist. However, she was informed that continued access to academic accommodations required a new psychoeducational assessment because documentation from speech-language therapists was not accepted as sufficient evidence of a learning disability within the Ontario university context. Unable to afford it, she allowed the one-year buffer period to expire and is now completing her thesis without formal accommodations.

4.2 Intelligence, Academic Competence, and Self-Doubt

Participants frequently discussed how dyslexia and learning differences intersected with perceptions of intelligence. They spoke about intelligence and academic competence in both personal and social terms.

Across interviews, participants described longstanding experiences of feeling "behind" or being treated as less capable. Many recalled early school experiences marked by comparisons with classmates who appeared to read and write with ease. Several participants described being labelled as "dumb" or "slow" throughout primary and secondary education, and these experiences continued at university. Participants described being viewed as less intelligent than their peers by other peers, teachers, professors, and, in some cases, family members.

Academic abilities were consistently described in terms of fit with specific tasks and subjects. Challenges with reading and writing were common across all participants, particularly under time pressure. Difficulties with mathematics were also frequently reported; all eight described math and, in some cases, science-related subjects as particularly overwhelming and discouraging. Several avoided courses, programs, or career paths that required substantial mathematics or science coursework because of these experiences. Sarah illustrated this pattern, recalling that she wanted to pursue dentistry but was discouraged by teachers and classmates who told her that such a path required excellent math and grades. After years of extra help, she eventually "lost hope" and abandoned dentistry, a decision she later regretted.

Other participants similarly recounted being steered toward or away from certain academic pathways based on perceived ability. Daphne, studying Commerce at Dalhousie University, recalled the competitive culture and the implicit suggestion that a student with a disability did not belong: *"*When I was in Commerce, it was definitely difficult because there is a

very competitive culture, and to have an edge over somebody who has a disability seemed to be a thing. It was like, why are you in this program? You should go hit the arts or something".

Margot reported that peers and professors were surprised and shocked that she had been admitted to the university or that she was performing well academically. She also described jokes about her writing and assumptions that she was less intelligent than her peers:

> It's kind of weird when a lot of people pity or think it's unusual that you've gotten to university. Like your milestone should be different than other people, all because you have dyslexia. Especially because academics aren't made for people with dyslexia to begin with, so it's very belittling when you're already struggling, knowing you shouldn't be there. And then people really reinforce the fact that they think you shouldn't be there.

She reflected on the impact this had on her self-perception: "I think it affected how I saw myself, because it feels like you have to prove to everybody that you're fine but you're not" (Margot).

Participants described others interpreting dyslexia as laziness, lack of effort, or low intelligence. Several recalled being told that their academic difficulties would improve if they simply worked harder or applied themselves more. Margot described these assumptions as common in her interactions with others: "People think you're less intelligent or that you're not trying. I've been told that if I simply try harder, my dyslexia would get better". Theo expressed similar frustration: "I hate when people take away my ability to put an effort away from me, you know, like that's why I'm here". He also described being told by a professor that he was "not even that disabled", accompanied by a pervasive narrative that if he would "just read and write better or put in more effort, the issue would disappear". Reflecting on these experiences, Theo also described encountering expectations that academic work should be completed in a particular 'right' way, explaining: "When professors have perceptions of the right way to do something,

and that right way is like a neurotypical, non-dyslexic way of doing it, that will always be harder…It's just not the way I think".

Some participants described the most direct challenges to their competence coming from faculty. Nora recalled being asked by a professor in her graduate program whether she was capable of succeeding: "I'm not questioning your intelligence, I just don't think you're smart enough to complete a thesis". She described this as a "direct questioning of my intelligence". She reported receiving grades of approximately 65% on written assignments, with feedback focused almost entirely on grammatical and linguistic errors and little attention given to the content, arguments, or analysis. Strong oral contributions in class were not reflected in assignment grades or accompanied by feedback that could be used to improve future work. She felt that throughout these experiences, her academic competence remained in question despite her demonstrated knowledge and classroom participation: "It felt like instructors couldn't get past the disability".

Some participants described internalizing these perceptions about their intelligence and academic ability. Nora's narrative contained many references to being "dumb". As a child, she frequently called herself "dumb" and "let people believe it". She describes high school teachers telling her she was "not smart enough for university" and that, if she went, there would be no accommodations. She reported absorbing these voices until a supportive professor at university asked her directly: "Why don't you trust yourself? Why do you think you're stupid? You're one of the smartest kids that I've met".

Glenn internalized being "slow" or "stupid" in school and described carrying these perceptions into university. He described experiencing imposter syndrome during university and doubted whether he was capable of pursuing graduate education, despite his academic achievements. Reflecting on this period, he recalled thinking: "I'm just going to do my

bachelor's. Like, I don't think I'm smart enough for my master's". Daphne similarly reflected: "I was never going to do well in school. I was never going to pursue higher academic pursuits like everyone else around me. I was just there to get the job done, and even if I was trying to get the job done, it was not very well".

While many accounts focused on deficit-based perceptions, participants were clear that dyslexia did not define their intelligence. Several identified key strengths in creativity, critical thinking and verbal communication. Daphne, Theo, Margot, and Nora described these strengths as important aspects of their academic experiences, alongside the challenges associated with dyslexia. Several described their strengths in relation to specific tasks and course demands, like strong verbal communication skills, noting that current university assessments often do not accommodate these strengths. Three of the eight participants internalized being 'slow' and 'stupid' in school, only to discover that they scored 90-100% on exams in their field.

4.3 Time, Pace, and Academic Workloads

Time, pace, and course workload emerged as central concerns (themes) in all participants' academic experiences. Participants described the university as fast-paced and dense: heavy weekly reading loads, frequent quizzes, and overlapping deadlines across multiple courses. Programs in psychology, sociology, criminology, feminist and gender studies and commerce were described as requiring substantial reading and writing within compressed periods of time.

Many participants described difficulty keeping up with coursework and deadlines. Managing the time required for readings, assignments, and assessments was described as a key aspect of academic work. Several participants framed their core need as additional time rather

than additional academic support. Theo stated: “How my disability works is I just need more time. I just need more time to figure it out”. Sarah described similar challenges with fast-paced, deadline-driven curricula and emphasized the importance of: “Needing more time not just for tests but for understanding concepts at a sustainable pace”.

Participants described coursework as requiring significant time and sustained effort. Margot described challenges associated with prolonged tasks and fatigue: “I would be working on an assignment for so long and then not be able to edit it until the end. That was really hard because you could stare at a page all day, but if you're really tired, you can't read”.
Glenn similarly described taking longer to read compared to others and reported that re-reading written work in the final stages of assignments was often not done due to fatigue: “I know that if someone is reading, it takes me twice as long to read the same thing. It’s just what it is”. Nora similarly mentioned the everyday time cost of dyslexia. She explained that planning and mental preparation for tasks are part of the ongoing “mental load that comes with being a person with dyslexia, knowing it’s going to take you double the time, if not more”.

Participants linked the lack of time to both academic and non-academic consequences. Theo emphasized that without sufficient time accommodations, other needs suffer: “The real way that my disability affects me is if I don’t receive accommodations to have the time to have my needs met in other ways. I’m just blowing the amount of time I can spend on cooking, eating, resting after working so hard”.

Nora also described instances in which she was not given sufficient time and the impact this had on her workload and overall health. In her master’s program, she described a course where three or four research articles, over one hundred pages, had to be summarized in a two-page paper due at midnight before the 8:30 am class the following morning. When she requested

more time as per her accommodations, the extension was granted until 8:30 a.m., exactly when the class started. When she asked for more time, she was ignored. This schedule led to repeated all-nighters and exhaustion: “I was pulling all-nighters and not sleeping Tuesday nights until Wednesday morning for, like, the eight or ten assignments we had to submit”.

All eight participants used extended test time and stated that it helped with formal assessments but did not change the pace of day-to-day coursework. Several participants described feeling overwhelmed by time-consuming academic tasks, especially when readings, quizzes, and writing assignments accumulated simultaneously. Iris, who did not have accommodations during her first year, highlighted the challenges of adapting to university expectations, describing the transition from high school to university as “a lot to learn in a short period of time”, which eventually prompted her to seek re-diagnosis and register for support.

Extra time was a crucial accommodation for all participants. Even with extra time, participants described the importance of planning and various coping strategies. Students relied heavily on calendars, chunking tasks, and starting early. Several described triaging tasks when the workload exceeded their capacity: skimming rather than close reading, prioritizing certain assignments, or dropping courses when they anticipated or encountered unsupportive instructors. Camille considered reducing her course load but chose to take a full course load each semester to avoid lengthening her time in school, even though this made semesters “crazy”. Theo’s primary personal strategy was a self-accommodation in which he deliberately took fewer courses per term so he could devote the extra time he needed to each course (subsequently extending their length of degree).

The space of learning also mattered. Several participants used separate testing rooms for exams. Participants described specific educational environments and settings. Theo described

writing exams in quieter, separate spaces and noted that she liked these environments because they “were less stressful and had fewer people”. Sarah similarly highlighted the importance of space, describing lecture halls with steep, crowded seating as a “true nightmare”. She avoided classes with such rooms because the environment and layout intensified her claustrophobia and tics, making smaller, quieter rooms an important part of her support.

