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It’s Not All Black and White:
The transition of students with dyslexia into the first year of university study.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of Master of Education (Adult) at Massey University (Manawatu) New Zealand

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"It’s Not All Black & White" by Claire, September 2009
Abstract

This thesis is a qualitative study using constructivist grounded theory of the learning experiences of four students at one university in New Zealand. The students, ranging in age from 18 to 22 years, identify as being dyslexic. It is an exploration of the ways in which dyslexia has affected their prior educational experiences, their decision making about future study, and their transition into the first year of university study. The ways in which students frame their understanding of dyslexia and how this affects their approach to learning at university are investigated.

This thesis uses an interpretivist methodology and the grounded theory methods of Charmaz (2006). The thesis starts with an outline of the epistemological basis for the research, followed by a discussion of the place of literature in grounded theory methods, use of the literature in this study and a review of the literature. The methodological basis and methods used in this study are then presented.

The presentation of the participants’ interpretation of their experiences of learning with dyslexia and transition to university are given as individual synopses and through categories which emerged from the data. The main findings are presented in the discussion using a tentative model based on four stages of discovery, acceptance of dyslexia, and learning with dyslexia which frame participants’ experiences and decision making. Two factors of importance overlying the model are: the discourse of dyslexia presented to and held by the student, and the degree to which the students are able to self advocate.

The absence of a common understanding of dyslexia has affected the students’ self confidence, and ability to advocate at university level. The academic resilience, academic buoyancy, and determination of these students to succeed and be accepted as capable learners, despite educational barriers, is related to the recognition of dyslexia by the student and society, and the nature of support provided in earlier education. The findings in this thesis provide a basis for further understanding of the transition to university for students who have struggled in high school, and for a wider acceptance of the varied ways in which learning differences can be supported in education.
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Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................. i
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ iii
Table of Contents ........................................................................................................ v
List of Figures ................................................................................................................ ix
Photographs .................................................................................................................. x

INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Introduction .......................................................................................................... 1
  1.2 Why This Study? .................................................................................................... 3
  1.3 The New Zealand Context .................................................................................... 5
  1.4 Research Aims ...................................................................................................... 7
  1.5 The Research Questions ....................................................................................... 7
  1.6 Outline of Thesis .................................................................................................. 8

THE LITERATURE .................................................................................. 9
  2.1 The Role of Literature in Grounded Theory ......................................................... 9
  2.2 Transition to Tertiary Study ................................................................................ 11
  2.3 Experiences of First Year Students in the Transition to Tertiary Study ............. 14
  2.4 Discourses of Dyslexia........................................................................................ 18

  2.5 Reviewing the Literature on Students with Dyslexia in the Transition to
  Tertiary Study ............................................................................................................ 22

  2.6 Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 26
# METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Introduction</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Epistemology</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Rational for Choice of Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded Theory</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructivist Grounded Theory</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Research Focus</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Research Process</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 Research Tools</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Recording and Transcription</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflections on the Data Gathering Process of Interviews</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 Method of Data Analysis</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent Themes Using Grounded Theory</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of Method</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8 Ethical Considerations</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Nature of Participants and Informed Consent</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy and Confidentiality</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Harm to Participants</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Approval</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.9 Conclusion</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# FINDINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Introduction</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Four Distinctly Different Learning Experiences</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack’s Synopsis</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George’s Synopsis</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire’s Synopsis</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane’s Synopsis</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Category – Cognitive Characteristics of Dyslexia</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Category – Personal Awareness of Dyslexia and Strategies for Action</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Category – Personal Characteristics and Emotional Effects of Dyslexia</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.6 Category – Discourses of Dyslexia .......................................................... 68
4.7 Category – Prior Learning Experiences ...................................................... 70
4.8 Category – Decision Making .................................................................. 72
4.9 Category – Expectations of University ...................................................... 74
4.10 Category – Transition to University ......................................................... 75
4.11 Conclusion ......................................................................................... 78

DISCUSSION ............................................................................................... 79
5.1 Introducing the Model ........................................................................... 79
5.2 Recognition .......................................................................................... 81
5.3 Reconciliation ...................................................................................... 82
5.4 Determination ....................................................................................... 84
5.5 Academic Resilience and Academic Buoyancy ....................................... 85
5.6 Self Advocacy ...................................................................................... 87
5.7 Discourse of Dyslexia .......................................................................... 90
5.8 The Transition Experience .................................................................. 93
5.9 Conclusion .......................................................................................... 94

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION ........................................... 96
6.1 Introduction .......................................................................................... 96
6.2 Conclusions from this Study .................................................................. 96
6.3 Wider Implications for Consideration ................................................... 98
6.4 Further Research ................................................................................ 99
Concluding Comments ............................................................................. 99

APPENDICES ............................................................................................ 101
Appendix A: Ethics Approval ..................................................................... 102
Appendix B: Type of Questions that may be asked in the Interviews .......... 103
Appendix C: British Dyslexia Association Checklist .................................... 104
Appendix D: An Example of the Relationship between the Transcript, Coding,
Categories and Research Questions ......................................................... 105
Appendix E: Information Sheet .................................................................. 106
Appendix F: Consent Form ........................................................................ 109

REFERENCES .......................................................................................... 111
List of Figures

Figure 2.1  Place of the Literature in this Study .................................................. 10
Figure 2.2  Student Centred Model of Success (after Stage & Hossler, 1989, in Braxton, 2000) .......................................................... 13
Figure 2.3  Socio-cultural Model of Transition from Secondary to Tertiary Education (after Herrington, 2001b) .................................................. 13
Figure 3.1  Comparisons and Contrasts of Grounded Theory (after Charmaz, 2006, p. 141) .......................................................... 32
Figure 3.2  Participants’ Details ............................................................................. 35
Figure 3.3  The Processes Involved in Reading Transcripts, Coding, Identifying Categories, and Themes ................................................. 41
Figure 3.4  Categories Derived from Grouping the Line-by-Line Codes ............... 43
Figure 3.5  Relationship between Emerging Themes, Categories and the Model ......................................................................................... 44
Figure 4.1  Self Reported Characteristics of Dyslexia Affecting Day to Day Living ......................................................................................... 62
Figure 5.1  A Tentative Model of the Stages Important in the Transition to University for Students with Dyslexia in New Zealand .................... 80
Photographs

Frontispiece: "It’s Not All Black & White" by Claire, September 2009

Photo 1: Surrounded by Words – Jane
Photo 2: “The weight of literacy on your shoulders” – Jane’s portfolio
Photo 3: The Growing Weight of Words – Jane
Photo 4: Almost at Breaking Point - Jane