

Diverse Learning and the challenge of Inclusive Practices in Higher Education: An Australian Self-Study Action research exemplar of a Student with Dyslexia

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The educational journey of a higher education student with dyslexia and related health issues has complexities. In order to explore the educational practices involved with diverse learning, a self-study action research model, where the researcher also became an active participant, was used. Researcher and co-researcher met irregularly over a period of two and a half years. Their collaborative relationship explored learning difficulties, institutional habitus and health issues, and enacted remedial learning methods that enhanced the student's successful educational progress. The research revealed the need for higher education institutions, educators and governments to recognise and understand more comprehensively the complexity of diverse learner vulnerability. An inclusive educational policy and practice, which recognises and supports 'at risk students', should be supplemented by comprehensive teacher training in diverse learning styles. Self-study action research is an appropriate professional development approach that could enhance teacher understanding and practice within an inclusive curriculum.

Keywords: *Dyslexia; Auditory processing; Receptive listening; Expressive Listening; Affect regulation; Self-regulation*

Introduction

The experiences of a mature age female undergraduate student with diverse learning, in particular dyslexia and accompanying health issues are presented. The focus is in on the crisis points endured, the struggle to obtain effective assistance, and the collaborative support enacted through a self-study action research (SSAR) approach.

The word dyslexia comes from the Greek words 'dys', meaning difficult, and 'lexia', meaning speech ('dyslexia', 1984). From Tomatis (1978) comes a deeper meaning:

"The Latin word for "to read" ("legere", as in lecture), goes back to the ancient meaning "to harvest or gather through the ear". Similar to the Greek "lexis" with the variant of "duslectos" which evokes with even great clarity a speaking disability ..." (p.59)

Research studies have identified the common dyslexic features that hamper learning. These include inconsistent Auditory Processing (AP) (Corriveau, Goswami, and Thomson 2010), linguistics issues (Tomatis 1996), differing attention span (Koch and Tsuchiya.N 2006, Sperling et al. 2005) and cognitive deficits such as reduced information processing and reduced working memory capacity (Price 2006). People with dyslexia have more variable auditory brain stem responses to speech (Hornickel et al. 2011).

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In Australia, at the commencement of higher education studies, self-report data is asked of students in relation to having a disability. However, while Australian Universities collect these type of statistics, dyslexia is not identified as a discreet category but rather under the category 'other'. Therefore, recognition of dyslexia and consequent specialist help is often unavailable because of the lack of significance of this category. Particularly in higher education, when students are unsupported and have hidden learning and health issues, vulnerability to stress, and impacts on general health can occur (Robotham and Julian 2006) an impact upon academic achievement. The complexity of these interacting factors creates a challenging learning and teaching context as exemplified in this research. Consistent with SSAR, the use of 'I' in the texts refers to the primary researcher; the exemplar is referred to as the co-researcher

Context

The elusiveness of Dyslexia

Research about Dyslexia is contradictory particularly in relation to AP. White et al. (2006) showed how children with dyslexia could have concurrent sensory processing issues even whilst showing excellent cognition and vocabularies. Yet other researchers reject the notion of the presence of low-level AP (Nicolson and Fawcett 2006). It is suggested that a low level of AP may depend on the contribution of more than one factor; for example the learning environment, individual stress level, or even the newness of the task being undertaken?

An often cited example of AP difficulty is the auditory visual disturbance of reversals in writing b and d. This is observed in children with dyslexia and may manifest in adulthood when they are confronted with unfamiliar letters and words (Fidler and Everatt 2012). On an emotional level this may cause hesitation, feeling unsure and doubt.

As a result, if the person is reading, they may risk losing comprehension and context. The earlier learned compensatory strategy may present in adulthood as excessive re-reading of texts.

Australian and United Kingdom context

The first Australian National Dyslexia Forum (Colheart et al. 2010), which brought many stakeholders together, resulted in a report tabled in Federal Parliament: *Helping people with dyslexia: A national action agenda*. A government response, agreed with many of the recommendations, but was unprepared to change funding arrangements (The Australian Government response to recommendations of the Dyslexia Working Party Report 'Helping people with dyslexia: a national action agenda', 2012).