Camille contrasted experiences across institutions, noting a smaller university campus felt more flexible and accommodating, while larger universities operated under more standardized procedures (undergraduate at... & graduate at uOttawa). Like several participants, accommodation spaces became sites of separation as well as support, involving relocation to separate examination rooms. Camille describes finding a sense of community among students with similar experiences, but also feels it marked them as different: “Every exam, we were the same people [students with learning disabilities] in the same room…My friends knew that I was not doing the exam in the same room as them”.

Daphne reported mixed experiences with space in university, describing classrooms as environments where they felt reserved and less confident. Some openly spoke and engaged in class while others were more uncomfortable interacting with others in these spaces. Online learning during COVID-19 also created its own temporal challenges: Margot reported that courses and subjects “blended together”, making it difficult to track and manage obligations as well as maintain focus. She highlighted the difficulties with virtual platforms like Zoom and their chat-based discussion functions because of a lack of spell-check and increased pressure.

4.4 Relationships with Professors, Peers, and Disability Service Staff

Relationships with professors, disability service staff, and peers significantly shaped participants' university experiences. Across all interviews, a professor's response to disclosure and accommodation requests was a decisive factor in their academic experiences.

4.4.1 Relationships with Professors

Participants described significant variation in faculty responses to disability disclosure and accommodation requests. The majority described professors as supportive and flexible, allowing lecture recordings, deadline extensions, and, in some cases, providing informal accommodations beyond formal requirements. However, others encountered professors who were dismissive, resistant, or overtly ableist. Consistent across all participants was the observation that professors in the social sciences and humanities were generally more understanding.

Nora described interactions with professors in her graduate program as particularly negative. She recounted multiple episodes of bullying, failing grades, and denial of accommodations. She observed that some professors saw disability as a reason to help, while others saw it as extra administrative work or as grounds for doubting her competence. Similarly, Daphne reflected upon repeated difficulties obtaining accommodations and the lack of accommodating professors: "It was a nightmare. I'm really good with communication, and I would often highlight that to professors. I was like, could I communicate this, you know, oral exams and things like that, and there was never an accommodation. There was no sort of leniency or adaptation".

Even if participants liked the professor, this did not always mean that disclosures of dyslexia or requests for accommodations were met with supportive responses or positive reactions. Margot recalled informing a professor she liked that she had dyslexia and immediately

observing a notable change in his facial expression and reaction: “His face dropped, like I said I had cancer or something”. Although she reported many positive interactions overall, she emphasized that experiences often depended on the individual professor or department. She described a few professors who responded negatively to accommodation requests, including strict conditions and threats about grade penalties:

> I’ve had many professors give me threats when I’ve asked for extensions. Because I kept asking for extensions on assignments, they kept getting more stringent with me, like setting harder deadlines and saying I would get marks deducted. Sometimes I’ve even gotten professors saying you are going to get a zero if you don’t hand it in after your one-day extension.

Margot also described one professor who, upon hearing she was dyslexic, responded by saying they believed they were dyslexic too and then offered unsolicited tips on how to read. She described feeling like this missed the point of her disclosure entirely.

In contrast, several participants described positive and supportive relationships with professors. Despite initially not being eligible for formal accommodations, Iris said that several instructors were understanding of her circumstances and provided informal support, such as assignment extensions and access to lecture notes. Since registering with accessibility services, she found the staff and professors “really nice” and “understanding”. Glenn similarly described positive relationships, including informal interactions such as meeting for coffee and keeping in touch. He felt respected, particularly as an older student with professional experience. Nora highlighted the impact of a supportive Indigenous professor who approached accommodations differently, asking, “What do you need, what do I need to do to help you succeed?” She

described excelling in this course, contrasting it with experiences in less supportive environments where professors did not approach accommodations in the same way.

As participants described their interactions with professors, many also discussed the decisions they made about disclosing their disability and seeking support. Several participants described the need to proactively assess professors before disclosing disabilities or deciding whether to remain enrolled in courses. Theo described initially enrolling in multiple classes to determine which professors seemed approachable or accommodating. Margot reported consulting Rate My Prof (a publicly accessible online platform where students can anonymously evaluate and review university/college instructors' ratings and comments on teaching style and classroom experiences) to identify which professors might be more receptive and responsive to accommodation requests and accessibility needs: “Later in university, I was good at finding which professors were good and which ones weren’t”.

Participants also described uncertainty around the implementation of their accommodations. Several participants (Camille, Margot, Nora) recounted delays while professors sought clarification or expressed uncertainty about how accommodations would apply to specific assessment formats. Camille, Margot, and Nora, in graduate-level studies, all reported being told by both the disability service office and by professors that because there were no exams, there were no accommodations. Some participants noted that certain departments or disciplines appeared more accommodating than others. Humanities-based programs were frequently described as more flexible and understanding, while business and STEM fields were depicted as environments where accommodations were viewed as a weakness or crutch.

4.4.2 Relationships with Peers

Relationships with peers were mixed. Most participants found support in friendships and communities with other students who are disabled. One participant described growing up surrounded by misfits and disabled peers.

Camille similarly reported positive peer relationships formed through accommodation-based exam rooms, where she repeatedly encountered the same students, and described forming friendships and a strong sense of community in those settings. Glenn described positive cohort-based learning experiences among a group of mostly military veterans (mostly military veterans, plus one civilian) who worked well together "because of a shared military experience". He described peers as supportive and reported that these relationships continued after the program. He attributed these relationships to his "good personality and character" not academic status.

In contrast, several participants described becoming more visible once their disability was disclosed. They reported that others viewed them primarily through the lens of dyslexia, particularly when using accommodations that differentiated them from peers. Theo described frustration with how this played out in group work: "On occasion in the past, when I've done group work, I've been given less responsibility because of my diagnosis and I find that frustrating. I do get frustrated when I'm doing group work because I think that people have biases about me before I even have a chance to prove myself. I think in those areas, that affects my sociability".

Negative experiences with peers took various forms, from overt insults to subtle disbelief or pity. Margot described some peers as looking at her "as if she is dying. They say things like oh my god, I am so sorry and then it takes a second where they start to pity you". Several

participants described feeling conspicuous when writing exams in separate rooms or working to different timelines, sometimes prompting questions and perceived scrutiny from peers.

Nora described divergent experiences of community across her academic career. During her undergraduate degree, she felt a strong sense of community among students with learning disabilities. She described many using the same testing centre (seeing familiar faces) and becoming "friends with the learning disability kids…the ones whose brains work differently". By contrast, in her graduate program, she struggled to find community, describing most classmates as "very white and from wealthy backgrounds, while she was a first-generation Indigenous student from a very low-income home". She expressed feeling like she had "nothing in common" with many peers and gravitated instead toward Indigenous and BIPOC communities on campus: "I've always found myself gravitating towards BIPOC people because we often have a shared experience of living with oppression, colonial systems and racism and all these things, and you can essentially trauma bond over really crappy things that we have to deal with on the daily".

4.4.3 Relationships with Disability Service Staff

Disability service offices were generally viewed positively, although participants emphasized that these offices were often overcrowded and underfunded. While almost all participants enjoyed interactions with specific disability service staff at their respective institutions, they also described difficulties reaching staff or obtaining timely support due to high student demand.

Nora's experiences with Disability Service staff were mixed. Undergraduate support at another Canadian university was perceived as helpful. At uOttawa, Nora saw the accommodation centre as overstretched and not resourced to support graduate students. She described being told:

"There are no accommodations for grad students because there were no timed exams". When she proposed alternatives, extra time for essays or oral submissions, these were not taken up, and she was told her needs could not be recognized within existing frameworks. She described feeling "left in the dark" and isolated. A time-management session with a student hired by DSO at the university made her feel especially misaligned. The student was there to provide strategies for time management, but "had no disabilities nor graduate experience, and offered generic advice like "just make sure you read them," which Nora was already attempting without much success:

> You [student staff at DSO] were hired in a position that, quite frankly, I don't think you should be in. Because why are you advising neurodivergent people on how our brains work when you don't even understand how they work? I don't care if you read all the textbooks in the world. You don't look at our brains daily. You don't understand the actual struggles of being a person in academia with accommodations or lack of accommodations.

Other participants reported largely positive experiences with disability service office staff. For example, Margot described one staff member as someone she "really liked" because she intervened when a professor failed to honour accommodations, emailing the professor and arranging a meeting. Margot described the disability support staff as hard workers in an underfunded system and noted that it became harder to reach them after COVID-19 as more students sought support. She further reported that she did not experience the DSO as a site of community; she did not know other students via the office and described its relationship and role as primarily to "get your accommodations".

4.5 Identity and Educational Journey

Participants' identities as learners and as people who identify as dyslexic were not static. Across interviews, they described how their understanding of dyslexia evolved over time and how their relationship with dyslexia changed across their educational journeys. Participants also reflected on how intersecting identities shaped how their dyslexia was understood and experienced in the university. Several described dyslexia shaping both educational experiences and their sense of self from childhood through university and into early adulthood. While some participants identified strongly as dyslexic, others described dyslexia as only one aspect of a broader identity.

For most participants, understanding what dyslexia meant beyond the label they received in childhood was a gradual and uneven process. Several described early schooling as a period of confusion, where they knew they experienced learning differently from their peers but lacked the language or framework to make sense of their experiences.

