

2009

Adult dyslexia and the 'conundrum of failure'

Kathleen Tanner

University of Wollongong, ktanner@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/edupapers>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tanner, Kathleen: Adult dyslexia and the 'conundrum of failure' 2009, 785-797.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/edupapers/1003>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Adult Dyslexia and the 'conundrum of failure'

Kathleen Tanner

Faculty of Education, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

While there is a wealth of literature about childhood dyslexia, adult dyslexia remains relatively un-documented, particularly from a lived perspective. This paper focuses on the 'deficit perspective of failure', as highlighted in current literature, which addresses issues confronting adults with dyslexia. Within this theme of failure, a number of subtypes have been identified. This paper contextualises these subtypes around the perceptions of individuals involved in a tertiary course for adults with dyslexia. The paper demonstrates what the author has identified as a 'conundrum of failure' that has influenced the perceptions of many adults with dyslexia, including their life choices. Its prevalence in the literature and the lived experiences of the research subjects highlight the need for societal, institutional and attitudinal change.

Keywords: adults, dyslexia, failure, education, lived experience

*Email: ktanner@uow.edu.au

Introduction

Effective communication in western society requires the ability to decode the written word. Text literacy is fundamental to life. There is an implied expectation that all people should be able to read and write. This value is instilled in children from an early age when they first enter the education system, through to late adolescence and beyond. In fact, society continually rewards its members who can read and write. In our everyday lives we are surrounded by print – menus, signs, instruction booklets and timetables, and evidence of literacy demands in society steadily increasing (Wolff and Lundberg 2003).

While most people manage to attain the expected literacy skills as they move through the education system, there are 5 to 10% of adults (Smythe, Everatt and Salter, 2004), who are of average to above average intelligence, had adequate schooling and yet struggle to decode the written word despite educational intervention. These people have dyslexia. In its simplest form dyslexia is a neurological malfunction (Shaywitz, 2003) that affects the individual's ability to process the written word. This is not to say that they are completely illiterate, but rather that the process is not fully automated, and at times glitches are encountered when they attempt to interpret written text. However, many people with dyslexia have poor learning characteristics that go beyond text decoding. There is an ongoing definitional debate about the parameters of dyslexia, or even whether it is a scientific/medical condition. Because of this, it is virtually impossible to provide a universal profile of an adult with dyslexia.

“The Westernised school system promotes a particular notion of the skills necessary to achieve social and economic competence” (Barnes and Mercer 2003, 144). This has led to the marginalisation of students with specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia. Throughout their lives they have had to deal with the message: if they succeed in learning to read and write they will be successful in their lives. If they fail to gain these educational skills, they will be considered social failures. Living with this attitude “can have the effect of making people ... feel they are not seen as functioning adults ... and feel they cannot be open about their difficulties because such attitudes are supported in popular culture” (Herrington, Hamilton and Mace 2001, 2). These attitudes reflect not only the failure barriers and social oppression that exists within society but also the way those attitudes have been internalised by members of society who, as unconscious conduits, perpetuate these attitudes.

These negative experiences culminate in what I have coined the *conundrum of failure* and, despite the efforts of so-called ‘supportive others’, the oppressive attitudes and beliefs which are institutionalised within schools and society devalue those whose literacy skills are deemed to be inadequate.

Literature Review

The “Conundrum of Failure”

What is failure and how do our perceptions and experiences determine what constitutes failure? Is failure a social construct, a manifestation of society’s norms and expectations? Or is it a manifestation of an individual’s make-up? In the context of dyslexia, why do adults feel they have failed? How do they experience the impact of failure? Can failure be defined as one-dimensional, or is it multi-faceted? Is failure always negative, or is it motivational, even promoting resilience? What are the day-to-day implications of living and working within a society that sets up to fail people with dyslexia?

These questions and many others arise when considering the difficulties and complexities entailed when defining failure within the context of adult dyslexia. Failure is identified throughout the literature as a key factor that directly impacts on the self-perception and self-efficacy of adults with dyslexia and their resultant attitudes regarding how society has failed and marginalised them. Failure can be broken into at least 5 sub-types.

1. **System Failure** (Herrington, Hamilton and Mace 2001)
2. **Constructed failure** (Poole 2003)
3. **Public Failure** (Scott 2003)
4. **Family Failure** (Scott 2003)
5. **Personal Failure** (Palombo 2001; Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins and Herman 2002)

System failure (Herrington, Hamilton and Mace 2001) occurs when inappropriate educational opportunities have been provided to cater for specific learning needs. This causes “*academic or school failure*” (McNulty 2003; Wolff and Lundberg 2003;

Humphrey 2002; Reddy and Sujathamalini 2003; Nosek 1997). This type of failure links directly with the knowledge educationalists have about specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia, as well as their individual belief systems and attitudes which impact on their “behaviours, philosophies and even their effectiveness” (Kerr 2001: 82). The majority of adult research participants in the literature highlighted bad experiences throughout their schooling due to ignorance, failure or inaccurate acknowledgement or identification of needs (Humphrey 2002; Palfreyman-Kay 1998) which resulted in “low expectation, insensitive teaching and a weak curriculum” (Mackay 2002, 160).