Since the report, community awareness has gathered momentum with the development of new support and advocacy group websites such as *brisbanekids*, *defydyslexia* and the Australian Dyslexia Association (ADA). Although awareness of the issues has improved, redesigning individual education legislation in every state and territory to accommodate federal changes is not yet complete. ADA, advocating support and education, has set up training protocols to help teachers understand dyslexia. This activity, helped by a newspaper article supporting the report (Patty 2010), has resulted in increased use of the word 'dyslexia' by teachers and parents.

Regardless of these developments funding through the federal Disability Discrimination Act (1992) (DDA) remains non-specific to dyslexia; therefore schools are not obliged to take action. Without school policy changes, the social learning environment will remain unchanged. Dyslexia as a topic is cited in more formal publications: for example, a discussion by a lead researcher (Firth 2010) on 'dyslexic friendly' schools, reported in a peak body publication, influenced the organisation of successful Australian wide seminars and the first Queensland state school to make this policy (Stoneley 2012).

In contrast higher education in the UK accepts dyslexia as an appropriate and desirable label that is understood to indicate a generalised learning style needing specialised help. Dyslexia in this way represents a wider neuro-diverse cohort of students (Pollak 2009, Armstrong 2010). Such a cohort, still unacknowledged in Australia, is placed in the 'Other' group within the national disability statistics of higher education.

Mature age students in higher education, whilst not subject to targeted funding, are an increasing cohort. Along with this, is an increase in higher degree students with dyslexia (Tops 2012). The president of The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) discussing a pending report, said mature age students would show as 'being undervalued, underfunded, and excluded from student life' (Woodward 2012, 1). As well, being a student with dyslexia means no acknowledgement in education policies despite long-term excellent Australian research (Colheart, Patterson, and Marshall 1980).

Dyslexia and Auditory Processing

Good AP examples include the immediate understanding of verbal instructions without need to repeat and the mastery of any given literacy program (Leopold 2009). People with dyslexia can have poor AP. Malloch and Trevarthen (2009) suggested that both receptive and expressive listening can be affected by limited voice-ear control and audio laterality, yet people may think when a person is articulate

they cannot be dyslexic (J Sturt, Personal Communication May 2008).

The central notion behind the integration model of the two brain hemispheres is the emotional right brain and the language left brain (Schore 2009), is that any change in aspects of AP effects both affect and self-regulation. When the emotional right brain is dominating, the associated symptoms (e.g. anxiety, and/or dissociation) are more likely to be classified as 'mental' (Helen and Immordino-Yang 2011). Excessive reading can cause sensory processing stress, leading to obsessive behaviours that reduce efficiency and efficacy (Mugnaini et al. 2009).

To support and develop student learning processes for those identified with dyslexia, the following questions were considered: Were the affect regulatory aspects of AP an ongoing issue? Were the attributes of expressive and receptive listening under-used? Were reading aloud and spelling, considered to be practices involving auditory discrimination, difficult for a person with dyslexia? Research by Patten (2011) suggested that understanding the somatic nature of emotions (affect regulation), listening, and engaging students in their learning process would improve learning outcomes for all students. How students learn—their individual learning style—crosses cultural boundaries (Simy and Kolb 2008).

Learning styles that may partly develop from compensatory strategies aimed at managing early schooling learning issues commonly slow down learning (Davis 1994). Under pressure in an unfamiliar learning environment, past strategies may fail, leading to anxiety and stress in adults who may also have other hidden health issues, the significance of which may be unrecognised. The result could be constantly feeling overwhelmed and avoiding certain tasks.

Although there are many aspects to AP, learning to listen to oneself using relationship methods is fundamental to improving the functional aspects of learning and health (Porges 2003, Tomatis 2005). For example, a lack of confidence in speaking and taking a proactive role in the classroom can create a level of vulnerability, social isolation and alienation, such as occurs for Indigenous students and those studying English as a second language (Sawir 2005). A build-up of vulnerability can result in obsessive behaviours and anxieties, which could be classified by student services as a mental health issue, whereas the root cause can be ineffective listening and learning strategies (Khan et al. 2011).