Nora recalled that before her formal diagnosis in grade eight, she frequently called herself 'dumb' and allowed others to believe it. Her mother described dyslexia to her as "connections in the brain that worked differently", but Nora did not fully understand what this meant until much later. She described a long arc from passively accepting the label to actively researching it as an adult: "I started following people on social media who have dyslexia and learning disabilities, and it helped me make sense of my own lived experience". She described learning "to love that part of my brain, though it has been a really long process". She further described this shift as both empowering and exhausting.

Sarah grew up knowing she had a learning disability but was never given a clear or updated label. She described years of wondering why school was so hard, attributing difficulties to anxiety or personal failings. She wished she had been diagnosed earlier but stressed that she

has gained a clearer understanding of dyslexia over time: “as I have gotten older, I have really started to understand what dyslexia is”.

Glenn’s understanding and relationship with dyslexia developed later in life. Diagnosed informally at a time when dyslexia was not widely recognized, he spent years without a clear explanation for his educational experiences. He recalled being labelled a ‘slow learner’ in school and reported that his understanding of dyslexia expanded as an adult through his children’s experiences with accommodations and his own experiences returning to university: “Back then they didn’t call it dyslexia. You were just slow, or you were stupid. That was it”. Glenn emphasized personal resilience, adaptability, and life experiences as more influential aspects of his identity than dyslexia itself.

While several participants described a gradual acceptance, others reported that dyslexia was integrated into their identity much earlier in life. Theo’s understanding was shaped by attending a specialized school from grade five to grade ten, where dyslexia was normalized among peers: “I grew up in an environment where everyone around me had some learning disability, which made it incredibly normalized. There also really wasn’t bullying at my school because, like, what are you going to bully someone about? You’re all dyslexic”. He noted that because the label was shared among several peers, it carried less weight and was not positioned as a marker of individual difference or deficiency in the same way it might have been in other educational contexts.

Daphne described understanding dyslexia partly through her father, who has “full-time dyslexia”. She experiences her own dyslexia as “more sporadic”. She reported that her understanding of dyslexia was shaped less by formal diagnosis and more by observing a family member and gradually recognizing similarities: “I knew my dad had it, and sort of my parents

didn't make a fuss about it. Their whole thing is, especially because I've got a couple of things, to not make a point of highlighting it". She described this approach as good and bad; it prevented her from being defined by the dyslexic label but also delayed her from fully understanding what support she might need.

Alongside growing awareness of dyslexia, participants described shifting relationships with the dyslexia label itself. Several highlighted changes over time, influenced by educational experiences, supportive or dismissive encounters and personal reflection. Many reported moving from uncertainty, discomfort, or negative assumptions toward greater acceptance. Margot described herself as 'nonchalant' about the label, identifying as dyslexic since childhood and openly comfortable telling employers, professors and new acquaintances without hesitation: "I can't imagine not saying I'm dyslexic. It's always been something I've identified with". At the same time, she distinguished between identifying as dyslexic and identifying as 'disabled' more broadly, and she remained cautious about checking disability boxes on job applications. She also attributed her comfort with dyslexia to growing up with a mother who worked in special education, which gave her access to language and knowledge that other participants lacked. She described this as a form of privilege, having adults who understood the system and could advocate within it, while also recognizing many of her peers at university had no such background.

Theo articulated a strong political relationship with the label. He did not simply accept it; he actively chose to identify as dyslexic and connected this to a broader disability identity: "To describe myself, I do identify as dyslexic. I think that what else would I identify as? I definitely identify as dyslexic". He described dyslexia as shaping his entire academic trajectory, including his field of study.

Camille described a different relationship. After moving to Ontario for graduate studies, she learned that documentation supporting her childhood diagnosis was no longer accepted for accommodations. Unable to obtain a new psychoeducational assessment, she reported that the experience of losing access to a label she had carried since childhood was disorienting: “I had the diagnosis my whole life, and then suddenly it wasn’t enough”. Camille also expressed discomfort with the language of ‘identifying as’ in relation to disability. She did not reject the dyslexia label but resisted what she saw as an institutional requirement to perform disability identity to access support. For Camille, dyslexia was a fact about her brain, not an identity to be claimed or performed.

Iris described the most understated relationship with the label. She described dyslexia as occupying a relatively small place in her overall sense of self: “I don’t really think about it that much. It’s just there”. She used accommodations and supports when needed, emphasizing family, friendships, and interests in art as more central aspects of identity.

Several participants described dyslexia in relation to their aspects of identity, including race, gender, sexuality, and class. Nora’s account was the most extensive in this regard. She identified as disabled, Indigenous, white-passing, a first-generation university student, and from a very low-income single-parent household. She described these identities as converging in university, particularly in graduate school, to produce a sense of dislocation: “Most people in my classes are very white, come from very privileged, wealthy backgrounds. I’m a first-generation university student who has learning disabilities and is Indigenous. And all of the risk factors in my life would point to me either being dead, incarcerated, or pregnant…If you look at my life and you look at my CV, you don’t understand how it’s the same person”. Nora recalled sitting at a table in her master’s cohort while classmates complained about their families’ cleaning staff.

Her mother had worked as a cleaning lady. She described feeling as if she had nothing to contribute to the conversation: “I was like, we are different people. People like me don’t meet you here often, historically”. She described graduate school as a million times more inaccessible than her undergraduate experience and reported never feeling part of her cohort. Instead, she sought community through the Indigenous Resource Centre and among BIPOC students with shared experiences.

Nora also described changes in how she believed others perceived her following disclosure. Before disclosure, she reported being read as white and neurotypical. After disclosure, she felt seen primarily as ‘Indigenous and disabled’, a shift that changed how professors and peers interacted with her: “From that point on, it's just a point of contention. And then you just view me as whatever you want to view me as. You want to see someone that you think is dumb and incapable of doing things? Go ahead. That's on you, not me”.

Nora further explained how being an ‘outspoken Indigenous woman with disabilities’ in a department that claimed to be progressive but reacted defensively to internal critique: “People don't like outspoken women. And when you're outspoken and Indigenous and disabled and from poverty, that plays heavy”.

Camille, a Chinese adoptee raised by white parents in a small, predominantly white town in Quebec, described the intersection of race, adoption, language, and learning disability as producing a constant sense of difference. From an early age, she recalled being aware that she was different in relation to ethnicity and family background. She reported instances where teachers and peers did not expect her to struggle academically because of stereotypes about “Asian students being good at school”. When she did struggle, it took longer for adults to

recognize that something was wrong. She described an uncomfortable contrast between these assumptions/stereotypes and their own academic challenges in reading and writing.

Gender also featured prominently in participants' accounts. Sarah reflected on gender and misdiagnosis. She believed her difficulties and dyslexia were overlooked because she could "socially integrate as a girl". She was not disruptive in ways that typically flagged boys for assessment. Instead, her difficulties were labelled as anxiety, stubbornness, or behavioral issues: "I think girls get missed because we can mask it better…I wasn't the kid throwing chairs, so no one thought to test me". She described a trajectory from being labelled difficult and stubborn in childhood to being seen as anxious and withdrawn in university. She now describes herself as socially extroverted: "Now I kind of mask things by being so socially extroverted". Margot also noticed gendered patterns in educational settings. She recalled being viewed as a "troublemaker who did not take school seriously" when she talked during silent times because she could not read silently. She observed that boys who displayed similar behaviours became 'class clowns', while she was framed as a bad student who did not take school seriously.

Theo, who identifies as queer, observed strong overlaps between queer and disability activism on campus: "Students on campus that are involved in disability advocacy work…and queer clubs and societies on campus, I mean, it's practically a circle. It's practically all the same people". He attributed this overlap to the fact that people who experience one form of marginalization are more likely to recognize and resist others. He also identifies a structural difference between disability and other forms of marginalization. He noted that, disability, unlike queerness or race, is so thoroughly individualized by the medical model that disabled people often do not see themselves as part of a collective: "The ways that you are disadvantaged as a disabled person are so deeply put on you as an individual, you don't even think that you need to

work in a collective space to make your life easier. It feels exclusively on your shoulders, whereas challenges with being queer or black or poor, these are challenges which you feel like are systematic, but disabled issues don't feel systematic in that way".

Several participants also reflected on aspects of their identities that they viewed as conferring privilege. Glenn did not foreground intersecting identities in the same way but acknowledged that being a white heterosexual male gave him certain privileges. He described himself as "lucky" in that sense and recognized that younger racialized or low-income students will likely face additional barriers navigating diagnosis and disclosure. Sarah similarly identified herself as a "white female who is Canadian and an English speaker" and reported "having a lot of privileges and not facing many barriers" because of this, despite also describing gendered experiences related to dyslexia. Margot, who comes from a white middle-class family, also described family background as shaping her understanding and experiences with dyslexia. She attributed part of this to growing up with a mother who worked in special education, which gave her access to language and knowledge that she believed many other participants had not had during their upbringing. She described this as a form of privilege, having adults who understood the education system and could advocate on her behalf, while also recognizing many of her peers at university had no such background.

Across accounts, participants described dyslexia as intersecting with other aspects of identity in ways that shaped how they understood themselves and how they experienced educational environments. These intersections were discussed in relation to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and experiences of both marginalization and privilege.

