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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  
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## **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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## 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