Methodology and Methods

The research was theoretically informed by three major theoretical perspectives. Firstly listening theories, two in particular; auditory processing (Tomatis, 1996) and socio-cultural relational based on the work of (Gilligan 1981), Gilligan et al. (2006) and (Kiegelmann and Gilligan 2009). Secondly, from a biological perspective, self-regulation (Carroll 2009, de Ridder and de Wit 2006) and thirdly critical education (Freire 1970)

Within a higher education context and utilising Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb 1984) a self-study action research (SSAR) model was adopted. The approach utilised a structure that would provide support and empowerment, as that seen previously in the pioneering work of Freire (1970). As critical education theory demonstrates, the intention was to enhance learning and not just to 'diagnose' a situation. This action research framework enabled the inclusion of reflection on the self as researcher and practitioner with emphasis on the experiences, understandings

and knowledge that the researcher/practitioner brought to the study, aiming to improve and/or reframe practice (Feldman, Paugh, and Mills 2004). This method has been predominantly utilised in researching teaching practice where the focus is on understanding and problematising educational approaches.

The value of self-study in teacher research has gained recognition in higher education research (Toit 2012, Loughran 2009), and action research projects have explored atypical learners (Colarossi et al. 2011), adults with disabilities (Rule and Modipa 2012), and higher education researchers in collaboration with teachers of college students with learning difficulties (Forey, Firkins, and Sengupta 2012). Historically there have been a variety of approaches to SSAR, such as interviewing, co/autoethnography, multiple site self-study, arts-based voice work and collaborative participatory methodologies (Lasson, Galman, and Kosnik 2009).

The type of self-study action research applied was a variation of that developed by Whitehead (1988) who challenged the epistemology of education research by shifting the emphasis from the social field of action inquiry to a living process by asking the question 'What can I do to improve practice'? Further, Mc Niff and Whitehead (2009) developed an understandable theoretical and practical framework and expanded on the earlier ideas of the use of self as researcher/practitioner and particularly in the use of the validity criteria, authenticity and transparency (McNiff 2009).

The learning methods implemented in the learning cycles, (Figure 1) were regarded as able to support a change in self-understanding and research reflexivity for the researcher, concurrently with understanding and self-management of individual learning for the co-researcher.

Figure 1

To begin to dynamically develop a collaborative support model using an action research framework, the label 'dyslexia' was used to invite co-researchers to meetings designed to explore a positive perspective of dyslexia as a talent, as proposed by West (1991) and Davis (1994).

The Listening checklist (Madaule 1994) was used to provide a structured approach to enable a two-way reflection process on the themes of the checklist. As a holistic auditory processing tool, it covered both receptive and expressive listening, motor skills, social adjustment, level of energy, developmental and environmental history and foreign languages (Madaule 1993).

The research was also theoretically informed by the listening guide (Gilligan et al. 2006), a relational dynamic system of analysing data which helped to establish the difference and value of tangible and intangible reflexivity processes. I-poems (Gilligan et al. 2006) as a form of intangible reflexivity, allowed blocked emotions to be revealed and understood.

I-poems are created by taking the subject 'I', and the following word, to create a focussed poem. In applying this analytical method both researcher and co-researcher reached new levels of understanding of texts and concepts; resulting in a richer more transparent form of analysis and the revealing of issues which would have previously remained excluded, unseen or abstract.

Other learning methods utilised in this exemplar were reading aloud, using the 'hand held microphone' achieved by placing the right hand in front of the mouth, reflexive conversations and meta-reflections. In this research, combining SSAR

and the listening guide utilised the relational and cognitive issues that presented and brought depth and engagement of both co-researcher and the practitioner researcher.

Using creative methods that emphasise language, practices and form can: accommodate changing emotions, help explain complexity and develop knowledge (Black 2011). Self-study action research legitimised the use of these creative methods as both preparations for writing up the co-researcher story and for the interpretation from four perspectives: clinical (health), educative, social and psychological.