Chapter 5: Discussion/Analysis

This chapter interprets the findings presented in Chapter 4 through the intersectional disability studies framework outlined in Chapter 3. The findings reveal that accommodation processes in Canadian universities are not neutral administrative systems but sites where ableism, stigma, and intersecting identities converge to shape students' lived educational experiences. Participants' accounts demonstrated that navigating higher education as a student who identifies as dyslexic involves far more than obtaining accommodations; it involves negotiating assumptions about intelligence and competence, managing disclosure, navigating institutional expectations around time and productivity, and responding to social and structural forms of exclusion. Drawing on concepts of intersectional stigma (Berger, 2004), academic ableism (Dolmage, 2017), crip time (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006; Ljuslinder et al., 2020), misfit (Garland-Thomson, 2011), and retrofit (Dolmage, 2017), this chapter analyzes how the accommodation system operates in practice and what it produces, not only in terms of access, but in terms of identity, belonging, and social positioning. Moreover, it examines how disability is produced, managed, and experienced within the contemporary university.

Rather than restating findings by theme, I draw on evidence across multiple themes to demonstrate how each concept illuminates dimensions of participants' experiences that a purely descriptive account would not. The analysis begins with intersectional stigma because participants' experiences were differentiated by their social identities/positions, race, gender, sexuality, and class. Any analysis that does not consider this differentiation from the beginning risks reproducing the hegemonizing tendencies that the intersectional disability studies framework is designed to challenge. From there, the discussion moves to academic ableism, the broader normative structure within which stigma operates and through which students are

judged, valued, and positioned within the university. Crip time then examines one of the primary mechanisms through which academic ableism is enforced: the temporal organization and structure of the university. Misfit extends the analysis from normative linear time to the broader relational encounters between bodies and institutional environments. Finally, retrofit examines how institutions respond to these misfits through accommodations that adjust individual access without transforming the norms and structures that produce this exclusion.

Taken together, these concepts provide a framework for understanding how participants' experiences are shaped across multiple levels of the university environment. The analysis moves from the broader social conditions that shape students' experiences to the institutional norms that structure/organize academic life, the mechanisms through which those norms are enforced, and the institutional responses that attempt to manage, rather than eliminate, resulting barriers. Rather than functioning as separate explanatory categories, these concepts operate as interconnected analytical tools that illuminate different dimensions of the same institutional processes. The chapter concludes by synthesizing these concepts to articulate how the accommodation system, as participants describe it, functions as a retrofit within an ableist institution, one that requires students to disclose a stigmatized identity in order to access individualized and often temporary adjustments, while leaving underlying structures that produce exclusion unchanged.

5.1 Intersectional Stigma: Disability at the Crossroads of Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Class

Berger's (2004) concept of intersectional stigma provides the analytic foundation for understanding how participants' experiences of disability were not uniform but were differentiated by their racial, gender, sexuality, class, and other social positions. Goffman's (1963) foundational work on stigma illuminates how individuals with concealable differences

manage information and navigate between discredited and discreditable identities. Dyslexia, as a largely invisible disability, positions students as discreditable; their stigma is concealable, and they must engage in impression management, deciding whether, when, and to whom to disclose (Goffman, 1963; Waterfield & Whelan, 2017). However, as Berger (2004) argues, Goffman's (1963) framework treats stigma as if it operates along a single axis. In reality, individuals experience stigma differently depending on how their distinct identities intersect. The findings of this study strongly support this intersectional understanding and demonstrate why it must anchor the analysis.

The most vivid illustration of intersectional stigma emerged in Nora's narrative. As an Indigenous, white-passing, low-income, first-generation student with dyslexia, Nora did not experience disability stigma in isolation from other identities. The identities converged to produce a qualitatively distinct experience. Her observation that "all of the risk factors in my life would point to me either being dead, incarcerated or pregnant", situates dyslexia within a constellation of marginalized positions that together shaped her educational trajectory. In her graduate program, she struggled to find community among classmates she described as "very white and from wealthy backgrounds", gravitating instead towards Indigenous and BIPOC communities and describing the process as "trauma bonding over shared experiences of oppression, colonial systems and racism". Nora's experience of disability stigma, being told "she was not smart enough to complete a thesis", receiving feedback focused on linguistic errors rather than content, cannot be disentangled from the racialized, gendered or class assumptions about intelligence, competence, and belonging that structured her academic environment. This is precisely the co-constitution that Erevelles (2015) theorizes: "disabled subjectivities are racialized and racialized subjects are disabled simultaneously" (p.147). When Nora's work was

evaluated primarily for grammatical accuracy rather than content, this assessment did not merely disadvantage her because she identifies as dyslexic; it disadvantaged an Indigenous, low-income female student whose relationship to academia was already shaped by colonialist ideologies and class-based assumptions about linguistic competence. The disability and the social position are not separate experiences that coincided by chance; they are mutually constitutive.

Camille's experience illuminated a different intersection. As a Chinese-born adoptee raised in a predominantly small white town in Quebec, she navigated stereotypes about Asian academic excellence alongside the reality of a learning disability that made reading and writing persistently challenging. The dissonance/disconnect between racialized expectations of her performance and her actual experience created a double bind: she was perceived through a racial lens that assumed academic competence and through disability lens that assumed academic deficiency. Neither perception captured her experience; together, they produced a unique form of misrecognition that illustrates Berger's (2004) argument that intersecting stigmas do not simply add together but interact to produce distinct patterns of marginalization. Camille's question about "why is it so easy for her (sister) and so difficult for me"? carried the weight of not only disability-related self-doubt but also the racialized and gendered expectation that academic success should come naturally to her.

Gender intersected with disability stigma in participants' accounts, as well. Margot's experience of being labelled a troublemaker for talking during silent reading, which she did because she struggled with reading, was explicitly gendered. She observed that boys exhibiting similar behaviours became "class clowns", while she was described as "a bad student who did not take school seriously". This gendered differential reveals how assumptions about gender-appropriate conduct interact with assumptions about academic effort to produce distinct

stigmatizing experiences. For Margot, disability-related behaviour was filtered through gendered expectations, producing not the tolerant amusement/humour reserved for boys but moral disapproval. This dynamic, while emerging in primary and secondary school, set the terms for how she understood herself as an academic well into university, shaping her self-perception and her approach to disclosure. Sarah's experience similarly illustrates that stigma was not simply attached to dyslexia but was shaped by assumptions about femininity, behaviour, and emotional expression, requiring continual forms of identity management that differed from those described by male participants.

Daphne's experience of being told to leave the Commerce program "for the Arts" represents a form of ableist sorting that carries classed implications. The suggestion that a student with a learning disability does not belong in a competitive, business-oriented program and should instead pursue the implicitly less rigorous, less economically valuable Arts reflects hierarchical assumptions about which academic fields are compatible with disability and which are not. This sorting restricts access not only to particular disciplines but to the career trajectories and economic outcomes associated with them.

The experiences of Glenn and Iris provide analytically important counterpoints. Both describe relatively less stigma in their university experiences, as both hold forms of racial and social privilege. Glenn, a white man and military veteran, described positive relationships with peers and professors and did not experience significant stigma related to dyslexia. He made special mention of the social privilege he is afforded as someone with his social identity. Iris, who is Chinese and was born in China, did not believe her experiences had been significantly shaped by her intersecting identities. Instead, she described a supportive family environment and consistent parental investment in learning support. These accounts do not contradict the

intersectional framework; they highlight the uniqueness of individuals' identities and how they shape their experiences. The relative absence of compounded stigma in Glenn's and Iris's narratives may be explained by the privileges they hold. Intersectional stigma is not only about the presence of multiple marginalizations; it is also about how certain identity aspects offer protection from the forms of compounded stigma that other students face. Glenn's ability to describe his university experience as largely positive, attributing it to "his good personality and strong character" as well as his structural advantage, is itself a product of the racial and gendered privileges that allowed him to move through academic spaces without the additional burdens that Nora, Camille, and Daphne described.

Theo's account adds a further dimension. His description of overlaps between queer and disability activism on campus, and his observation that many leaders in disability spaces also belong to other marginalized groups, suggest that intersectional identity positions can also produce forms of solidarity and collective resistance. While he stressed that his queer identity did not directly change his academic experience, it deepened his awareness of the value of collective advocacy, a resource that not all participants accessed equally.

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that the experience of disability stigma and higher education is not a singular phenomenon but a differentiated one shaped by the particular configuration of identities that each student brings to the institution. An analysis that treats dyslexia stigma as if it were experienced uniformly would miss the racialized double bind faced by Nora and Camille, in which they navigated the simultaneous pressures of being recognized as needing support while also being subject to racialized assumptions about competence, ability, and legitimacy. It would also overlook the gendered moral judgments experienced by Sarah and

Margot, the class sorting encountered by Daphne, and the relative insulation Glenn's privileges provided.

The decision about whether to disclose is never just about dyslexia; it is about the entire identity configuration that disclosures make legible. This finding demonstrates why intersectional stigma must be the starting point of analysis: every subsequent concept, academic ableism, crip time, misfit, and retrofit, operates differently depending on the social position of the student experiencing it.

