The lived experience of adults with dyslexia:
An exploration of the perceptions of their educational experiences

This thesis is presented for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

From

Murdoch University

By

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2010
I, Kathleen Tanner, declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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June, 2010
Abstract

This thesis examines the life choices of a small cohort of adults with dyslexia. In particular, it focuses on the influence of their educational experiences (primary, secondary and post-secondary) on their understanding of their dyslexia and how this knowledge assisted them in understanding their role within a society that places high value on strong literacy skills.

Each of the participants in this study had previously completed a customised course for adults with dyslexia developed by TAFEWA. Most were diagnosed as having dyslexia in adulthood, a small number as part of the process that led to their enrolment in the TAFE course. The researcher was both a lecturer in that program and played a critical role in designing a number of core units, particularly the Understanding and Managing Dyslexia unit from which participants in this study were drawn.

The study shows how the participants benefited from their participation in this course as it their enhanced understanding of dyslexia. This enhanced understanding facilitated positively reframing of their attitudes towards their dyslexia and society’s attitudes to people who display limited literacy skills. Prior to the course, the participants, who ranged in age from early 20s to 60+, believed that society was setting them up to fail.

Traditionally dyslexia has been interpreted through a medical-scientific lens. This study adopts a different approach that is holistic in focus, is situated within an interpretivist paradigm and draws from a range of methodologies, including phenomenology, feminist theory and narrative inquiry to develop a series of case
studies that draw individual experiences together. A significant feature of the thesis is
the adoption of an ecological framework developed from Urie Bronfenbrenner’s
(1979) social ecology theories of human development and in particular his Person,
Process, Context and Time (PPCT) process (1992), to present individual participants
and analyse their life experiences. The time component, in particular, is important in
the context of lived experience.

The analysis is based on the life narratives of 10 individuals that focus on their
educational experiences and the influence this had on their life choices. Data
collection involved a series of one-on-one semi-structured conversations and a face-
to-face focus group.

This thesis goes beyond the work of Bronfenbrenner to reinterpret the ecological
model and presents an alternate conceptual framework in which society is likened to a
river flowing across a landscape. The individuals are a key part of the river alongside
the micro and exo systems. The landscape represents the macrosystem and the
framework within which the river flows. In a human context this equates to the
relationship of the individual to society and the significance of change linked to the
passing of time.

A key argument is that the lenses through which dyslexia is viewed directly influence
the way people with dyslexia are perceived in a wider societal context. The language
used and the emphasis in a societal context placed on literacy skills, not only limits,
but also marginalises and excludes those with literacy difficulties. Thus the thesis
moves beyond the medical /scientific framework within which the concept of dyslexia
is traditionally viewed. Whatever dyslexia is or is not, it is clear there exists a group
of people for whom day-to-day living in a literacy-based society presents unique
challenges and the present study investigates how they have experienced these challenges.
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Participant 5: Kerrie
Participant 6: Robert
Participant 7: Riley
Participant 8: Sam
Participant 9: Christine
Participant 10: Sarah

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Year completed high school
Post secondary education information (not including TAFE dyslexia course)

Perceptions of the Educational Setting as a System or Institution

Repeating year levels
Perceptions of Individuals (Teachers and Peers) within the Educational Setting

Teaching characteristics

Perceived responses to identification of strengths and difficulties during primary and secondary years

Referred the student to a support staff or remedial group or attempted support in the classroom context

Ignored or appeared oblivious to participants' needs

Perceptions of teacher responses in an adult learning context

Referred participant to Dyslexia course

Referred to other courses/forms of support

Attempted to support and adjust teaching and learning linked to identified job-related qualities

Non-supportive

Bullying

Peer Responses

Primary and secondary years

Importance of peers

Bullying

Name calling

Victimisation and public humiliation

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Withdrawal

Compensatory responses

Negative self-efficacy

Out of individual participant's control

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(before Dyslexia Course)

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Acknowledgements

There are many people who have provided me with enormous support, guidance, reassurance, love and laughter during my thesis journey. The following people however, deserve special recognition.

To those who provided the inspiration and renewed my passion in teaching and learning –

Every amazing student that I have had the privilege of teaching as a result of the dyslexia course at TAFE. In particular, to the 10 inspirational people who have provided the wealth of information for this thesis.

To those who guided the process -

My supervisors Susan McKenzie and Judy MacCallum who have made me appreciate the term academic rigor and showed me ways to make connections I couldn’t see.

To those colleagues who have kept me going and supported my journey.

Not just colleagues, but more importantly friends - Kay Thurstans from TAFEWA and Dr Roselyn Dixon from UOW.

To the following friends and family who put up with me no matter what mood I was in.

Special thanks to Christine, Megan and Alison who, on my numerous trips to Perth to collect data, would sacrifice their beds and put up with my bad jokes! Also to Paul and Loreta for your support and sustenance.

Also to Faye, Steve, Bella and Rowey who not only looked after my physical health but celebrated every ‘milestone’ of my intellectual health no matter how small.

To the four most important people in my life.

Without their love and support this journey may never have seen the light at the end of the tunnel. To my husband and friend Stephen, your love and support has been unending and you’re not too bad as a proof reader either!!! To my children, Emilija - who's been on this journey once before, but this time had to put up with her Facebook time being interrupted, and Hamish – whose speed at growing up inspired me to finish this faster than intended. Yes, Hamish – it’s finished! And of course, to Lucy, who would turn 11 this year.

Finally I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father the late Bruno Pecats whose never-ending desire to learn and 'better himself' has been an enormous inspiration for my life choices. He also made a wonderful choice of a life partner - Norma Pecats - to whom I am forever indebted for nurturing my understanding of diversity and acceptance.