Consistent with the notions of transparency and authenticity of SSAR, Figure 1 demonstrates the contextual influences on this research. In particular, the consideration of the personal perspectives and values of the researcher and co-researcher influenced research credibility. Pearce (2008) applied her personal stories from childhood schooling to demonstrate how remembered values and learning were still present in adulthood. In a new collaboration Pearce, Down, and Moore (2008) cited Bourdieu's notion of habitus as a framework to describe and map the dynamic interactions between any objective structures, such as educational institutions, with personal experience and histories, for example students with dyslexia. They then described how 'acquired' habitus is on-going, shaped and modified (Pearce, Down, and Moore 2008, 4). As my history forms part of the dynamic that shapes values, taking into account the notion of habitus fitted well with the research design. The research was approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee (ECN-05-147). The following explores the learning journey of a co-researcher with dyslexia. The pseudonym Supa has been chosen to maintain confidentiality.

Exemplar: a long term support and helping story

Supa and I met together for twenty meetings over a period of two and a half years. Consequent to the diagnosis of dyslexia of her children, Supa's own dyslexia was finally also confirmed. As undergraduate mature-aged student with previously acquired training in professional group facilitation in personal development, Supa experienced learning and health issues such as a metabolic problem and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Her story highlighted an evolving mutual understanding of where her learning and health issues intertwined, hindering progress in her studies.

Over the two and a half years of interacting together, the focus changed from initial mistrust to one of a trusting working relationship within a context of awareness of the complexities of dyslexia, trauma and re-traumatisation. To help establish trust, we shared common history, identified previous study, and commenced a progressive understanding of our individual learning styles (Exley 2003).

Supa's experience of the 1st year of her study was characterised by a number of obstacles and difficulties: a traumatic experiential learning environment, a lack of quality learning support, and the general impact of her dyslexia on her progress. Then in the second year of her studies, the co-researcher interactions focussed on strategies to deal with her specific learning issues as it has become apparent that her health issues were triggered by the shock and trauma of failing units of study. In the 3rd year of her study she had a substantial exam failure and shared with me that for over a year staff had not returned or provided feedback on a number of assignments. At that stage she sought help from the University disability services, primarily for assistance with her dyslexia.

The focus, however, became her previous diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), rather than her learning needs. This highlights an inconsistency between student learning assistance with an educational emphasis, and the disability health service with a medical emphasis. Supa knew she was a person with dyslexia, which she believed affected only her writing. By this time our process was a co-researcher to co-researcher relationship, sharing in a synchronistic way - simultaneously learning and acting.

Supa's story focused on the context (the habitus of higher education), the vulnerability of studying with a pre-existing background of chronic health issues, and the institute's perception and action when seeking help for her dyslexia late in her studies.

The auditory processing dyslexia link

A two-way reflection was structured using the Listening checklist to explore the process of conceptual understanding of words. Supa believed her trouble saying certain words had their emotional origins from her father helping with spelling in primary school. Her example: 'refrigerator'. She explained how he would: '... spell the word for me! and by the time I [said] "re" and ... "yes"— by the time I get to the third [letter] he would yell at me – absolutely yells at me – and I would go – freeze'!! This traumatic experience exacerbated the (dis)integration of her right/left auditory neural pathways (Schoe 2009) – leaving her bodymind programmed that spelling out words can be threatening. While she could say 'fridge' it took her one year to learn to say and spell the full word.

Her compensatory strategy was to write down the word slowly and check it. She knew the word was un-mastered as she could miss the sound of any part: middle, beginning or end. She used this strategy when asking a person to spell their surname. After three attempts to spell it she would stop, as she did not want the person to become frustrated with her. When learning Anatomy her strategy failed did not bring success and she had to repeat the exam. The complexity of her compensatory strategies are shown in the following reflection through [missing words] and (excess words): 'I was stuck in my, my, my way of verbalising, my way of writing and (all that sort of thing) and you just [] succinct...' (Supa 16 2010). Missing and excess words show a functional challenge to her self-listening; the struggle to find the correct words through her brain hemispheric lateral stress (Schoe 2009).