5.1.1 Disclosure, Passing, and Stigma Management

Participants' disclosure practices ranged from open and routine to highly selective and context-dependent. At one end, Margot, Nora, and Theo were open about their dyslexia. Margot described herself as almost 'too outspoken', telling professors and employers directly. Nora, after years of hesitation, now identifies more with the label and uses it actively in introductions and advocacy. Theo openly identifies himself as disabled and dyslexic and views this as an integral part of how he navigates institutional systems. At the other end, Daphne deliberately downplayed dyslexia in academic settings, relying instead on ADHD documentation because, in her experience, "dyslexia related concerns are not taken seriously," while ADHD yielded similar accommodations. Camille and Sarah disclose selectively, only when context made it necessary or natural. Sarah declined to use a note-taker due to the "social embarrassment" and often masks confusion to avoid appearing "stupid".

The institutional requirement of disclosure as a prerequisite for accessing accommodations further complicates this dynamic. As Camille argued, "the system is designed to make sure that they're not accommodating someone who doesn't have a quote unquote real disability. It keeps the division clear". Here, disclosure functions as an institutional gateway, a

mechanism through which the university manages and polices the boundary between ‘normal’ and disabled students. Theo describes the emotional cost of this process: “having to give up some really personal information about my life to someone that I've just met in order to convince them that I'm actually deserving of some of their time and some of their effort”. The language of ‘convincing’ and ‘deserving’ reveals that disclosure is not merely informative but performative: students must not only state that they are disabled but persuade institutional actors that their disability is real, legitimate, and worthy of response.

The cost of non-disclosure was equally significant. As Clark (2024) argues and as participants confirmed, choosing not to disclose may avoid immediate stigma but may also foreclose access to necessary supports, with consequences for academic performance and well-being. Sarah’s decision to decline a note-taker, driven by social embarrassment, meant forgoing a support that she felt might have improved her academic experience. Daphne’s ‘strategy’ of using ADHD documentation instead of dyslexia documentation allowed her to access some accommodations but effectively erased a central dimension of a learning experience from the institutional view. The efforts involved in concealing or minimizing dyslexia also produced what Clark (2024) describes as an intense “consciousness of difference” and a persistent fear of exposure. TV's account of masking confusion by “being so socially extroverted” illustrates the labour-intensive nature of non-disclosure.

Participants’ strategic selection of professors represents a sophisticated form of stigma management that operates at the intersection of disclosure and institutional navigation. Margot used Rate My Professor to identify sympathetic instructors. Theo enrolled in multiple courses to assess which professors seemed approachable before committing. These strategies reflect what Goffman (1963) calls impression management, but they also reveal something that the original

framework does not fully capture: The extent to which stigma management requires knowledge of the institution, social capital, and resources that are unevenly distributed and experienced among students. Students who arrive at university without prior experience navigating accommodation systems or without parental support to guide them may lack the resources to engage with this kind of strategic navigation. This further advantages already privileged "normal" students and disadvantages those at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities.

5.2 Academic Ableism and the "Normal" Student

If intersectional stigma describes how students' experiences of disability are differentiated by their social positions, academic ableism (Dolmage, 2017) names the normative structure within which that stigma operates. It refers to the ways in which higher education is systematically organized around able-bodied and able-minded norms that determine who is perceived, recognized, and valued as capable, intelligent, and deserving of inclusion. The findings of the study demonstrate that these norms are not abstract ideals but are actively enforced and shaped through institutional practices, interactions with faculty and peers, as well as cultural expectations. These effects are distributed unevenly along the intersection of lines analyzed above.

The idealized student, as Dolmage (2017) describes, is neurotypical, reads quickly, writes fluently, works independently, meets deadlines without accommodation, and demonstrates knowledge through normative academic practices. Students who struggle to adhere to, or deviate from, this norm are positioned as deficient (less intelligent and academically incompetent). This normative student was unmistakable in participants' accounts. Participants were told that "they were not smart enough", that they should "just try harder" and that "they're not even that disabled". These statements are not merely individual prejudices; they reflect an institutional

culture that equates academic competence with neurotypical forms of performance and interprets any deviations from those expectations as personal deficiencies. As Dolmage (2017) argues, the "university hides ableism behind idealism" (p. 48), framing exclusion as a real outcome of academic excellence rather than as the product of structural design.

The structure of assessment was a key site through which academic ableism operated. Despite participants' consistent identification of strengths in verbal communication, critical thinking, and creativity, university assessment remained heavily dependent on written work under time pressure. Several participants described strong oral contributions in class that were not reflected in grades determined by written assignments. Nora's was particularly illustrative: she received approximately 65% on written work with feedback focused on grammatical errors rather than content, while she thought her classroom contributions demonstrated the kind of analytical thinking the assignments were designed to measure. Daphne described being "really good with communication" and repeatedly requesting oral assessment alternatives that were never granted.

The assessment structure in this sense did not measure knowledge or intelligence in a neutral way; it measured the capacity to perform knowledge in a particular manner, like written or timed, that systematically disadvantages students whose bodyminds do not conform to that norm. Nora's and Daphne's experiences of being denied alternative routes to demonstrate knowledge illustrates this, as they had to do this in institutionally regulated ways rather than by measuring knowledge itself.

The assumption that dyslexia is controllable and can be overcome through sufficient effort reflects what Theo identified as a cure narrative and represents a core expression of academic ableism. It locates responsibility or accommodation failure in the students' insufficient

effort rather than the institutions' inflexible design. In other words, it reinforces the assumption that disabled bodies must be fixed and corrected to be considered normal. This assumption was reported across participants, from Margot's account of being told her dyslexia would get better with more effort, to Theo being told that he was not even 'that disabled'. This cure narrative sustains academic ableism because it naturalizes the existing system: if students would simply try harder, no systemic change would be necessary. The source of difficulty is relocated within the individual, and the institution is absolved of responsibility.

The consequences of academic ableism were also visible in the pathways toward which students were steered. Sarah abandoned Dentistry, discouraged by teachers and classmates. Daphne was told to leave Commerce for the Arts. These moments of academic sorting are not separate instances of advice; they reflect a wider system that maintains elite academic fields and spaces for bodies and minds that conform and adhere to normative expectations. When a student is told that they did not belong in the program, the message is not about individual capabilities but about what kind of bodymind that program is designed for.

This institutional de-prioritization of disability was also structurally visible. Participants' descriptions of overcrowded, understaffed, and bureaucratically slow disability service offices reflect material consequences of this de-prioritization. When Margot could not access accommodations in the first semester because the process was long, and when Daphne was sent from one office to another without resolution, they were experiencing an institutional system that has disability support on its periphery. As Dolmage (2017) argues, the constrained capacity of Disability Service Offices conveys to the broader university community that disability is of low importance. Academic ableism, in this sense, is not confined to a single policy or interaction. It is woven into the everyday functioning of the university. It can be seen in decisions about how

disability services are funded, in evaluation practices that privilege particular ways of learning and communicating, and in assumptions that academic struggle reflects a lack of effort or ability rather than exclusionary institutional structures.

5.3 Crip Time and the Temporal Architecture of the University

If academic ableism names the normative structure of the university, crip time (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006; Ljuslinder et al., 2020) illuminates one of the primary mechanisms through which that structure and disability are produced in the first place: the normative organization of linear time. The university operates on what Ljuslinder et al. (2020) call 'ablest time', linear, progressive, and standardized temporal expectations that assume a particular kind of body-mind, one that reads at the predictable pace, writes within fixed deadlines, and completes degrees along the normatively prescribed trajectory. The findings of this study demonstrate that these temporal norms are not neutral; these regulatory mechanisms shape who fits and who does not within academic environments.

Participants' accounts converge powerfully around the experience of needing more time. Theo articulated this with utmost clarity: "How my disability works is I just need more time. I just need more time to figure it out". This framing is significant because it redefines the accommodation need: the issue is not that Theo lacks knowledge or academic ability, but that the institution's temporal framework does not accommodate his or other neurodivergent ways of processing. Sarah described the same dynamic: "needing more time not just for tests but for understanding concepts at a sustainable pace". Glenn noted plainly, I know that if someone is reading, it takes me twice as long to read the same thing; it is just what it is". These are not narratives of deficiency; rather, they are descriptions of a mismatch between individual temporality and institutional tempo. Crip time, as Kafer (2013) explains, "bends the clock to

meet disabled bodies and minds" (p. 27), rather than demanding that bodies and minds conform to the clock. What participants described, however, was the opposite: an institution that bends minimally and demands maximum conformity, where ability and able-bodiedness are the idealized standard (Dolmage, 2017; Kafer, 2013).

The consequences of this temporal inflexibility were explicit and, at times, severe. Nora's account of receiving an extension until 8:30 a.m., exactly when the class began, for work due at midnight, is a vivid example of how accommodations can gesture toward flexibility while providing none in practice. The result was repeated "all-nighters and exhaustion", consequences that extended far beyond academic performance into physical and mental health. Theo described a broader illustration of this: "The real way that my disability affects me is if I don't receive accommodations to have the time to have my needs met in other ways. I'm just blowing the amount of time I can spend on cooking, eating, resting and working". Here, normative time does not merely shape academic outcomes; it colonizes students' lives, crowding out rest, nutrition, and overall well-being. This is precisely the temporal logic that crip time challenges. It makes visible how society itself is disabling and that an individual is only 'disabled' when accommodations are not in place. Participants' accounts reveal how university structures privilege particular ways of moving through time and completing academic work.