Constructed Failure results from the tunnelled view in which dyslexia is interpreted and ‘treated’, particularly in the educational context. Poole (2003) claims that a student “must first fail in school before s/he is identified”. This failure is determined by a ‘diagnosis’ which provides evidence to support funding to ‘fix or treat’ the problem. Focus is on medical treatment rather than educational solutions. She states that a scientific paradigm ‘currently drives educational policy’ (171). In Australia, this has been exacerbated by the view that schools will receive government funding to support students with additional needs only when a scientific or medically suggested label is attached to a condition. People with dyslexia are ruled out because definitions used in an Australian educational context are inconsistent (Rivalland 2000). It is also hindered by the definitional gymnastics in the literature as to what dyslexia is. Poole (2003) believes that dyslexia needs to be viewed within a wider ecological perspective rather than a purely educational and scientific framework.

Public Failure is evident in all aspects of society (Scott 2003). School contexts provide many opportunities for failure because demands are constantly placed on students to demonstrate their literacy skills within a public forum. Examples include reading out loud or reading text within a time frame and responding to it. For an adult with dyslexia, public failure in life can be constant, particularly with society’s emphasis on communicating through the written word. Filling in forms, replying to emails, reading signs or reading instructions are daily events. Public failure to read correctly quite often results in *public humiliation* (Fink 1998).

Family Failure can be attributed to the attitudes of caregivers and siblings, as well as the individual’s belief that they are ‘failing their parents’ (Scott 2003, 84). Scott highlights the attitude of many parents who believe that strong literacy skills are the key to academic success. Children can feel a sense of guilt, due to their inability to please their parents and a belief that “continued academic failure will lead them to lose their parents’ love” (84).

Personal Failure is a culmination of failures beginning when a student with dyslexia enters an educational institution and realises they are not succeeding. This can eventually become a lifelong ‘fear’ (Palombo 2001) of learning and of new or unknown situations. In a 20-year study of students with learning disabilities, Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins and Herman (2002) identified specific “success attributes” (personal characteristics, behaviours, attitudes, and conditions) (201) that enabled students to succeed in adulthood despite the difficulties and failures they encountered through school. They claimed that students who did not have these attributes experienced “continued failure” throughout life.

Through examining the lived experiences of adults with dyslexia involved in a TAFE program in Australia this study intends to add to the limited research about adults with dyslexia. It will use this failure paradigm as a way of conceptualising the experiences and attitudes of adults with dyslexia. It also identifies aspects of the social model of disability which defines disability as a form of social oppression caused by the restrictions and barriers created by society towards people with impairments through overt and non-overt prejudice and discrimination. (Oliver 1986 cited in Riddick 2001). It also identifies Goffman's (1963) understanding of the need to hide one's disability, considering dyslexia as a 'non-evident' impairment, by using 'passing techniques' as normalising or compensatory strategies. Finally, this paper highlights, on one hand, the literature's focus on dyslexia from a deficit perspective but on the other the need to view adult experiences from a perspective which incorporates not only the political, economic and cultural contexts but also the degree to which individual perceptions and understanding of life experiences can change dependent upon one's knowledge of their dyslexia and personal perspective on life.

Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative study conducted in Australia over a period of 3 years during a TAFE (Technical and Further Education) course specifically designed for Adults with Dyslexia. The research was conducted during one of the 6 units – *Understanding and Managing Dyslexia*. Approximately 70 students with a mixed gender balance were involved. Students were diagnosed with dyslexia by an educational psychologist or evaluated by a Dyslexia specialist. Many had gone undiagnosed throughout their early education. Ages ranged from 17 to 70+ with a majority in the 22 – 45 age group. Enrolment in the course was either self-motivated or recommended by government and/or private job agencies. A variety of tools were used for data collection including focus group discussions, written or illustrated personal profiles and one-on-one interviews. Nosek's (1997) categorisation tool was a component of the initial one-on-one interviews. Thematic analysis based on the failure themes identified in the literature was used. The role of the researcher was as principal lecturer for the course and therefore a participant-observer.