Reflection

Rote learning words, arising from an early emotional incident, continued to trigger Supa to either freeze or have 'a blank feeling' in her head. Such symptoms, common sensations after a startle or shock, manifest in diverse ways in a different habitus, leading to accumulated stress and sometimes exacerbating mental health issues. When the person does not perceive the nuance of the sounds of particular words; parts of the words are not heard, such words must be consciously thought about which delays reading automatically. As stress accumulates, due to such a process, mistakes grow and create confusion. I gained valuable insight into the importance of the integration of both auditory and visual processing for improvement in spelling and comprehension which is consistent with the finding of (White et al. 2006).

A deeper understanding of the affect issues through I-poem use

The use of the Listening Guide (Kiegelmann and Gilligan 2009) enabled a focus on the intangible (affect) aspects of learning. Supa experienced a misunderstanding of the set essay criteria which resulted in a writing failure. Her self-confidence tumbled and she was unable to unblock her writing to start the next assignment. She said she had consciously read the criteria but stated: 'I get confused I haven't learned it properly yet. I have it but I haven't got it.' Feeling confused by this statement I made the above one line sentence into an I-poem, which is one of the four elements of the listening guide. As an I-poem, her statement above becomes:

I get
I haven't
I have
I haven't

When I read this I-poem back to her, she realised she needed a deeper understanding of the concepts in the essay criteria. The discussion explored her surface understanding of the criteria. We moved to a new stage and quality of facilitation and through this action learning process, Supa was encouraged to further her skills in academic writing.

Deep listening as a learning strategy

To accommodate her confusion and lack of understanding I read the essay criteria aloud to her. She could then focus on listening to her written work, freeing her visual perception. Following this I introduced a strategy to develop critiquing skills derived from the benefits of reading aloud, by using the 'hand held microphone'. The deflected sound of her voice entering her right ear enabled Supa to focus her auditory self by objectively listening, leading to better management of her essay writing difficulties, particularly sentence structure and coherence, and increased confidence in editing her essays. Supa continued to successfully utilise this strategy throughout her tertiary studies.

Another strategy included linking the essay criteria to the relevant textual reference material which ensured a development of deeper receptive listening. Deep listening, often was expressed by Supa on a bodily level as 'an appreciation, it's not [only] the writing [but sometimes] you will touch a point [on my arm] in a way that meant I can embody [the knowledge]' (Supa 12 2010). Rather than simply acquiring information or skills offered by university student support services, Supa's capabilities grew, increasing her personal autonomy in the habitus. For example, though receptive listening she developed a new understanding of the use of questions:

The power of your support was in the questions. How you questioned myself in the reflection that's the power. I remember to do that for others. You've embodied it. You gave me questions that ...helped me put it into a sentence and slow [down the] process... the kindness really helped. It was quite 'masculine' to the point it showed me how you did it (Supa 13 2010).

Further, she now understood the difference between critique and criticism. She felt encouraged to ask more questions and explore the role of reflection, which became the basis of critique as a 'gift that comes from heart and if not from heart or from practical or just from logic becomes criticism' (Supa 13 2010).

This new knowledge of critiquing developed further during our action learning work on a counselling assignment: she reflected:

you were critiquing what I didn't see; you made me go in and look at it more. The critic within had to be able to do that, it was part of the objectives... I couldn't do it, I was stuck (Supa 16 2010).

Reflection

The strategies to develop deep listening revealed Supa's learning difficulties and actions to improve learning. She had used her version of the requirements of an 'academic' essay style. However, the criteria for this particular essay required a self-reflective subjective style. Although Supa was familiar with self-reflective writing she had completely misunderstood the essay requirements. At that point in her study, with stress accumulating, the cognitive flexibility to change styles, self-listen and comprehend the essay requirements was impossible. The use of remedial strategies within this action learning project led to improved listening: Supa moved from a reactive mode to taking on the co-researcher role (Rose 2009). With reflection skills embedded from the first meeting, gradually her learning became learning-as-knowledge-creation through the 'transformation of experience' (Kolb 1984, 4), a more dynamic and active process.

Discussion

Supa was a capable, intelligent person with a high threshold of adaptability. We met irregularly over nearly three years, insufficient however to implement long term individualised structures to build up knowledge of academic writing. By working on issues brought to each meeting, an empowering process developed which lifted self-esteem and student identity and helped achieve the goal of completing the degree. Rule and Modipa's research (2012) with disabled adult learners in South Africa supports the transformative and self-efficacy outcomes of action research.

The long-term nature of Supa's AP issues was demonstrated by her detailed description of the stress of learning the word 'refrigerator', the detailed learning needed in the Anatomy course, where a variation on an 'old solution' for rote learning failed to work for her. The problem of reduced working memory capacity (Price 2006) hindered Supa's learning of complex anatomical information. The hand microphone method embedded into action learning processes, enabled Supa to realise the importance of auditory self-listening (Austin 2014) to cognitively make sense of her writing and empowered her to self-edit.

Supa entered higher education with un-integrated compensatory strategies. For example problems with spelling, rote learning and affect regulation which manifested within PTSD as panic attacks and 'dissociation' – a term used to express the 'gap' that occurs when inner and outer reality do not match up (Gilligan 2003). The research showed in diverse ways the connection between the experience of dyslexia as an adult, auditory processing as communication and affect regulation. A new auditory strategy, the 'hand held microphone' enabled her to proactively edit her essays, resulting in improved receptive listening. A shared I-poem allowed her to reach, as described by Siegel (2012) as a mindfulness turning point; she could switch her overwhelming affect regulation from reactive to proactive, and resolve her avoidance of her written work. Enabling collaborative support and work directly with affect regulation (Siegel 2012)

seemed crucial for developing this diverse learners' attributes.

Gendlin's original work (1981), discusses the use of a 'felt sense' as an internal anchor to language sensory awareness. Further, Imbir and Jarymowicz (2012) have shown that individual performance can differ based on differing levels of affective emotions (reactive) and reflective practices. Individuals may have less control of affect regulation (emotions) compared to self-regulation (cognitive control). Therefore, by firstly working with the affect regulation the educator could work to improve focused cognitive reflections. Linking these ideas it has been proposed that a re-conceptualisation of inclusive education in relation to students with dyslexia would include an understanding of student emotional and cognitive dispositions and notions of identity in the social and academic habitus (Pevitt 2013).

Supa gained flexibility by minimising her visual blanks while reading and through focused listening she gained her auditory locus of control. By systematically embedding strategies within curricula that focus on listening, and therefore attention, educators would be inviting students to find their internal locus of control. Self-awareness processes have educational value and assist in understanding learning as a development model. Vygotsky (1978) used an individual social model, acknowledging the dynamic between internal and external locus of control, crucial in early childhood learning and self-regulation, is equally applicable to any teaching situation as suggested by (Bodrova and Leong 2012). The present research supports the Vygotskian model which requires that in the process of gradual control of their learning environment, students with dyslexia are supported by collaborative guidance (Price 2006). Learners may then be empowered through encouragement to develop personal self-correction of any sensory distortions.

The use of action learning helped understand how Supa's compensatory strategies impacted on her learning. Student support can be enhanced through developing deep listening and appropriate action learning processes. Since the recent changes in equity and diversity policies in Australian universities, policies now include awareness and development of student centred learning to meet the needs of a broader group of diverse learners (Lawrence 2003). Students whose prior university learning experience was in a highly structured teaching and learning system may lack skills in human relations and life-long skills. Therefore any collaborative support in higher education requires teachers to gain an understanding of the background learning experiences, help the communication of ideas verbally and understand student learning styles. Supa had little opportunity for this to happen in her habitus, despite being an experienced facilitator able to seek help. For diverse learners, particularly students with dyslexia, experiencing a sense of belonging and being involved in inclusive teaching practices are essential for long-term empowerment (Shor 2012).

If reflexive practices were more commonly used in educator training, reflective practices would be perceived as a common part of teaching practice. An example of such a practice, was an action learning project with early career academics that led to more flexibility in the individual processes and helped participants to develop the skills of reflective and reflexivity processes within their cohort (Davis et al. 2012). Research by (Norton et al. 2011) suggested that participatory action research enhanced the reflective teaching and practice skills of social work teachers in higher education. In their research both Whitehead (2009) and (Wood and Kurzel 2009) extend this notion arguing that reflexive and reflective practices in SSAR enabled the

development of a living education theory. Therefore the value of collaborative, participatory approaches provides an answer to Marcos, Sanchez, and Tillima (2011) proposition that knowledge on reflection generated by research is not translated into teacher practice. The successful academic progress of diverse learners requires educational solutions to embed internal awareness processes to disentangle debilitating compensatory strategies directly interfering with individual cognitive learning and reflective practices.

Conclusions

Within the context of SSAR the collaborative developmental process aimed to improve practice and empower both co-researcher and the researcher. The main discussion focussed on the co-researcher; however, embedded throughout the paper were examples of the researcher's improvement and reflections on practice. Most important were shared social cultural context; change in communication patterns; understanding of new concepts; proactive use of creative methods; and supportive accommodation of emotional issues in the complexity of the lived experience of dyslexia and chronic health issues.

Key Findings

Supa demonstrated issues with AP which are characteristics of dyslexia and struggled through several aspects related to lack of effective support. Her greatest success was accurately comprehending the essay criteria and completing assignments to the level of distinction. Usually a proactive person, when health issues impinged, Supa's greatest felt need was for a consistent learning support person, yet the institution deemed her health issue as her disability status, implying the on-going essay literacy issues of dyslexia were of lesser importance. Our collaborative support enabled communication on the affect level that allayed some of the contextual stress. Nevertheless, at times these aspects eroded self-confidence, questioned competency and under-mined her student practitioner identity. Supa's strengths – a determined positivity, a passionate love of learning, endurance and resilience – sometimes counter balanced the situation. Supa learned to edit essays, improved self-study management; acknowledged panic attacks and developed new ways to lessen periods of dissociation. A discussion on other essay criteria led to new effective strategies for spelling words and the on-going development of reflective reflexive practices.

Limitations

The study of this exemplar student with dyslexia and health problems is not generalisable to the population of higher education students. However, the processes and outcomes could be common to the diverse learning cohort and other vulnerable students, and therefore transferable to a similar habitus in higher education.

Thoughts for the future

If higher educational institutions embrace positive relational frameworks within the existing social structures (Whitehead 2008), diverse learners could successfully transit through higher education (Kift 2009). Up-skilling tertiary teachers to facilitate student learning then becomes a priority. From an internal change agent perspective, understanding the importance of place (or habitus), would make diverse learners with hidden disabilities more visible. The unrecognised innate abilities of students with dyslexia – as determined risk takers, creative innovative thinkers

and excellent problem solvers – would be valued and accepted in an inclusive higher education habitus.

University support systems need to develop a more preventative and proactive stance, by having an in-depth evaluation in place at the beginning of study to support at risk students. For example, an Australian study (Purnell, McCarthy, and McLeod 2010) used an online Student Readiness Questionnaire on enrolment. The results suggested strategies to assist those categorised as having 'low readiness'. One strategy was questioning whether the student is uncertain about their enrolled program and then providing them with contact details to careers counselling services.

In-depth knowledge about student vulnerability could be identified by including an additional question on the current University entry forms. An example: What enhancing and protective factors could you use to manage learning issues during your studies? Answers to this question along with other data from the form may be sufficient to alert student services earlier, as well as providing data for an individualised vulnerability spectrum, as proposed by Distel (2013). This approach legitimizes the development of proactive strategies and demonstrates the complexities of educational vulnerability. Some of the indicator characteristics such as learning difficulties, chronic health issues and being mature age were established in this exemplar.

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