Even when extra time was granted, it was limited to strict parameters. For instance, Margot received 33% extra time on exams, a standardized figure that was occasionally "still too short". This standardization uncovers the institutional assumptions that disability can be quantified and managed through a specific formula; that a fixed percentage of additional time will neutralize/eradicate the effects of dyslexia across all contexts, all subjects, and all moments of life. Crip time, by contrast, insists on flexibility: not a fixed adjustment but a fundamentally

different relationship to pace, rhythm and duration that acknowledges the variability of body-minds across time (Ljuslinder et al., 2020). All eight participants used extended test time and stated that it helped with formal assessments, but none described it as transforming the pace of day-to-day coursework, the heavy readings, the overlapping deadlines, the accumulation of quizzes. The accommodation addresses the exam, but it does not address the temporal architecture embedded within the institution.

Participants' coping strategies further illustrate the tension between normative linear time and crip time. Camille chose to take a full course load each semester to avoid extending her time in school, a decision driven by the normative expectations that degrees should be completed within a standard timeframe and the financial burdens of extended enrollment. Theo, by contrast, deliberately took fewer courses per term, essentially constructing his own version of crip time. But this self-accommodation came at a cost: a longer time to complete the degree, with all the financial and social implications that it includes. Nora described the everyday temporal dimension of dyslexia as an ongoing "mental load that comes with being a person with dyslexia, knowing it's going to take you double the time, if not more". This crip time was experienced not as liberation or flexibility, but as an ongoing cognitive burden, a constant awareness that one's relationship to time is out of rhythm with institutional expectations. This awareness itself becomes a form of labour, one that is invisible to the institution/university and unaccounted for in any accommodation plans.

These divergent strategies reveal that students are forced to choose between conforming to ableist timelines at the expense of their well-being and deviating from those timelines at the expense of their social and institutional standing. Importantly, neither of these two options challenges the temporal norms themselves. The institution's normative time structures remain in

place, and the student absorbs the cost of this mismatch, whether through exhaustion and stress or extended enrollment. This is how normative time functions as a regulatory mechanism: through a set of expectations so deeply embedded and entrenched in institutional design that deviation is experienced as personal failure rather than structural exclusion. When understood through the intersectional lens established above, the causes of this temporal mismatch are not borne equally. Students with financial resources and strong support systems can afford to manage and extend their enrollment, while students from low-income backgrounds, like Nora, cannot. The temporal architecture of the university is not merely ableist; it is also classed, gendered, and racialized in its effects.

5.4 Fitting, Misfitting, and the Relational Production of Disability

Garland-Thomson's (2011) concept of misfit extends the analysis from temporal norms examined through crip time to the broader relational encounters between bodies and institutional environments. Disability, in this framework, is not a fixed or inherent trait of individuals but emerges through the quality of the relationship between a "particularly shaped and functioning body" (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 594) and the environment it enters. Where crip normative temporality produces disability, misfit reveals how the full range of institutional conditions, spatial, pedagogical, relational and cultural, produce moments of alignment or misalignment that shape students' experiences. The findings reveal that participants' experiences of disability were profoundly context-dependent: the same student fit in one setting and misfitted in another, depending on the professor, assessment format/practices, the physical space, and the culture of the department. Most importantly, students experienced misfit when their temporal needs collided with university timelines.

This relational quality was evident in participants' accounts of task-specific ability. All eight described challenges with reading and writing, the tasks most central to university assessment, while simultaneously identifying strengths in critical thinking, verbal communication, and creativity. Several participants described excelling in courses where assessment formats aligned with their strengths: Nora thrived in a course taught by a supportive professor who asked, "what do you need", but received failing grades in courses where assessment was exclusively written. Daphne described strong communication skills but was never offered the option of oral assessments. Theo similarly observed that "when professors have perceptions of the right way to do something, and that right way is like a neurotypical, non-dyslexic way of doing it, that will always be harder…It's just not the way I think". These accounts illustrate that "fitting" is not about whether the student is capable but about whether the environment is designed to recognize and sustain the capabilities that the student brings. When the assessment format is exclusively timed and written, the student who identifies as dyslexic misfits, not because of an inherent deficit, but because the institutional "environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it" (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 594). Theo's account demonstrates that dyslexia is not inherently stigmatizing or disabling. He described attending a specialized school "where everyone around him had some learning disability making dyslexia incredibly normalized". Within that environment, difference did not produce exclusion because educational expectations were organized around neurodiverse ways of learning rather than neurotypical norms. His transition to university therefore illustrates Garland Thomson's (2011) concept of misfit: disability emerged not because his bodymind had changed, but because the relationship between his bodymind and the institutional environment had changed. What had once been a context of fit became one of misfit as university assessment,

pedagogy, and expectations privileged neurotypical ways of learning, reading, and demonstrating knowledge. His account reinforces Garland-Thomson's argument that disability is relationally produced through environments rather than residing solely within individual bodies.

Physical spaces also produced fits and misfits. Sarah described steep, crowded lecture halls as a "true nightmare" that intensified her claustrophobia and tics, prompting her to avoid classes held in such rooms. Theo, by contrast, described writing exams in quieter, separate spaces as less stressful. Camille contrasted the flexibility of a smaller campus with the standardized procedures of a larger university. These spatial accounts demonstrate that the built environment is not a neutral space for learning but an active participant in producing fit or misfit. When Sarah avoids a lecture hall, the architecture is not passively difficult; it is actively disabling.

Garland-Thomson (2011) argues that repeated acts of misfitting can solidify into a stigmatized identity, "a person unsuited or ill-suited to his or her environment" (p. 593). This process was visible in participants' narratives. Daphne's declaration, "I'm not made for this environment", captures the shift from misfitting as a relational process to misfit as an internalized identity. After three universities and repeated experiences of misalignment, Daphne understood herself not as someone encountering poorly designed environments but as someone who fundamentally does not belong. This is the dangerous process that Garland-Thomson (2011) identifies: when the relational origins of misfitting are obscured, the individual absorbs and internalizes the misalignment as a personal failing. Whether students experienced university as supportive or exclusionary depended primarily on how particular spaces, evaluation/assessment practices, and relationships interacted with their bodyminds. The analysis above demonstrates that students who's racial, gender, class, or sexuality identities already marked them as marginal

within academic spaces are often more likely to experience situational misfitting that can be internalized into a misfit identity, or a sense of personal misfit. Nora's internalization of being dumb occurred not simply because she identified as dyslexic but because the label was layered with race, gender, and class assumptions about her capabilities and belonging. Glenn, by contrast, outwardly acknowledged that they were protected from this internalization partly because of the social capital their identity provided.

Yet participants also demonstrated what Garland-Thomson (2011) conceptualizes as a third position: refusing to fit. Margot and Theo used Rate My Professor and course-shopping strategies to proactively assess and select professors, effectively reshaping their institutional environment to increase the likelihood of 'fit'. Nora's advocacy for alternative assessment formats, oral submissions, and grammatical thresholds represents a refusal to accept the terms of an environment designed without her in mind. These strategies do not eliminate misfitting, but they reveal students' agency in navigating and, at times, resisting the institutional conditions that produce it. Theo's connection to disability advocacy and queer activism further illustrates how refusal to fit can become a collective practice and political tool rather than an individual coping mechanism.

The accommodation exam room occupied an analytically complex position in this framework. For some participants, the separate room was a site of fitting, a quieter, less stressful space that aligned with their needs and allowed them to perform at their best. For others, it was simultaneously a site of marking, a site of difference. Camille described the same group of students gathering for every exam, where their friends knew they were not doing the exam in the same room; the separate room grants access while making visible the very different set the accommodation is meant to address. Students are accommodated, but at the same time, their

accommodation signals that they do not 'fully belong' within the normative space. In other words, it produces a conditional fit, one that is always marked as an exception to the norm rather than an equally valued mode of participation. In this way, the accommodation room functions as both a site of fit and a marker of misfit, embodying the tension at the heart of how institutions manage disability. This complex tension leads directly to the final analytical concept: retrofit.

5.5 Retrofit and the Limits of Accommodation

Dolmage's (2017) concept of retrofit examines how institutions respond to the misfits, temporal mismatches, and stigmatizing dynamics documented above. While misfit describes how disability is relationally produced and crip time reveals the temporality of that production, retrofit describes the institutional logic of response: reactive, after-the-fact adjustments, most frequently in the form of accommodations, that grant temporary access without challenging the underlying norms of ability, productivity, and performance that structure the institutional environment. Findings of this study illustrate this logic at multiple levels and demonstrate that the accommodation system, despite its stated purpose of ensuring equal access, functions as a retrofit within an otherwise exclusionary structure.

The requirement for a psychoeducational assessment operates as the first layer of retrofit. Participants consistently describe these assessments as expensive (ranging from $2,000 to $ 5,000), time-consuming, and logistically burdensome. For students managing heavy course loads and employment, the assessment process itself constituted a significant barrier to accessing the very supports designed to remove barriers. Moreover, several participants found the childhood documentation did not satisfy institutional requirements, necessitating a second assessment, or what might be understood as the re-certification of a disability that had not ceased to exist. This process exemplifies what Samuels (2014) calls "biocertification": the institutional

demand that disability be scientifically verified before support is granted. We see that the accommodation system does not ask whether the student needs support; it asks whether the student can prove, through costly and time-bound documentation, “that they are disabled enough to deserve it”.