The course was designed to help participants understand their dyslexia, and enable them to develop skills to further their vocational prospects and desires. The unit *Understanding and Managing Dyslexia* encouraged participants to disclose their personal experiences and it was during these sessions they identified the societal attitudes and barriers they had encountered which influenced their life choices.

The unit *Understanding and Managing Dyslexia* operated over a 10 -week term and students met for weekly 3-hour sessions. Each session had a specific focus that involved interactive discussion of key questions or concepts as well as flexibility for student-centred open discussions. Each student created a personal profile in text or pictures and individual interviews were conducted.

It is within the context of these focussed discussions and individual profiles that this paper will endeavour to contextualise the *Failure Conundrum*. Anecdotes provided span a large spectrum in time based on the students' ages, and therefore reflect varying stages in educational opportunity and paradigms over time.

Responses from eight intakes of students have been used for this study. Each new intake was asked the following questions:

1. When did you first find out you are dyslexic?
2. Have you ever told anyone you have dyslexia? If yes, who? If no, why not?

These questions were asked to identify Nosek's (1997) three categories of dyslexics:

1. *The Candid Dyslexic* – willingly discloses and acknowledges his dyslexia to themselves and others (7).
2. *The Closet Dyslexic* – “conceals his dyslexia from himself through denial and from others out of shame and fear” (7).
3. *The Confused Dyslexic* – “doesn't know he is dyslexic and struggles through school and life unaware of what causes his trouble with words” (7).

Results and Discussion

In regard to these initial interview questions, the majority (48/70), appeared to have spent their lives as *Closet Dyslexics* and had developed compensatory or ‘passing’ (Goffman, 1963) strategies to hide their difficulties. Unlike Nosek's description, 25 of this group acknowledged, as opposed to denied, their dyslexia to themselves, but concealed it selectively. In each group there were *Confused Dyslexics* (12/70) who, until a recent decision to participate in the course, had experienced a lifelong frustration with their characteristics, but did not know why. The *Candid Dyslexics* (5/70), although they openly answered the questions and provided examples of their willingness to disclose their dyslexia on a one-to-one basis, did not become blatantly obvious until at least 3 weeks into the course, at which time they began to openly provide advice to their fellow students, on the benefits and importance of disclosure from an advocacy perspective. Over a period of time a number of the *Confused Dyslexics* shifted into this *Candid* category as they gained a greater understanding of their dyslexia. Five out of 70 were non-committal and could not recall situations or answers to the questions.

The results of the focus groups and individual profiles were subjected to thematic analysis based on the 5 sub types of failure identified throughout the literature that led to the development of the *conundrum of failure*. Responses within each subtype also highlighted aspects of discrimination and social oppression including, but not restricted to, stigma, social isolation and exclusion, social categorisation, and victimisation.

System failure

Discussion of system failure provided a mixture of emotional turmoil ranging from hostility toward how inadequate they perceived their educational experiences, to a resigned sense of ‘moving on’. Discussions are categorised into two themes: (1) the failure to acknowledge individual learning requirements, which was evident from early educational experiences through to tertiary experiences; (2) the inaccurate identification of characteristics and needs; and, underpinning these two themes: teacher knowledge and attitudes. Students indicated that “identification [was] a prerequisite for receiving services, yet identification [was] potentially

stigmatising”(Ferri, Keefe and Gregg 2001, 26). The following anecdotal material exemplifies these themes.

(1) *Failure to acknowledge learning requirements:* Student L (Age 21/Female) received private tutoring throughout her primary and secondary schooling to support her learning. She enrolled in a vocational tertiary course. Due to external tutoring and support she knew she could succeed if the teaching strategies and learning experiences reflected her personal learning style. She requested audio recordings of lectures and notes prior to each class. She sought assistance with written work and asked for alternative ways to present assessments. Her requests were refused. Even with the assistance of the Disability Support Office no allowances were made. She was told that she was unsuitable for the occupation she was pursuing because being able to read and write accurately was a key factor. Feeling she had personally failed, as well as the system failing her, she dropped out before the final assessment hence she would not have a written record of her failure constituting to her, the final exclusion barrier. Discrimination occurred in 3 respects: (1) legislatively (Australian Disability Discrimination Act, 1992); (2) a refusal to provide accommodations to support her learning; and (3) verbally (regarding her vocational aspirations). This verbal discrimination, linked to the labelling of her disability, reflected a ‘superiority versus inferiority’ attitude, resulting in her “being told what [she] can (potentially/expect to) do and what [she] cannot” (Charlton 1998, 32).

University Student R (24/F) failed all required written work. She too sought alternative assessment methods but because the assessment was set by an external body no modification was allowed, except for extra time. She paid an external tutor to help her improve her written work. Through this support she experienced written success. She spoke of the added and considerable financial burden but claimed the expense was worth having the word *Pass* written on her work. Both students – L and R - experienced the exclusionary nature of educational thinking and the importance of written assessment procedures alongside the acquisition of standardised ‘paper’ qualifications to access the work force. R also experienced exclusion from within the public ‘free’ education system and the added expectation of funding her own educational support where the system had failed her.

Both these students revealed themselves as *Candid dyslexics* on their understanding that educational paradigms had shifted and that accommodations for students with specific learning needs were mandatory however, they found that rhetoric and action did not match and their disclosure and requests further exacerbated discriminatory barriers. These responses resulted in their transition back to *Closet dyslexics*.

2. *Inaccurate and/or insufficient identification of characteristics and needs:*

A number of students claimed they were segregated in ‘special classes’ with students who had intellectual impairments ‘... just because we couldn’t read they thought we were dumb” (Student N 29/F). Inaccurate identification occurred and therefore unsuitable education was provided, reflecting western education systems which are “structured on a normative model of measured intelligence and narrow academic ability”(Rieser 2001, 146) .

Student D (21/M) stated: “I was classed as very dumb at school by my teachers and was overlooked and forgotten about.” He, along with another student, felt school did not offer them anything ‘important’ and simply made them feel ‘stupid’. They became involved in anti-social behaviour. By acting tough they could hide the fact that they weren’t good at something – nobody dared say anything. It was a good cover-up. The anti-social behaviour escalated, they both left school and have since spent time in gaol (Students D: 21/M & C: 54/M). Developing ‘power’ through anti-social behaviour that instilled fear in others, provided less stigma and shame than being ‘labelled’ dumb.

Some spoke of teachers who verbally expressed their frustration at not knowing what to do with them professionally. Comments such as: “Why can’t you read? I don’t know what else to do” (Student S 49/F) were indicative of what Kerr (2001) refers to as teachers experiencing a sense of “disempowerment or learned helplessness” (83). Report cards indicated teachers’ awareness of obvious potential, yet blame for a lack of achievement was attributed to the student. “Every report card I had through school said the same thing ‘... is a very bright student with a huge potential that he doesn’t live up to’.” (Student P 23/M) Report cards were viewed as something to be feared, or superficial or even condescending. They rarely reflected a true understanding of the students’ strengths and weaknesses.

Not all students felt the system had failed them. Significantly, some thought they had failed the system because they ‘weren’t bright enough’ or were ‘simply stupid’. (Students E 32/F, O 69/F, T 43/M, & G 28/M) However, this view changed as the course progressed and they began to understand their dyslexia and how they process information. These students were initially identified as *Confused dyslexics*.

Constructed Failure

Within an Australian context an educational debate between defining specific learning disabilities and learning difficulties continues to exist and drive policy. While the Australian Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act, 1992* identifies disability as “a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction”, responsibility for public education is state or territory based (Elkins 2000). Therefore, a diversity of definitions or ‘labels’ exists which have been determined on a state or territory basis. These definitions are embedded in the non-disabled ideology that these students are able to ‘overcome’ their difficulties through intervention and are linked to a decision on terminology use in an historical federal report conducted in 1976 by the Select Committee of the House of Representative (Cadman 1976). The Queensland State Education Department is the only state that clearly differentiates between ‘learning disabilities’ (including dyslexia) and ‘learning difficulties’ (Louden, Chan et al 2000; Elkins 2000; Rivalland 2000). The basis of this categorisation is linked to the power of language that directly influences economic, social and educational outcomes.

Student V’s (43/F) son was diagnosed with dyslexia. She presented the diagnosis to his school and was told that dyslexia was not recognised as a disability in their state, but as a learning difficulty and educational funding was not available to provide him with individual specialist help. In line with the current inclusive paradigm, classroom

teachers were expected to address his individual needs by modifying their teaching strategies and his learning experiences. In response, he was put on a literacy-based software program available in the school with minimal support and explicit instruction.

Students diagnosed with dyslexia during primary and/or secondary school spoke of a sense of relief on the part of some educators - 'that's why he can't do it' (Student T 38/M), but on the other hand confusion: "now we've got a label what do we do next?" (Student P 33/M). However, this is where the misunderstanding of the concept of dyslexia and intelligence became linked. Some teachers believed that dyslexia was an intellectual disability and therefore supported the decision to move people 'labelled' as dyslexic into special education units or 'special classes'. (Students L 21/F, O 69/F, N 29/F, S 49/F).

Those students involved in special education classes or withdrawal groups expressed frustration that they knew they could grasp the content of regular classes on a cognitive level but just needed to be shown how. They expressed anger at things being 'dumbed down' and having to work with students who were not their intellectual equal and throughout their schooling experienced the stigma attached to the concept of intellect (Students H 26/F & P 23/M).

Goffman (1963) identified 'evident' and 'non-evident' disabilities and within this context dyslexia can be viewed as 'non-evident' or 'hidden'. The decision to label non-obvious impairments, according to Riddick (2001), is particularly important. She claims labels "can mediate between the individual and their cultural context and explain certain difficulties they have and thus help to prevent inaccurate or negative attributions" (231). Even those students who had been diagnosed and therefore 'labelled' while at school were often faced with the attitude that dyslexia did not actually exist – it was an excuse for laziness. Being diagnosed and 'labelled' didn't actually help. Student F (24/F) claimed "I went through so many tests – for what purpose – a label? And what good did it do – nothing – couldn't they just see I was struggling – why couldn't they just help me to learn to read and write?" On the other hand, some of those diagnosed as adults expressed a sense of relief in knowing that they weren't 'dumb' or 'stupid' and they now could equate their frustrations with something tangible (Student L 21/F, D 21/M, S 49/F, K 49/M).

Public Failure

Examples of public failure in the classroom were driven by teachers and peers. In hindsight, many of the students acknowledged that perhaps those who were causing the humiliation did not realise the life-long impact it had. Rocco (2008) claims that non-disabled persons 'do not see how our actions or choices are harmful to groups we are not a member of; the experiences of people not like us are invisible to us' (138). Simple words in jest such as "can you be any dumber?" (Student Q 31/M), haunt them today, and have been internalised. This sense of feeling worthless, ashamed and of lesser value reflects the 'psycho-emotional dimensions of disability' (Reeve 2006, 95) which reflects the personal as opposed to public experiences of social oppression. This oppression "operates on the 'inside' as well as on the 'outside'" (Thomas 2003). In the context of people with dyslexia, this internalisation can exacerbate a sense of powerlessness and promote negative self-esteem.

On a daily basis, many of the students spoke of the unconscious assumptions, promoted by the exclusionary ideology that underpinned their educational experiences, in that people are continually judging their inability to read proficiently or remember. “You know what they’re thinking when they look at you that way” (Student N 29/F). Shopping is one example: when frustrated by shopping labels, instructions, medication dosages or even signs they have sought assistance only to be ‘put down’ by the comments or body language of those they had sought assistance from. Some had developed compensatory strategies such as asking someone to read it for them because they ‘had forgotten their reading glasses’; or going shopping with a friend. Public failure extended into the workplace particularly the humiliation that occurred when workmates ‘set you up’. Those with vocational apprenticeships talked of incessant public humiliation when it was found out they had difficulties with their reading. On one occasion Student M (23/M) was provided with a written list from his colleague to gather equipment. The list incorporated sexual references and innuendo that went unrecognised until the student handed the list over to a storeroom supervisor to read.

In other situations involving social occasions where the cultural expectation was to read, students used behaviours identified by Goffman (1963) as ‘passing’ techniques. They attempted to disguise abilities for which they believed they may be stigmatised and use a socially acceptable ‘normal’ response. When having to choose from a restaurant menu some used the strategy of ‘watch and listen’ and then ordered what someone else had already requested. When going out in a group, Student S (49/F) always requested that they eat at the same restaurant because ‘they catered for her food allergies’. In fact she knew where to locate and read three meals on the menu. Others spoke of avoiding social functions that involved reading, or trivia nights that involved the recall of information highlighting their internalised oppression and increased feelings of self-chosen isolation and social exclusion. As their impairments are hidden, unless public disclosure has occurred, this may exacerbate the ‘emotional labour’ (Reeve 2006, 104) required to deal with these personal feelings.

Within this theme, students shared their use of many compensatory or ‘passing’ strategies to disguise their dyslexic characteristics and therefore avoid public failure and humiliation. This pointed to a power shift not only in their ability to find ways to participate in a ‘culturally acceptable manner’ but also as a consequence, a shift in their ability to address the psychological and emotional barriers they had internalised. Many found creative ways to manoeuvre within, and around the exclusionary barriers that existed socially.

Physical and emotional bullying within and outside the classroom emerged as a common theme. Anecdotes encompassed accounts of victimisation, humiliation and social devaluation that stemmed from the value placed on intelligence and literacy skills in western society. Although the gender and ages, of the students varied markedly, the theme of being punished or put down because of literacy skills was constant and made them feel as ‘lesser beings’.

“I knew ... something was wrong when my teacher kicked me in the back of the chair. All I was doing at the time was trying to read” (Student P: 23/M).

“The nuns often made us stand up in class and read. I’m sure they thought that hitting me with the ruler would make me be able to read the words”(Student U: 59/F).

Peers tended to use more direct terms such as ‘idiot’, ‘stupid’, ‘dumbo’, and ‘moron’. Teachers tended to use body language and indirect put-downs by attributing the blame of failure to the student through comments such as: “try harder and you might be able to read it”, or, “that’s such an easy piece to read, any fool could do it”. These are examples of verbal and non-verbal reactions disqualifying the person and publically stigmatising them and their actions (Goffman 1963).

Student K (49/M), after completing the course and, based on his personal experiences and frustrations, recognised that change was required at a political level. Being pre-selected to run for state parliament he ran a political campaign based on highlighting *system failure* that created *academic failure* and resulted in *life-long failure*. He highlighted his *personal failure* and publicly used this as a platform for creating awareness of dyslexia. However, with this came the challenge of deciphering the required candidate enrolment forms and filling them in. Undeterred, he sought assistance. He successfully requested the written documentation be provided in audio format. His political aspirations were unsuccessful however, he continues to campaign on behalf of adults with dyslexia, and challenge people’s knowledge and understanding. This student from the beginning was a ‘*Candid dyslexic*’ and has since become a very ‘*Public dyslexic*’ and advocate of change.

Family Failure

Mixed experiences were described within this category relating to Scott’s (2003) perception of family failure. Two other factors also emerged which were not clearly evident in the literature: (1) the idea of ‘failing your children’ and (2) the influence of ‘supportive partners’.

Students, with school-aged children who had dyslexia, spoke of their innermost desire not to ‘fail their children’. Student O (47/M), disclosed how his father would physically and emotionally punish him over his efforts at school. This victimisation led to a sense of unworthiness and suicidal thoughts, which haunt him today when in his father’s presence. However, as a father of a young son with diagnosed dyslexia, he is determined ‘*not to fail his son*’. He has actively established a network of experts and alternative therapies outside of the school environment to help them both. He has developed a bartering system to access ‘experts’, particularly for the benefit of his son, by trading his skills for theirs due to financial hardship. His disclosure of his dyslexia is linked to the needs of his son.

Students V(43/F) and E (32/F) have children who struggle at school due to their dyslexia. As parents and advocates, they believe they are failing their children even though they are doing ‘*everything possible to support them*’. They perceive the teachers and school as unsupportive highlighted by a comment made by a teacher: ‘*don’t you think you’re overstating this dyslexia thing?*’ But when E disclosed that she also had dyslexia, she ‘*sensed fear*’ in the teacher based on their ‘*lack of understanding*’. Both students claimed that negative comments and interactions with the teachers fed their fears of inadequacy as parents, as well as inferiority as non-

literate adults. They stated they were being denied the social right to access educational resources based on their child's needs and experienced a denial of their knowledge of their child's experiences. Coupled with this was the high emotional cost involved in disclosure of not only their child's ability to meet the 'norm', but also their own.

Those involved in relationships at the time spoke of their supportive and understanding partners who supported their efforts and encouraged them to 'follow their dreams'. Even though frustration, stress and anxiety still exist, student S (49/F) claimed: "I can fail and I have someone else to help me pick up the pieces".

Self-employed students emphasised the importance of the emotional and financial support of partners and parents in the initial stages of their business ventures, as well as the on-going encouragement and recognition of their strengths. It was within this subtype that a number of *closet dyslexics* evolved into *candid dyslexics* and openly disclosed their dyslexia within a public forum for the benefit of others.

Personal Failure

The psycho-emotional impact of personal failure often resulted in suicidal thoughts and/or attempts. Counselling had been sought by a number of students for depression. Others had experimented with drugs as a way of making themselves 'feel better'. Student D (21/M) said it enabled "... me [to] fit in and to give me the confidence to try anything. Although it was good times I was digging myself into a hole and when work finished I turned to crime for I was good at it."

Not being able to maintain a job, to develop trade qualifications or even professional skills was a daily reminder of this *culmination of failure*. Some of the older students operated successful businesses, including: plastering, painting, building, and hairdressing. Some saw this success as due to a lot of hard work and individual perseverance, but others viewed it as a reflection of their academic failure because they were led to believe they would not be capable of completing the further study required for the profession of their 'dreams'. The main reason some chose to become self-employed was because of the negative attitudes, victimisation and exclusion due to the lack of understanding of their individual characteristics by their previous work colleagues. By venturing into their own business they could control the work environment and to an extent, the demands placed upon them. It also eliminated judgemental situations and internalised frustrations.

One intake of students was motivated to continue networking with each other well after the course had finished. They proactively searched for interest/research groups and methods to help them improve their learning, lifestyle and personal well-being. They have since been involved in investigating alternative therapies that claim to assist people with dyslexia. This demonstrates their evolving resistance to the way in which they are perceived and how services perceive them highlighting the importance of the unifying sense of a group and resultant camaraderie. Unlike non-hidden disabilities where there exists a culture of 'support groups' that represent political needs as well as responding to personal needs, 'support groups' for 'hidden disabilities' such as dyslexia are not as evident. One student claimed "I never met another dyslexic person until I walked in this door!" (Student U 59/F).

The opportunity for participants to engage in such dialogue was cathartic. One student claimed that after most sessions ... 'I simply float out 'cause what I said has stopped weighing me down'. Many expressed the view that they had never revealed their dyslexia to anyone because of their fear of humiliation and misunderstanding, however, knowing that all those involved were 'dyslexic', provided a comfortable buffer of non-judgmental collectiveness, as well as a sense of relief that a program had been developed within a supportive environment to enable them to deal with society's barriers.

A key factor which arose from this research was the need to provide a forum in which the participants could gain knowledge of their dyslexia. It is not necessarily the discussion of failure that is important but more so acknowledging and providing opportunities to gain understanding and knowledge about one's dyslexia and openly discuss issues within a supportive educational environment. It is enabling *closet dyslexics* and *confused dyslexics* to express their fears and assist them in dealing with societal attitudes that exacerbate their perceived 'failures', as well as allowing an opportunity for advocacy for the *candid dyslexics*. It has also identified a new category in addition to Nosek's three, being the *Public Dyslexic* that incorporates those adults who openly and willingly highlight and promote their dyslexia in the public arena. It is interesting, however, to note that further ongoing research with a number of these students has revealed that they are keen to disclose their experiences and characteristics for research purposes but are fearful about recognition because of their future plans. This may indicate that their 'candidness' is determined by audience, and their 'closetedness' is used as a protective barrier against possible failure.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to contextualise the subtypes of failure highlighted throughout the literature through the perceptions and lived experiences of adults with dyslexia, and their disclosures within an adult-specific learning environment. This paper also demonstrates the multi-faceted aspects of failure and how it is embedded in the exclusionary and oppressive ideology that is reflected in our language use, belief systems and attitudes. Failure cannot be seen purely within a negative context, in fact it can impact on one's resilience and motivation and provide a positive challenge (dependent upon each individual's makeup). This is evident in the networking that continues to exist among many of the students and the advocacy roles they have since taken on. All the students had experienced a sense of adversity in terms of their educational experiences and the failures they had experienced based on the exclusionary nature of the system and the discrimination and prejudice they had encountered. The majority used passing techniques to enable them to operate successfully within a literacy-focussed society. However, specific emotional strategies for dealing with internalised oppression were rarely cited when discussing their reactions to failure. With this in mind, it is very difficult to define what specific characteristics constitute failure and what exactly its impact is. Alongside of this is the degree to which society creates the barriers and to what extent the individual characteristics of dyslexia are disabling. The complexities that exist create only more questions and issues and therefore add to the *conundrum of failure*.

This paper highlights the need for further research into adult dyslexia. While this study sheds some light on how adults with dyslexia perceive themselves within a framework that criticises those who are perceived to have failed, what it points to is the impact of systemic barriers on educational and occupational opportunities and unequal power relations that exacerbate the vulnerabilities of people with hidden disabilities such as dyslexia. Further research into the impact of knowledge and understanding of dyslexia gained by adults participating in courses such as the TAFE course for Adults with Dyslexia would be beneficial in providing further insight into how they perceive themselves and how society perpetuates failure for those with dyslexia. Focusing on this course's impact on the lived experience of adults with dyslexia is the subject of further study being undertaken by the author for her PhD.

Acknowledgement: Thankyou to the reviewers for your insightful comments. Thankyou to Dr Rose Dixon and Professor Stephen Tanner for your assistance.

References

- Australian Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992)
http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/dda1992264/
- Barnes, C and G. Mercer. 2003. *Disability*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press
- Cadman, A (Chair). 1976. *Learning Difficulties in children and adults: Report of the House of representatives Select Committee on Specific Learning Difficulties*. Canberra: Australian Government Printing Services
- Charlton, J. I. 1998. *Nothing about us without us: Disability Oppression & Empowerment*. London: University of California Press
- Elkins, J. 2000. All the Empires fall, you just have to know where to push: Antecedent issues for a study of learning difficulties in Australia. *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities* 5, no. 2: 4-7
- Ferri, B. A., C.H Keefe and N. Gregg. 2001. Teachers with Learning Disabilities: A view from both sides of the desk, *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 34, no. 1: 22-32
- Fink, R. P. 1998. Literacy development in successful men and women with dyslexia, *Annals of Dyslexia* 48: 311–347
- Goffman, E. 1963. *Stigma: notes on the management of a spoiled identity*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1968, c 1963
- Herrington, M., M. Hamilton and J. Mace. 2001. *Letter to: The Secretary, The Social Security Advisory Committee Re: Consultation: The Social Security (Literacy etc. Skills training Pilot) Regulations 2001*, A Response from RAPAL.
<http://www.literacy.lancaster.ac.uk/rapal/archive/policy/conditionality.htm>
- Humphrey, N. 2002. Self-Concept and Self-Esteem in Developmental Dyslexia:

Implications for Theory and practice, *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs* 2.

http://self.uws.edu.au/Conferences/2002_CD_Humphrey.pdf

- Kerr, H. 2001. Learned Helplessness and dyslexia: a carts and horses issue? *Reading literacy and language* July: 82–85
- Louden, W., L.K.S. Chan, J. Elkins, D. Greaves, H. House, M. Milton et al. 2000. *Mapping the Territory: Primary Students with learning difficulties: literacy and numeracy. Volume 1: Overview*. Canberra, Australia: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.
- Lyster, S. A. H. 1999. “Illiteracy – Prison of Its Own”, European Prison Education Association. Paper presented at 7th EPEA International Conference.
<http://www.epea.org/7thconf/tp4alma.htm>
- Mackay, G. 2002. The disappearance of disability? Thoughts on a changing culture, *British Journal of Special Education* 29, no. 4: 159-163
- McNulty, M. A. 2003. Dyslexia and the life course, *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 36, no. 4: 363–381
- Nosek, K. 1997. *Dyslexia in Adults: Taking Charge of your Life*, Maryland, USA: Taylor Trade Publishing, Lanham
- Palfreyman-Kay, J, M. 1998. Disabled People and Access Opportunities into Higher Education. Paper presented at *Higher Education Close Up*, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK, 6-8 July 1998.
www.leeds.ac.uk.ezproxy.uow.edu.au:2048/educol/documents/000000683.htm
- Palombo. 2001. cited in McNulty, M. A. 2003. Dyslexia and the life course, *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 36, no. 4: 363–381
- Poole, J. 2003. Dyslexia: a wider view. The contribution of an ecological paradigm to current issues, *Educational research* 45, no 2: 167–180
- Raskind, M. H., R.J. Goldberg, E.L. Higgins, and K.L. Herman. 2002. Teaching “life success” to students with LD: lessons learned from a 20 year study, *Intervention in School & Clinic* 37, no 4: 201-8
- Reddy, G. L and J. Sujathamalini. 2003. Inputs required by the People’s Committee and voluntary organizations for the effective implementation of literacy and development programs designed to overcome learning disabilities/difficulties in adults, *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 43, no 2: 282-292
- Reid-Lyon, G. 1997. In *Dyslexia in Adults: Taking Charge of your Life*, K. Nosek. Maryland, USA: Taylor Trade Publishing
- Reeve, D. 2006. Towards a Psychology of Disability: The emotional effects of living in a disabling society. In *Disability & Psychology*, ed. D. Goodley and R.

Lawthom, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan

Riddick, B. 2001. Dyslexia and Inclusion: time for a social model of disability perspective, *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 11, no 3: 223-236

Rivalland, J. 2000. Definitions & Identifications: Who are the children with learning difficulties? *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities* 5, no 2: 12–16

Rocco, T. S. nd. *Imagining the Possibilities: Disability Disclosure in Adult education and Training*. <http://www.coe.uga.edu/hsp/pdf/years/rocco.pdf>

Scott, R. 2003. A counsellor's perspective on dyslexia. In *Dyslexia Included: A Whole School Approach*, ed. M. Thomson, 82–92. London: David Fulton Publishers Ltd.

Shaywitz, S. 2003. *Overcoming Dyslexia: A new and complete science-based program for reading problems at any level*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf

Smythe, I., J. Everatt and R. Salter. 2004. *International Book of Dyslexia: A guide to practice and resources*. England: John Wiley & Sons Ltd

Thomas, C. 2003. Defining a Theoretical Agenda for Disability Studies, Disability Studies: Theory, Policy and Practice. Paper presented at Inaugural Conference of the Disability Studies Association.
<http://www.disabilitystudies.net/dsaconf2003/fullpapers/thomas.doc>

Wolff, U and I. Lundberg. 2003. A Technique for Group Screening of Dyslexia among Adults, *Annals of Dyslexia* 53: 324-339

Word Count: 6958