The structure of current disability service offices further illustrates the logic of retrofitting. As the findings show, disability service offices were consistently described as under-resourced, overcrowded, and operating beyond capacity. Staff-to-student ratios reported in the literature and echoed in participants' accounts paint a picture of offices stretched to the limit, where even well-intentioned staff could not meet demand. Margot noted that it became harder to reach disability service staff after COVID-19, and Daphne described being sent from one office to another without resolution. These are not failures of individual effort, but structurally embedded consequences of the institutional de-prioritization analyzed in the academic ableism section above. The disability service office itself becomes a retrofit, an office added to the institution to manage disability, rather than a transformation of that structure.

The most striking illustration of retrofit’s limitations emerged at the graduate level. Nora was told that because her graduate program did not include timed exams, “there are no accommodations for grad students”. When she proposed alternatives, extra time for written assignments, and oral submission options, these were not taken up. Margot similarly accepted that she would not get accommodations because “graduate students did not have timed exams”. Camille’s accommodations collapsed entirely because she could not afford a new psycho-educational assessment when her Quebec-based speech therapist diagnosis was not accepted in Ontario. These accounts revealed that the accommodation framework is not only reactive but also rigid; it is built around a narrow set of standardized adjustments (e.g., extra time on exams)

and cannot adapt to the diverse and evolving ways dyslexia shapes and influences academic work. When assessment formats change, the accommodation system fails to respond. The student is left as Nora described “in the dark”. This rigidity points to what Dolmage (2017) identifies as the underlying logic of the retrofit: “the goal is not to empower students to achieve with disability but to achieve around disability or against it, or in spite of it” (p. 70).

Accommodations are designed to bring the student closer to a normative standard of performance, not to question whether the standard is itself the problem. Extra time on an exam does not challenge the assumption that normative timed assessment constitutes a valid measure of knowledge; it simply allows the student to approximate the conditions under which a non-disabled person would write. The separate exam room does not challenge the assumption that all students should be assessed in the same format; it provides a spatial adjustment that enables the student to perform closer to that norm. In other words, the ableist norm remains undisturbed, and the institution remains unchanged. The adjustment is, as Dolmage (2017) argues, “highly temporary yet also relatively unimportant” within the broader institutional arena. In this way, the accommodation system functions precisely as a retrofit, a retrofitted solution, a modification applied after the fact to an environment that was never designed for the bodies and minds that now seek entry.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how students who identify as dyslexic experience academic accommodation systems in Canadian universities, and how those systems shape experiences of stigma, disclosure, identity, and belonging. Guided by an intersectional disability studies framework drawing on concepts of intersectional stigma, academic ableism, crip time, misfit, and retrofit, the study asked two questions: how does the academic accommodation system affect or influence the ways students with dyslexia experience their disability, and to what extent do students who identify as dyslexic feel the need to mask their symptoms or "pass" as non-dyslexic? Eight semi-structured interviews with students across Canadian universities provided the empirical basis for exploring these questions. This concluding chapter revisits what the study attempted to do, summarizes the central argument and key findings, acknowledges the limitations of the work, and identifies directions for future research.

This project was motivated by both personal experience and the observation that, despite rising numbers of students with dyslexia entering Canadian universities, relatively little research has examined how they experience the institutional systems designed to support them. Existing scholarship on disability stigma has largely focused on younger children or adults in non-educational settings, leaving a gap in our understanding of how stigma is produced, negotiated, and reproduced within higher education, particularly through accommodation processes themselves. Moreover, much of the existing disability research in higher education has been critiqued for centring a narrow demographic, what scholars have called white disability studies (Bailey & Mobley, 2019), and for treating disability as a singular axis of identity rather than one that intersects with race, gender, sexuality, class and other social identities.

This study responded to those gaps by centring the voices and experiences of students who identify as dyslexic across different post-secondary institutions and social locations. It situated their accounts within the broader Canadian disability policy framework, a fragmented system in which federal legislation signifies important shifts in how disability is conceptualized but does not directly govern the post-secondary institutions where students navigate accommodations. Provincial jurisdiction, institutional variation and uneven disability service office resources create the conditions under which students must disclose, document, and advocate for access.

The central argument of this thesis is that academic accommodation systems, while legally mandated and practically necessary, operate within and often reproduce ableist institutional norms. Accommodations are framed as mechanisms of inclusion and educational equity, yet the processes through which they are accessed can simultaneously produce stigma, require repeated acts of disclosure and self-advocacy, and reinforce dominant assumptions about normalcy, competence, and academic ability. From this perspective, experiences of stigma, identity negotiation, and emotional labour are not incidental side effects of the accommodation process but are produced through it, shaped by intersecting systems of ableism, racism, and gendered and class expectations embedded within higher education.

The theoretical framework provided the necessary tools/vocabulary for naming these intricate dynamics. Intersectional stigma showed how disability is never experienced in isolation but always alongside and through other identity positions. Academic ableism (ideal student) described how universities naturalized narrow standards of speed, fluency, and independence as markers of merit. Crip time captured how participants experienced and resisted normative temporal expectations that did not account for dyslexic identities. Misfit illuminated the

relational tension between participants' bodyminds and institutional environments built for a specific kind of learner. Retrofit revealed how accommodations function as after-the-fact adjustments that granted temporary access without transforming the underlying structures that produce exclusion.

The findings documented five interconnected themes. First, diagnosis, disclosure, and the accommodation processes were experienced as deeply intertwined. Diagnosis was often delayed, expensive, and emotionally draining. Disclosure was not a one-time event but a recurring, strategic act that students experienced differently across courses, professors, and institutional contexts. The accommodation process itself ranged from smooth and supportive to bureaucratically complex and emotionally draining, with graduate-level students reporting particularly thin or effectively absent supports.

Second, participants consistently described long histories of being treated as less intelligent or less capable because of dyslexia. Perceptions of intelligence were entangled with specific academic domains and fields, particularly mathematics and writing-intensive tasks. Some participants internalized deficit narratives over many years before encountering supportive figures or contexts that challenged those narratives. Others continued to limit their aspirations based on anticipated stigma and barriers.

Third, time, pace and workload were central to every account. The university was experienced and described as fast, dense, and deadline-driven. Extra time on exams, while essential, did not address the broader tempo of university life. Students developed elaborate planning and coping strategies but described these as consuming energy that could otherwise go towards learning and being healthy.

Fourth, relationships with professors, peers, and disability service staff decisively shaped whether formal accommodations translated into everyday access. Professors' stance ranged from collaborative to overtly dismissive. Peer dynamics in group work and assessment settings introduced visibility and assumptions about capability. Disability service office staff were often praised individually but described as operating within systems that were understaffed, underfunded, and procedurally complex.

Fifth, participants' identities as students with dyslexia evolved across their educational journeys. Their relationships with the label shifted in response to diagnosis, institutional encounters, and the presence or absence of community. Intersecting identities, including race, gender, sexuality, and class, shaped when and how dyslexia became visible, how others responded, and one's overall sense of belonging. Some participants moved towards open identification and active advocacy; others managed the label selectively or set it aside.

Across all five themes, a consistent pattern emerged: access was not guaranteed by the existence of an accommodation but was contingent on institutional conditions, relationships, and the ongoing labour of students to activate, manage, and defend their supports.

Returning to the study's research questions, the findings demonstrate that the accommodation system affects how students experience their disability not primarily through the accommodations themselves, but through the institutional conditions under which those accommodations are accessed, interpreted and implemented.

6.1 Limitations

This study is limited in scope. Eight interviews provide depth and nuance but cannot represent the full range of dyslexic students' experiences across Canadian universities. The sample, while diverse across race, gender, sexuality, class, and institutional contexts, included

more women than men and was concentrated in Ontario, Quebec, and Atlantic Canada. The experiences of students who chose not to disclose their dyslexia at all, and who therefore never engaged with accommodation systems, remain outside the reach of this study.

The research design captures retrospective accounts at a single point in time. A longitudinal approach would be better to illuminate how disclosure strategies, identity, and institutional relationships evolve across school semesters and degree transitions. Similarly, comparing and contrasting students' accounts with professors' interviews and disability service staff perspectives would provide a fuller picture of the ecology of access.

Several questions that emerged from the data cannot be fully explored within this project. How do accommodation experiences differ for students with co-occurring conditions such as ADHD, anxiety or autism alongside dyslexia? How do francophone bilingual students navigate accommodation systems designed primarily in English institutional contexts? How do mature or returning students experience systems built around modern-age undergraduates? And how do these experiences differ across different programs and institutions in different Canadian provinces? Each of these questions warrants dedicated inquiry.

6.2 Moving Forward

The findings point toward several directions for future research and practice. For research, there is a need for larger, multi-site studies that examine accommodation experiences across provinces, institutions, and program levels with particular attention to graduate students, who were among the most underserved in this study. Longitudinal designs would help establish and track the way students' relationships with diagnosis, disclosure, and identity shift over time and across transitions. Studies that pair student narratives with faculty and staff perspectives would help illuminate the institutional side of the dynamics participants described. Research that

centres on Indigenous, Black and Racialized students with learning disabilities is especially needed, given the intersection of patterns that emerged here and the historical limitations of white disability studies (Bailey & Mobley, 2019).

For practice, the accounts in this study suggest that the most critical improvements come not from adding more accommodations to the existing system but from redesigning the conditions under which learning happens. Participants consistently reported that when accommodations were respected and implemented, their experiences were smooth. These are not radical changes; they are design choices that institutions can make. At the same time, this study underscores that accommodation systems cannot be understood apart from the broader structures of ableism, racism, and inequality in which they operate. Students did not simply navigate bureaucratic systems; they navigated systems that reflected and reproduced assumptions about who belongs in the university, what a competent student looks like, and whose way of reading, writing, and thinking count as legitimate and normal. Any effort to improve accommodation practices must reckon with and understand these deeper structures, or risk, as Dolmage (2017) warns, retrofitting inclusion onto an otherwise vast exclusionary system.

6.3 Final reflection

This project began from a place of personal and intellectual curiosity, as a graduate student with a learning disability who has navigated these systems. It ends with a clearer picture of what that navigation entails for a small but diverse group of students, and with the conviction that their accounts deserve to be taken seriously, not as individual stories of struggle and resilience, but as evidence of how institutions produce the very barriers they claim to remove. The students in the study were not asking for special treatment. They were asking for conditions

under which they could learn. That distinction, between exception and access, between retrofit and design, is at the heart of what this thesis has tried to show.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Semi-structured Interview Guide:

*Give a brief overview/description of the proposed research. Explain/State why they are chosen study population — There is a lack of research on the social experiences of students with dyslexia in Canadian universities — how the accommodation system influences/affects how students with dyslexia experience the label of being learning disabled, including the stigma that might accompany such labelling. There is also a lack of research focusing on the unique experiences that might be mediated by one's gender or racial experiences. Researching this could improve experiences (with staff, their professors, and fellow students) for students who identify as dyslexic in higher education and offer a more nuanced perspective that is grounded in people's different social locations (gender, race, class).

*Thank them for participating—consent forms and reminders throughout. Ask them if they have any questions before starting, and then ask if they are okay with starting (including starting/beginning recording and taking notes). *

Confirm they are a current student or graduated from a Canadian university within the past five years (2020 cutoff)

1. What is your history/background of Dyslexia?
    a) When were you first aware (or diagnosed if applicable)

b) Describe to me what it was like (emotions/feelings) when you found/figured out you had dyslexia. How did you react?

c) Thinking back, do you feel that having dyslexia influenced/affected your childhood/upbringing?

d) How would you describe your experiences in (primary, secondary) school? Did these experiences affect your interest in pursuing higher education? If so, how?

e) Are you familiar with the form of dyslexia you were diagnosed with (Dysnemkinesia/dysgraphia (motor), Dysphonesia (auditory), or Dyseidesia (visual)? Do you have more than one type? A combination? If so, which ones?

2. Describe your lived experience as a student who identifies as dyslexic in university.

a) Do you identify as dyslexic? Why or why not?

b) How do you think people perceive you? Describe.

c) If others know, how do you envisage others react to your dyslexia?

d) Do you feel that it is easy to get along with others? Do you think/feel people like you?

e) What have/were your experiences been with peers/faculty/staff? Describe.

f) Has dyslexia influenced/affected your identity? If so, in what ways?

3. Has being a student who identifies as dyslexic (or has dyslexia) influenced/affected your university experience? If so, how? In what ways?

(If they are finding it difficult to understand, I will refer to areas that shape all students' university experience):

a) Sense of belonging

b) Confidence

c) Keeping up with coursework (deadlines, assignments, and exams)

d) Getting along with peers, professors, faculty, and staff (administrative and accommodation)

e) Participating/engaging in discussion/dialogue (inside and outside of class)

1. Can you tell me about your own experiences with academic accommodations at university? What types of accommodations and supports have been/were offered to you since starting university? Have these accommodations positively or negatively influenced your university experience (thus far)? How so, and which accommodations/supports?

2. What are your thoughts on the need to voluntarily disclose your status as a student with dyslexia?

3. Do you have another identity (E.g., gender (non-binary), ethnic, racial, religious, subcultural) that you think is significant concerning your experiences as a student who identifies as dyslexic? If so, which and in what ways?

4. Are there aspects of dyslexia you try/tried to manage or control at university? If so, what? To what extent? Have you ever had to try to hide your dyslexia?

An example would be someone with dyslexia who avoids taking part in class discussions because of wording difficulties (or reading aloud) and expressing ideas fluently or who does not want to write on the chalkboard in front of the class because of writing difficulties like poor handwriting, spelling mistakes, writing in all capital letters, or mixing capital letters within words, etc.

a) Are/were there specific occasions/situations when/where you do or don't try to manage/control these characteristics?

b) Have you heard of the term impression management (a form of identity management)?

6. Do you believe or feel there is a stigma towards dyslexia, and in what ways? (I will ask for specific examples that make them feel this way)

7. Do you think/feel that the accommodation system influences/affects stigma experiences as a student who identifies as dyslexic? How?

Potential follow-up:

1. I sincerely thank you for answering my questions and sharing your experiences. How did it feel to share this personal information with a person you just met?
2. Is there anything else that you wish to include? Are there any other personal experiences that you thought of during or after the interview but did not get the opportunity to share?

Consent Form

Title of the study: I Don't Suffer from Dyslexia, I Suffer from Other People: A Study on Students with Dyslexia and Stigma Experiences in Canadian Universities

Marcus Rao

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613-562-5800(2026)

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned Master's Thesis research study conducted by Marcus Rao under the supervision of Dr. Michael Orsini.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to understand the lived experience of students with dyslexia and how (if) the academic accommodation system at universities affects/influences their experiences of stigma. (How university students who identify as dyslexic experience the label of being learning disabled).

Participation: My participation will consist of a one-on-one semi-structured interview - some questions to be determined a priori while others will arise during the interview. During interviews, I will be asked to describe my lived experiences at university as a student who identifies as dyslexic. What have my experiences (and interactions) been with academic accommodation centres, with professors, and with fellow students? What my experiences have been with help-seeking for dyslexia? Select questions will also focus on exploring the experiences that might be mediated by one's racial, gender and class experiences. The interview will occur at whatever time is convenient for participants and will last approximately 1 hour; however, the duration/length of the interview will vary. Interviews will be audio recorded.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer personal information and discuss sensitive topics, and this may cause me to feel psychological or emotional discomfort when describing experiences as a student who identifies as dyslexic. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks, such as refusing to answer or moving to a different question, pausing/taking a break, or withdrawing from the interview. All

these risks will be minimized without fear of reprisal or ill-treatment. Identities will not be revealed, and I will be notified and directed towards potential resources (support services on and off campus).

Benefits: My participation in this study will provide me the opportunity to share hidden truths about experiences of stigma and the ways in which the academic accommodation system at Canadian universities has affected/influenced their experiences as a student who identifies as dyslexic. Rather than allowing non-labelled researchers and practitioners to drive agendas regarding accommodations, this study starts from the premise that knowledge about dyslexia can be enriched by allowing students who identify as dyslexic to share their unique experiences. Participants can challenge dominant power structures and combat traditional barriers that would otherwise censor their voices. Participation can be empowering, helping one actively contribute to positive change in attitudes and practices surrounding dyslexia and higher education. In light of this, the research offers a more nuanced perspective that is grounded in people's social locations (gender, race, class). By studying dyslexia through the lens of sociology and critical disability studies, we can uncover the social nature of such phenomena and offer an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of students with dyslexia and the role/relevance of stigma and labelling. We can analyze the ways in which dyslexia is socially constructed and stigmatized in academia, and, in turn, reduce the stigma these students might experience.

Confidentiality and Privacy: I have received assurance from the researchers that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for understanding the experiences of students who identify as dyslexic and how (if) the

academic accommodation system at universities affects/influences their experiences of stigma. I understand that the contents will be used only to explore and understand the experiences of students who identify as dyslexic and that my identity will be protected. Confidentiality and anonymity will be guaranteed using pseudonyms and password-secure data protection software. All identifying information will be removed from the data (e.g., name of the university, names, locations and dates that may be linked to a participant's life).

In order to minimize the risk of security breaches and to help ensure my confidentiality, it is recommended that I use standard safety measures, such as signing out of my account, closing my browser, and locking my device when I am no longer using it/when I have completed the study.

Conservation of Data: The data collected (names, emails, and current university or university that they graduated from), both hard copy and electronic data: including audio recordings, researchers' notes, and consent forms, will be kept in a secure manner. Hard copies and research instruments will be secured using two layers of physical safeguards: locked in a secure cabinet in a locked office at the researcher's home (both of which no one else has access to). Electronic data will be kept on a password-protected computer. An electronic copy of the data will be kept on a USB key in a locked cabinet at the researcher's home. This data will be anonymized and password-protected. The data will be retained/conserved for five years post-research project completion (using the same safeguards as during the course of the study).

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate, and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering

any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be removed from the dataset and not used in the study.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or their supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or telephone (613-562-5387).

It is recommended that I (*keep/print/save*) a copy of this consent form for my records.

If signed consent is sought:

Acceptance: By signing my name below, I agree to participate in this research study.

Participant's name:

Participants signature:

Date:

Researcher's name:

Researcher's signature:

Date: