Ako Mai Me: The adult dyslexic learner journey and experience

May – October 2023

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Executive Summary

This research project sought to explore the intricate experiences of adult dyslexic learners, identifying the complexities and challenges they have navigated in their educational journeys. The narratives collected from a cohort of eleven participants provide a comprehensive view that can inform future educational support mechanisms and teaching strategies. The goal of the project was to uncover dyslexic learner experiences in education with an Aotearoa New Zealand lens, with a particular focus on the tertiary learner experience. To accomplish this, the project objectives aimed to understand the experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of adult dyslexic learners, identify their unique strengths and abilities, explore the role of formal and informal educational support mechanisms, and make recommendations for stakeholders, including educators, employers, and policymakers.

Key themes and findings from the research highlighted the myriad of challenges dyslexic learners face which invariably impact their academic, and later on, their professional experiences and outcomes. Despite these challenges, adult dyslexic individuals often exhibit intrinsic strengths, such as resilience, resourcefulness, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving skills. The research also discovered the significance of coping strategies, such as the utilisation of technology, having structured routines, and seeking external assistance. Support from teachers, family, and peers was emphasised by the participants as vital for their wellbeing and ability to 'keep going'. It greatly affected their school and work experiences, as well as their self-perception and personal development. This support, or lack thereof, was found to significantly shape the educational and future occupational experiences of dyslexic learners, impacting their development, achievements, and overall happiness.

Recommendations are made for recognising and valuing the diverse experiences and capabilities of dyslexic learners. This involves implementing robust support systems in educational settings, formulating policies and practices that facilitate the holistic development and support of dyslexic learners, and enhancing awareness and training among educators and employers. The aim is to foster a deeper understanding and empathy towards dyslexic individuals, ensuring that their unique needs and strengths are acknowledged and supported in all environments.

The photo [above] was taken by my son, who like me is dyslexic. It reminds me of a time when he came home from school after seeing a show on the creation of our universe. He was about 7 years old and described the big bang theory to me with more understanding than I ever had. (I had just read a book on it) The show was very visual and engaging. Students laid on their backs and watch the movie projected onto the ceiling. Prefect for neo-diverse learners. To my mind, the photo encapsulate how my own brain works (ever where and no where) “Project participant John, 2023.

Introduction

The Ako mai me research project explored the experiences of adult dyslexic learners in Aotearoa New Zealand as they navigated compulsory school and tertiary studies. Ako mai me means - teach me so that I can learn. It sought to address a national research gap by emphasising the perspectives of adult dyslexic individuals and their families. The research is particularly pertinent in the context of the current landscape of educational reforms and policy changes in Aotearoa New Zealand. By shedding light on the lived experiences of dyslexic individuals this study contributes to both national and international discussions on dyslexia. It is highly relevant in the current Aotearoa New Zealand context as Whaikaha – the Ministry of Disabled People – gains prominence in the political arena, and tertiary education continues to address the equity, inclusion, and wellbeing of diverse learners (Ministry of Education, 2023).

It is important to acknowledge previous research projects funded by Ako Aotearoa in the adult dyslexia learner space, to set the context for this project's purpose and focus. In 2016, a project was undertaken by Primary ITO and funded by Ako Aotearoa, which investigated how dyslexic trainees can be supported in workplace and classroom settings. Key findings highlighted the impact of negative prior learning experiences on the trainees and the development of compensatory strategies like task avoidance. A notable finding was that dyslexic learners often have a clear understanding of what helps them learn and how they can support themselves. Challenges in learning included the classroom environment, time constraints, and assessment requirements. The study identified strategies for supporting dyslexic learners, such as individualised learning plans, one-to-one tutoring, mentoring, and the need for diverse learning materials.

Project Goal and Aims

The goal of this project was to shine a light on dyslexic experiences in education with an Aotearoa lens with a particular focus on the adult tertiary learner experience. To accomplish this, the study aimed to uncover the broader stories of people with lived experiences of their dyslexic learner journey, in particular, their experiences in post-secondary/tertiary contexts.

Background

In 2020, Ako Aotearoa invited dyslexic learners to complete an online survey, answering seven open-ended questions about their experiences as a dyslexic learner during early years schooling, high school, and tertiary education. The survey respondents were invited to participate in this research as a follow-on from the survey. Eleven of the 22 survey respondents agreed to be interviewed for this next

phase, sharing their stories about their journey through compulsory school and tertiary education environments as dyslexic learners.

The key stakeholder voices of dyslexic people and their whānau/family are lacking in the dyslexia landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand. Exploring the dyslexic learner journey experience with dyslexic people provides an opportunity to reflect on an important area of vocational learning. Learner journeys are of particular interest in the current Aotearoa New Zealand tertiary educational landscape due to the Review of Vocational Education (RoVE) and the establishment of Te Pūkenga/ New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology.

This study adds a richness to the current research at a significant time of vocational and higher education reform in Aotearoa New Zealand's history. Additionally, it highlights the lived experience of dyslexic people at a time when the new Whaikaha – The Ministry of Disabled People emerges into the political arena of Aotearoa New Zealand. Actively listening to the participants, especially at such a critical time in Aotearoa New Zealand's educational and political history, adds depth and offers a point of difference to the national and international discussions surrounding dyslexia.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews and narrative analysis methods were used to gather the participants' personal experiences and perspectives. Recurring themes, patterns, and insights that emerged from the qualitative data were identified *(refer Interview Schedule, Appendix A)*. Qualitative methods of interviewing and narrative analysis enabled the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' realities as people with dyslexia and provided a comprehensive exploration of the research topic.

Literature Review

What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is exhibited in individuals with unexpected difficulties in reading, writing, and spelling, despite having average or above average intelligence, regardless of language (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2018). Early identification of dyslexia and intervention are recognised as key to individuals developing literacy learning strategies which assist them to develop strong literacy skills. Approaches to recognition and support for dyslexic learners vary across cultures, however learning support and accommodations are known to make a significant difference in the educational and employment success of individuals with dyslexia.

Internationally, Government legislation requires education and training providers to improve equity and diversity outcomes for all learners - including opportunities for dyslexic learners. For example, in the United Kingdom, under the Equity Act 2010, schools and higher education institutions must make 'reasonable adjustments' for students with learning differences. Similarly, in Australia dyslexia is recognised under the Australian Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and Disability Standards for Education 2005 and requires pre-service teacher training in identifying and working with dyslexic learners. Although dyslexia is recognised worldwide and across written languages, there is a lack of agreement in identification, assessment, and effective intervention. Legislation focuses primarily on implementing early education screening for dyslexia, improved training and skills development for new teachers to work with dyslexic students, the development of evidence-based educational support systems for dyslexic students, and guidelines for ongoing professional development for current teachers (Clemens & Vaughn, 2023).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) aligns with the Ministry of Education's Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities (NELP), which recognises that the education system needs to be listened to and be responsive to student needs to empower them to achieve their aspirations at all stages of learning. The key focus of the strategy is on the achievement and wellbeing of all learners, reducing barriers to success, and strengthening the quality of teaching, to give learners the skills they need to succeed in education, work, and life. The push for more recognition and support for dyslexic learners internationally and in New Zealand has come from dyslexia and neurodiversity advocacy groups rather than new evidence from the research community.

Discourses of dyslexia

Definitions of dyslexia, recognition of the lifetime impacts of dyslexia, and the approaches to supporting dyslexic individuals vary across medical, psychological, and sociological discourses. Discourses are produced within societies and

groups based on what knowledge is believed to be true and false. The discipline or specialist area then controls, selects, and communicates this knowledge, influencing the priority issues given and the types of services provided. There is no consensus on the definition, specific criteria, or cut-off points for determining dyslexia, although it is generally recognised as a multifunctional learning disability.

The importance of dyslexia discourse

Without consensus on what dyslexia is and how it is defined, the proportion of the population within countries identified as dyslexic is difficult to establish (Helland, 2022). This lack of understanding and lack of clear criteria means there are issues in justifying and providing study or training support. Several discourses explore various perspectives on dyslexia, each with its distinct focus and implications. For example, the medical/biological deficit discourse perceives dyslexia as a discrepancy between writing skills and intellectual abilities, attributing it to physiological or genetic issues, particularly in the left hemisphere of the brain, deemed to be a permanent and limiting condition (Helland, 2022). In contrast, the cognitive/educational psychology discourse adopts an 'evidence-based' approach, defining dyslexia as a dysfunction in information processing that hampers various cognitive abilities, with remediation programs primarily addressing the literacy-IQ discrepancy.

The phonological processing discourse interprets dyslexia as a phonological (speech and sounds) processing deficit,. It is considered as an inherited, lifelong condition, which can be remediated through the development of decoding skills over time to automatise word recognition. Lastly, the socio-environmental approach acknowledges the insights from the previous discourses but introduces an environmental aspect, recognising that societal enablers and constraints, such as disclosure processes, focus on the 'normal' learner, and class size, can empower or disempower the dyslexic individual (Helland, 2022). Also, teaching, cultural attitudes, and socio-economic factors can influence perceptions of literacy and definitions of dyslexia.

The term 'developmental dyslexia' was developed from the phonological approach to identify there were dyslexic individuals who failed to meet English reading and writing progression markers despite appropriate teaching methods and intervention (Dymock & Nicholson, 2012). Dymock and Nicholson consider dyslexia as a limiting condition that can be overcome with intensive decoding and spelling instruction in early reading development. A recent review of adult literacy and teaching intervention studies also indicates that dyslexia occurs across languages and improvements in literacy development can still be made with dyslexic adults despite the language base (Vender, Melloni, & Delfittoi, 2022). While the authors explain the relationship between teaching literacy and literacy development and possible impacts on lifelong opportunities, they state that a developmental dyslexia approach does not account for the other characteristics of dyslexia, such as the

dyslexic learner's strengths, the strategies dyslexic learners develop to deal with literacy-based tasks, and the influence of environmental factors.

The discourse of dyslexia presented, and taken on board, affects teachers' and learners' perceptions of the dyslexic characteristics individuals experience, and the challenges they face. This in turn limits remediation approaches, and the possibilities for change. While the number of research publications on dyslexia and the dyslexic learning experience has increased over the last two decades, few studies define the discourse of dyslexia used (Helland, 2022).

Definitions of dyslexia

Definitions of dyslexia vary according to the prevailing discourse in use. The International Dyslexia Association (2002) educational psychology-based discourse, defines dyslexia as:

> "A specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterised by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge." (n.d.).

The British Dyslexia Association's (2010) definition of dyslexia is, however, the most widely accepted definition, defining dyslexia as a difficulty rather than a disability, thereby recognising its specific characteristics in relation to literacy and the life-long effects and strengths of dyslexia:

> "Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities. It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points. Co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor coordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation, but these are not, by themselves, markers of dyslexia. A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds or has responded to well-founded intervention." (n.d.).

In addition to these characteristics, the British Dyslexia Association (BDA) acknowledges the visual and auditory processing difficulties that some individuals with dyslexia can experience and points out that dyslexic readers can show a combination of abilities and difficulties that affect the learning process. Some

also have strengths in other areas, such as design, problem solving, creative skills, interactive skills and oral skills.

The Ministry of Education (2020) recognises the need for focused and extended support in the teaching of literacy, stating that within the classroom inclusive education principles, such as those used in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and multi-sensory, strengths-based approaches to learning will benefit dyslexic learners (Te Kete Ipurangi, 2023). The Ministry also uses the definition adopted by the advocacy group The Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand (DFNZ) (2023):

"Dyslexia is a specific learning difference which is constitutional in origin and which, for a given level of ability, may cause unexpected difficulties in the acquisition of certain literacy and numeracy skills. Dyslexia is not an intellectual impairment. Constitutional in origin refers to the fact that dyslexia has a substantive neurobiological basis. Structured literacy teaching is essential and can impact positively on the progress and achievement of students with dyslexia." (p. 1).

In addition, the DFNZ (2023) notes that in learning environments, individuals with dyslexia are often seen as 'slow' or 'struggling' with reading and writing and if left undiagnosed these difficulties compound. This has implications for adults with dyslexia due to the reliance on written text formats and requirements in the workplace and wider society, such as form filling, email communication, and physical and virtual information training platforms.

Assessment for Dyslexia

Dyslexia is difficult to assess. Individuals with dyslexia are commonly misdiagnosed or even missed entirely (Wagner, 2018). As there are no widely accepted assessment processes, both formal and informal assessments for dyslexia are used in New Zealand. The learning advocacy group, Specific Learning Difficulties NZ (SPELD NZ), has actively supported children and adults with a range of specific learning difficulties, including dyslexia, since the 1970s. SPELD NZ provide diagnostic assessment services using the Woodcock-Johnson range of tests which include language and auditory skills, visual skills and spatial awareness, speed of processing and short- and long-term memory.

Assessments can be used to provide the information required by New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) for the provision of Special Assessments Conditions (SAC). To meet SAC conditions, evidence of dyslexia may also be collected by special education needs and learning support staff in compulsory education or registered educational psychologists who recommend SAC that are required (NZQA, 2023). Time limitations on the period of assessment may be applied, meaning adults entering post-schooling training or study may require re-testing.

Dyslexia Characteristics and Lived Experiences

While the negative characteristics of dyslexia in learning may be apparent to learners and teachers, other personal and environmental factors such as interest in the subject area and having supportive teachers and family members also impact positively on academic achievement (Gibson & Kendall, 2010; Rowan 2014). In the school context, dyslexic learners may be directed to 'try harder, focus more, work on their spelling' at the expense of recognition of achievements, and this impacts on learner motivation and self-esteem. Low expectations from teachers means learners are often encouraged or restricted in subject choices from academic to vocational subjects (Pollack, 2005; Gibson & Kendall, 2010). Dyslexic learners may also be subject to verbal abuse or other forms of non-physical bullying from their classroom peers in compulsory education (Pollack, 2005; Gibson & Kendall, 2010). These experiences can shape the dyslexic adult's view of themselves and their educational capabilities.

Most articles on the dyslexic experiences of adult learners are situated within socio-medical and educational psychology discourses. For example, in a meta-study of 178 research articles, Reis et al. (2020) looked at comparative studies that considered three factors: i) the difference between adult dyslexic reading and reading-associated skills and non-dyslexic readers; ii) whether the use of speed measures versus accuracy measures is appropriate in adult learners who have had longer exposure to textual materials than children; and iii) how orthographic transparency affects the generation of reading profiles of dyslexic adults. Qualitative studies of the dyslexic learning experiences of adults are smaller in scale but provide more detail of individual perceptions and factors contributing to those perspectives, for example Pollack's (2005) study of 30 United Kingdom adult dyslexics' life experiences.

There is a small number of niche studies of the lived experiences of dyslexic people in Aotearoa New Zealand. Marshall, Hocking, and Wilson (2006) studied the narratives of eight 9-14-year-olds with specific learning difficulties, finding these young people needed to understand why they were experiencing problems in their learning. Rowan (2010) considered the impacts of dyslexia on learners in compulsory education from the perspective of four young adults in their first year of study at one university, where learners experienced teacher and system ignorance of their learning difficulties and needs. Inappropriate support was offered in an ad hoc manner which impacted on their success.

Wilson and Savery (2013) studied the discourses of dyslexia of four undergraduate students, identifying five themes: 1. Resilience; 2. the positive impact of identification; 3. self-awareness; 4. compensatory strategies; and 5. the positive consequences of being open about dyslexia. Rowan (2014) identified stages important in the transition of four dyslexic students to tertiary study: 1. the discourse of dyslexia presented in recognition of their learning difficulties; 2. the

Photographer: Lance McCaughan

process of acceptance and reconciliation that dyslexia could not be 'fixed'; 3. the importance of self confidence

in building determination; and 4. the need to be able to self-advocate if dyslexic learners were to build academic resilience and academic buoyancy to cope with the rigours of academic study. These studies contribute to the identification of seven key themes in the literature on the lived experiences of dyslexic people, as follows:

1. **Age of Dyslexia Identification -** Early diagnosis of dyslexia has significant impact on self-confidence, and the types of learning support dyslexic learners receive (Pitt & Soni, 2018; Rowan 2010, 2014). Marshall, Hocking and Wilson (2006) and Rowan (2014) found dyslexic learners' self-esteem increased after diagnosis, as having a label explained the difficulties faced in school. This knowledge countered self-concepts of being 'thick' or 'slow'. In turn, self-esteem increased, confidence built as learners identified as having a different way of thinking or learning style and recognised their abilities (Gibson & Kendall, 2010; Pollack, 2005).

   The earlier the diagnosis, the more likely the family will seek or advocate for support for learning; the learner experiences positive effects on achievement, self-belief and resilience develop. This leads to the growth of a positive, more holistic dyslexic identity, which is known to be important to ongoing academic success (Connor, 2013; Marshall, Hocking, & Wilson, 2006; Pitt & Soni, 2018; Rowan, 2014). In a study of 553 Australian students with learning challenges/ disability, Grimes, Southgate, Scevak, & Buchanan (2021) found even with an assessment, the majority of students with learning challenges do not disclose them and move through study without any accommodation and support.

2. **Dyslexic Identity** - Individuals have unique accounts of personal experiences of dyslexia, its characteristics and ways of adapting to overcome its challenges (O'Byrne, Jagoe, & Lawler 2019; Rowan, 2010, 2014). The recognition of individual dyslexic characteristics and strengths means individualised learning techniques developed over time are integrated into the dyslexic identity, used, and contribute to further learning success (Pollack, 2005). The different discourses of dyslexia shape the dyslexic's identity (Chanock, 2007). The focus of definitions and teachings on the negative characteristics of dyslexia in learning can impact on academic achievement and dyslexic learner identity.

   Barriers to success and lack of teacher awareness of the effects of dyslexia on learning significantly influence learner confidence. Despite this, adult dyslexic learners hold a view of their dyslexia as being an academic difference rather than a disability or disadvantage (O'Byrne, Jagoe, & Lawler, 2010; Pollack, 2005; Rowan, 2014). With self-identification as a dyslexic, the learner is more likely to register early with learning support, know the type of accommodations they need and why, thus increasing the likelihood of success in their study (Connor, 2013).

3. **Self-Advocacy –** To access the resources and learning support they need for post-compulsory learning; dyslexic learners must be able to self-advocate (O'Byrne, Jagoe, & Lawler, 2019; Rowan, 2014). Advocating for oneself leads to the development of positive academic self-concepts (Pitt & Soni, 2018). Earlier school experience is known to have ongoing effects on the dyslexic learner continuing their education (Gibson & Kendall, 2010; Rowan 2014) and in the workplace (Pollack, 2005). Being placed in the bottom or lower-ability class groups and being unable to move higher due to effects of dyslexia on grades (Gibson & Kendall, 2010) affects possible choices and transition to further education (Rowan, 2010).

   Dyslexic learners are self-aware, knowing that they have a good work ethic as they must put in more time and effort to achieve the same work as their peers (O'Byrne, Jagoe, & Lawler, 2019). The strength of their self-belief and resilience influences their ability to self-advocate. Grimes et al. (2021) found self-advocacy skills can be taught and Rowan (2014) showed that dyslexic learners who had developed self-advocacy skills in earlier schooling were better able to access learning support services at university. Self-advocacy is important due to the misunderstandings of what dyslexia is and how it affects learners differently.

4. **Resilience -** Being resilient requires individuals to be flexible and adaptable in the face of obstacles that are likely to cause them further difficulties (Miller, 2002). Dyslexic learners who are resilient can identify activities (for example, sport or art) where they can succeed and work on those to gain and feel successful. Learners who are not as resilient struggle to create or find activities and experiences where they can feel successful in pursuing them, comparing themselves with their peers. This leads to decreased motivation and diminished self-determination (Miller, 2002; Pollack, 2005; Rowan, 2014). Wilson and Savery (2013) and Rowan (2010) describe learners' perseverance in working harder, requiring more time to succeed than their peers, and the need for internal motivation to do so.

   Having supportive peer groups and networks increases resilience and counters the socio-emotional effects of the difficulties with learning (Wilson & Savery, 2013). Resilient learners can identify teachers or other learning support people who find ways to teach these learners or give them extra attention. In turn, this positive attention meant students developed resilience and means to respond to unsupportive teachers (Miller, 2002). Generally, having been tested for dyslexia and being able to acknowledge the presence of their learning challenges helped to build resilience (Gibson & Kendall, 2010; Rowan, 2014).

   In a recent Australian narrative study of dyslexia experiences of work and wellbeing in the workplace, Wissell, Karimi, Serry, Furlong and Hudson (2020) found when individuals had more autonomy in their jobs and in managing their dyslexia, they were more likely to have higher levels of self-efficacy and build resilience. However, employees saw disclosure of dyslexia as a questionable

position with acceptance by some managers and colleagues and dismissal by others. While disclosure is a means to build autonomy and control in the workplace, others reported concerns about being misunderstood, ridiculed, made vulnerable or not being taken seriously. Pollack (2005) also found dyslexic people end up working longer hours to cope with work demands, resulting in substantial fatigue and sometimes isolation from work peers.

5. **Relationships and Support Networks**. Family provides the first level of support for most dyslexic learners recognising the challenges faced in formal learning and seeking help (Pollack, 2005; Rowan, 2010). Parents advocate for dyslexic children within formal education, expecting teachers to understand learning differences. All learners need to be accepted and acknowledged; informal and formal relationships build social and learning support networks and a sense of belonging (Grimes, 2020). To improve a sense of belonging, learners with dyslexia need to connect with their peers and teachers; however, earlier school experiences of being dyslexic can be a barrier to connecting with new people. In earlier schooling, dyslexic learners may develop coping strategies such as humour and pragmatism to fit in (Connor, 2013). Dyslexic learners can experience bullying in early education; close and supportive peer relationships can counter harassment caused by the lack of understanding of learning differences (Gibson & Kendall, 2010). Building peer-to-peer relationships and working or connecting with others with similar learning challenges helps to build belonging and academic identity (Grimes, 2020). Teachers who recognise a range of abilities and show support and respect for dyslexic learners' study and progress can help to improve learning relationships in school.

6. **Accessing Learning Support and Resources** – The extra time dyslexic learners need to learn, complete assessments and deal with institutional processes is widely recognised (Grimes et al., 2021). Wilson and Savery (2013) found dyslexic students confident and open to sharing their learning differences with teaching staff had positive study consequences in accessing learning support in their studies. Similarly, Miller (2002) found resilient learners identified teachers whose teaching approach matched their way of learning or who gave them extra attention in learning.

   In contrast, Gibbons (2016) found the socio-emotional impact of the whole education experience disorientating and disempowering for dyslexic learners, meaning they were unlikely or unable to access learning support. Other learners were unable to locate information on the services available to them or how to access these (Rowan, 2014). Instead, learners worked to their strengths, selecting programmes of study that suited their strengths (Wilson & Savery, 2013). The discourse of dyslexia accepted also influences study choices, however over time dyslexic learners have been found to reframe the learning disability or difficulties discourse to a learning difference discourse (Pollack, 2005). Thus, they may not seek or accept the provisions offered under a disabilities

discourse. Grimes et al., (2021) also found when it is difficult to engage within the learning environment, motivation decreases and distractibility or the inability to concentrate and learn increases.

7. **Recognising Dyslexic Student Needs**. The different discourses of dyslexia held by stakeholders can be a communication barrier to learners receiving or accepting appropriate support (Chanock, 2006). In facilitating diversity and inclusion, Grimes (2020) suggests students' needs for learning are rarely considered in determining eligibility for learning support and accommodations. Instead, institutions rely on medical-legal approaches to fulfil legal requirements. This means that on enrolment learners are asked to disclose what accommodations and supports are on offer without knowing what support is available. Consequently, students' learning needs do not match the teaching or support on offer (Grimes et al., 2021). Resilient learners who understand themselves and have a strong dyslexic identity are able to identify what their needs are and confront discourse that disempowers them (Miller, 2002). Research on barriers and enablers or on the types of service programmes offered to disabled students, and whether these are successful or not, is more common than understanding the experiences of dyslexic learners. Most learners with learning challenges/disabilities do not disclose their learning needs; however, those who do disclose and receive appropriate accommodations are more likely to succeed (Grimes, 2020).

These themes from the literature were considered in the initial analysis of the survey data and in designing the questions for the semi-structured interviews for this project.

Findings: Key Themes

In analysing the narratives of the participants, five key themes emerged that encapsulate their experiences and insights within the educational landscape. These themes – Recognition, Reconciliation, Resourcefulness, Resilience, and Reflection – provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, strengths, and coping strategies used by dyslexic individuals throughout their learning journeys.

After examining the literature on dyslexia, particularly the experiences of dyslexic learners, limited emphasis on their resourcefulness and the strategies they use could be found. Additionally, while some authors observe the dyslexic learner's experience from an external viewpoint, this study encouraged participants to introspectively reflect on their experiences, as depicted in their personal stories.

Recognition, Reconciliation, Resourcefulness, Resilience, Reflection

Recognition: Recognition is pivotal for dyslexic individuals throughout their personal and educational journeys. Dyslexia can be identified early by educators or psychologists, or through informal acknowledgment by teachers or parents. In the educational environment, positive reinforcement, simple actions such as using green pens for feedback instead of red, can strengthen motivation and resilience. Conversely, the lack of recognition can lead to feelings of exclusion and disengagement in learning environments. Despite these challenges, many dyslexic individuals exhibit resilience and problem-solving skills. Recognition, at any life stage, provides them with the language to articulate their challenges and strengths, influencing life choices, self-esteem, and opportunities.

Reconciliation: Reconciliation involves dyslexic individuals acknowledging and harmonising their dyslexia with their life and learning experiences. This journey varies based on the timing and manner of dyslexia recognition; family and peer support are instrumental in this process. Recognising and embracing one's unique learning style is essential, as is the desire for personalised learning. The ability to adapt and find innovative solutions is a distinctive trait of dyslexic individuals, emphasising the importance of resilience, acceptance, and self-discovery.

Resourcefulness: Dyslexic individuals often exhibit resourcefulness, developing strategies to navigate challenges they face early on and throughout their lives and harness their unique skills, such as reading environments or understanding people deeply. Strategies like developing oral skills, counting letter points or using humour as a coping mechanism are some examples of their adaptability. The participants' narratives accentuate the transformation of perceived weaknesses into strengths and emphasise the importance of creativity and resilience in their journeys.

Resilience: Resilience is the capacity of dyslexic individuals to recover from challenges and keep going. Central to this is recognising their personal strengths and fostering self-determination. Many of the participants have integrated their dyslexic identity into their self-perception, using their experiences to construct successful learning and career paths. Resilience requires persistence, self-advocacy, and challenging unhelpful systems. Despite challenges, focusing on strengths and unique perspectives is key, exemplifying the commitment to excellence despite the hurdles faced.

Reflection: The participants' reflections provided insights into their experiences with dyslexia across various educational levels. Some participants, being dyslexic parents, grapple with the guilt of potentially passing on these traits. Their stories stress the importance of educators recognising and accommodating diverse learning styles, and informed educators who can identify and nurture learners' potential. Their narratives emphasise the importance of determination, effort, and the role of supportive educators in their success.

These key themes collectively portray the participants' journeys as dyslexic individuals and offer valuable insights into their strengths, adaptability, and personal growth. Their personal stories serve as a testament to the remarkable capacity for self-discovery and resilience in the face of learning differences. Within these rich stories, there are other themes of resilience and the transformative power of reframing personal achievements. Despite the hurdles they faced in earlier years, many of the participants have found new paths that allow them to make a meaningful impact on the lives of others who confront similar challenges, embodying the strength of their journeys with dyslexia.

The Stories

The participants have each embarked on unique journeys with dyslexia, navigating through a spectrum of challenges such as Irlen syndrome, mathematical difficulties, struggles with reading, writing, and spelling. They have also experienced profound self-discovery and undergone transformative shifts in perspective. Their narratives are marked by resilience, unwavering determination, and a commitment to overcoming obstacles – stories of personal success and the power of persistence.

Alongside their challenges, each of them possess unique talents and characteristics, highlighting the strengths that dyslexic individuals bring to the world. Their stories emphasise the importance of recognising and accommodating diverse learning styles and advocating for more inclusive educational approaches. Together, these individuals' stories illustrate the multidimensional nature of dyslexia, and the potential for personal and professional growth, resilience, and success when supported and understood.

Sophie, a lecturer currently pursuing advanced tertiary studies, has dyslexia characteristics that make reading a breeze for her. Spelling and grammar, on the other hand, pose challenges.

Background Story: Sophie's journey with dyslexia hasn't been without its share of obstacles. In particular, she faced significant difficulties when it came to writing, especially in the realms of grammar and spelling. These challenges often made the writing process feel like an uphill battle.

Past Experiences: To navigate these hurdles, Sophie discovered a valuable strategy. She realised the importance of breaking down the writing process into distinct stages. Initially, she focused solely on capturing her ideas, free from the constraints of grammar or spelling. This approach allowed her thoughts to flow without interruption. Next, she meticulously organised her ideas and ensured they were in the right place, constructing a solid framework for her work. Lastly, she tackled the daunting task of making her writing grammatically correct, often seeking assistance from her partner.

Recognising her difficulties with grammar and spelling, Sophie actively sought help from individuals who excelled in these areas. She openly admired their grammatical skills and wasn't afraid to ask for their support in checking her work. Additionally, she found digital tools like Grammarly invaluable, empowering her to take on substantial academic endeavours, including pursuing a Ph.D.

Story Now: Despite the ongoing challenges, Sophie has learned to be open about her dyslexia with colleagues and collaborators. She chooses to make her dyslexia public, even in the face of potential teasing about her spelling. Early in her

educational journey, she had a teacher who recognised her potential instead of dwelling on her difficulties. This teacher's approach emphasised alternative ways of expressing ideas and accepting help, leaving a lasting impact on Sophie's journey.

One of the key themes in Sophie's story is the importance of focusing on strengths rather than fixating on weaknesses. She isn't afraid to accept corrections, challenge traditional writing formats, or leverage her unique perspective. Sophie firmly believes that knowledge should be measured beyond writing alone, and she continues to champion her strengths, resilience, and pursuit of excellence despite the hurdles posed by dyslexia.

Proudest Moment: When she could write something without anyone spotting a mistake.

> "I think I would be proud if I had written something, and no one had spotted a mistake in it. Using Spell-checker made it possible to take on big study works like a PhD."

Key themes for Sophie's story:

Sophie's story revolves around several key themes. First, she relies on lists and structure to manage her life, highlighting the significance of organisation in coping with dyslexia. Her remarkable emotional intelligence allows her to navigate social dynamics adeptly, illustrating how dyslexia can coexist with unique strengths. Sophie's candid acknowledgment of her phonological challenges emphasises the importance of addressing specific dyslexia-related difficulties.

Her journey from dropping out of school to earning a Master's degree underscores resilience and personal growth in the face of adversity. Throughout her journey, Sophie benefits immensely from the support of her husband, mentor, and colleagues, underscoring the importance of a strong support network. Her willingness to openly share her experiences and challenges raises awareness about dyslexia's emotional impact, highlighting the power of self-advocacy and education. Additionally, her story serves as a testament to the significance of recognising and leveraging individual strengths when dealing with dyslexia, emphasising the role of self-advocacy within a supportive network in addressing dyslexia-related challenges.

Malcolm, a Student Advisor, Disability, faces challenges with spelling and information processing. He requires additional time to think, conceptualise, recall, and respond. Additionally, he experiences directional confusion, often mixing up left and right.

Background Story: Malcolm's journey with dyslexia began early in his life, and it was marked by struggles, particularly in the realm of mathematics. Yet, Malcolm was a resourceful problem solver, and he devised innovative strategies to navigate these challenges, such as counting letter points. In the face of adversity, humour became his shield, concealing his difficulties from both peers and educators. Malcolm's talent in art shone bright, but he eventually made the difficult decision to drop out of school during the third form, which had a significant impact on his self-esteem.

Past Experiences: Fear of exams and a series of academic setbacks haunted Malcolm's school years, leaving his confidence shattered. His dream of becoming a police officer gradually faded, replaced by a cloud of self-doubt. Malcolm grappled with the labels of "laziness" or "stupidity" that were often assigned to those who struggled in school.

However, an intriguing twist in Malcolm's life led him down a different path. He began to explore the potential connection between inner ear problems like Meniere's disease, hearing loss, and learning difficulties, including dyslexia. He believed that this link was often overlooked by educational psychologists. His proudest moment came when he earned a diploma in teaching people with disabilities, marking a significant turning point in his perspective on achievements.

Story Now: Today, Malcolm has found purpose in assisting others who face similar challenges. He aligns his abilities and interests with his career path, using his own experiences to guide and support others. Reflecting on his transition from high school to the working world, Malcolm shared a personal experience of abrupt job termination, highlighting the uncertainties that this phase of life can bring.

Proudest Moment: Successfully completing a diploma in teaching people with disabilities, prompting a shift in his perspective on achievements.

> "I remember getting pulled out of class and it was very daunting. I don't think teachers realise how daunting it is for kids when you get pulled out of class, whether that's into a little reading group as they used to call it and you're not in the big reading group. So you feel different."

Key themes for Malcolm's story:

Malcolm's story weaves together several central themes that highlight his journey. In the face of early struggles with math, Malcolm's resourcefulness shines through as he develops innovative strategies like counting letter points, showcasing his

adaptability and creative problem-solving skills. Additionally, humour serves as his shield, enabling him to navigate dyslexia-related challenges, emphasising the powerful role humour plays in coping with adversity.

Furthermore, Malcolm's artistic talents emerge as a source of confidence and accomplishment, underscoring the importance of recognising and nurturing individual strengths. His decision to pursue alternative pathways, including teaching people with disabilities, reflects his unwavering determination to define his own path to success, highlighting the significance of recognising and pursuing unique routes to achievement. Malcolm's exploration of the connection between inner ear problems and learning difficulties sheds light on the importance of advocating for comprehensive assessments and considering often overlooked factors in addressing learning challenges. Throughout his journey, Malcolm's resilience in the face of setbacks and self-doubt stands out, emphasising the transformative power of shifting one's perspective on personal achievements and learning differences. Finally, his story underscores the crucial role played by supportive individuals, including his mentor and colleagues, highlighting the significance of a strong support network while navigating challenges associated with dyslexia.

"During school years, I received limited support or accommodations. Dealing with ADHD has posed challenges, but I've found ways to manage and adapt my learning strategies." Rachel van Gorp, project participant "Margaret".

Margaret, a senior lecturer at a polytechnic, has a unique way of processing information. She visualises everything, turning spoken words into mental stories. She struggles with phonology but excels in processing and organising information in a structured manner.

Background Story: Margaret's story revolves around her dyslexia journey, where she found comfort and control in creating lists as a means of bringing structure to her life. This approach provided her with a sense of order in a world that could often feel overwhelming. Additionally, Margaret possessed a unique talent for reading social dynamics and sensing the atmosphere in a room, highlighting her emotional intelligence.

Past Experiences: Despite excelling in various areas, Margaret openly acknowledged her challenges with phonological sounds and pronunciation, particularly in languages like English. To cope with these difficulties, she actively sought help from knowledgeable individuals and leaned on tools like Google for support.

Her educational path included dropping out of school and later pursuing a Master's degree, reflecting a journey marked by resilience and personal growth. Margaret came to realise that her aptitude for comprehending complex concepts didn't always translate to mastering subtleties in instructions.

Story Now: Today, Margaret has found purpose in assisting others who face similar challenges, aligning her abilities and interests with her career path. Reflecting on her transition from high school to the working world, she shared a personal experience of abrupt job termination, emphasising the uncertainties that this phase of life can bring.

Proudest Moment: Achieving a Master's degree and openly sharing her personal experiences and challenges at a symposium, shedding light on the emotional impact of opening up about her struggles and accomplishments.

> "During school years, I received limited support or accommodations. Dealing with ADHD has posed challenges, but I've found ways to manage and adapt my learning strategies."

Key themes for Margaret's story:

Margaret's narrative encompasses several key themes that illuminate her journey. Her use of lists to create structure in her life underscores the importance of finding effective strategies to manage the overwhelming aspects of dyslexia. This theme emphasises the power of organisation and planning as vital tools in overcoming dyslexia-related challenges. Additionally, Margaret's remarkable emotional intelligence, as evidenced by her ability to read social dynamics and sense room atmospheres, highlights the coexistence of unique strengths alongside dyslexia-

related challenges. Her story serves as a testament to the idea that dyslexia does not define a person's abilities but rather adds to the complexity of their skill set.

Moreover, Margaret's candid acknowledgment of her difficulties with phonological sounds and pronunciation emphasises the importance of recognising and addressing specific dyslexia-related challenges. Her journey reflects resilience and personal growth, showcasing her ability to adapt and grow beyond the confines of dyslexia-related setbacks. Throughout her narrative, the support she receives from various sources underscores the significance of having a strong support network while navigating the challenges posed by dyslexia. Margaret's story demonstrates that with determination, support, and effective strategies, individuals with dyslexia can achieve personal growth and success.

Robert, a portrait photographer, has the unusual ability to read mirror reflections and upside-down text. Writing things down is challenging for him, and he relied heavily on his memory during primary school. He perceives the world in a series of mental pictures and associates words with their shapes. For math problems, he employs his unique approach, breaking them down into his own processes for solutions. His exceptional skill lies in pattern recognition.

Background Story: Robert's story is one of resilience and personal growth in the face of dyslexia-related challenges. Despite encountering difficulties in reading and writing, he chose to approach life with a laid-back and resilient attitude. Robert dedicated himself to improving his reading and writing skills, determined to overcome the assumptions others made about his abilities.

Past Experiences: As Robert learned to live and cope with dyslexia, he discovered unexpected strengths. His talents in photography and confident oral communication became apparent, even without an in-depth knowledge base. Engaging in practical activities like baking and building projects motivated him, fostering independent thinking and the development of critical articulation skills. Robert's unique reading approach involved meticulous attention to detail, breaking down words and sentences into manageable chunks. Remarkably, he excelled in complex mathematics, demonstrating precision in piecing together intricate problems and interpreting instructions.

However, Robert also faced misunderstandings and confrontations due to his unconventional problem-solving methods, which were initially misinterpreted by a teacher. Fortunately, his mother's unwavering advocacy played a pivotal role in recognising his unique thinking style. This recognition ultimately led to his placement in an advanced math class, showcasing the importance of early recognition of difficulties and family support.

Story Now: Photography became Robert's source of solace and confidence, providing an outlet that diverted attention away from dyslexia-related challenges. His story exemplifies the impact of determined advocacy, the significance of early recognition of difficulties, and the invaluable support of family in overcoming reading and writing challenges associated with dyslexia. It reaffirms the power of resilience and unwavering determination in navigating the complexities of dyslexia.

Proudest Moment: In Robert's own words,

> "I memorised the New Testament word perfect" The sound of rustling paper as people checked my quotes was just about deafening. I'd give a quote and then everyone got out their Bibles and checked the quote and found I was dead accurate."

"People make assumptions. They've only got a bit of information about you, and they decide to make an assumption at that point rather than waiting until there's further information."

Key themes for Robert's story:

Robert's story is shaped by several prominent themes that illustrate his journey. At its core is his determination and resilient attitude in the face of dyslexia-related challenges. These qualities stand out as central themes, highlighting the remarkable strength of character that has guided him through adversity, serving as a source of inspiration for others facing similar struggles.

The discovery of strengths within himself, particularly in areas such as photography, oral communication, and mathematics, highlights the idea that dyslexia can co-exist with unique talents and abilities, demonstrating that one's potential is not limited by their learning differences. Also, the role of family support and advocacy, especially his mother's, is a key theme in Robert's journey. It shows the importance of early recognition of learning difficulties and advocating for appropriate support and interventions. Robert's unique problem-solving methods and thinking style further illustrate the value of recognising diverse approaches to learning and understanding the challenges of dyslexia. Ultimately, Robert's story is a celebration of personal triumph over dyslexia-related challenges and serves as a powerful reaffirmation of the power of resilience and determination in overcoming obstacles.

"I find it easier to communicate/tell my story either in speech or in photographs. I would rather create a photo than write a story." Project participant John, 2023.

John, an education tutor, grapples with spelling and struggles with memory and recall; information tends to fade after a minute. He considers himself audio-challenged, finding phonics ineffective while relying on visual cues for learning and spelling letter by letter.

Background Story: John's story revolves around their remarkable talents as a gifted artist with a profound ability to visualise and create. Their creative process is a significant part of their life, consuming considerable energy. John attributes their compassion and empathy to their neurodiversity, recognising it as a valuable aspect of their identity alongside dyslexia.

Past Experiences: Reading and writing have posed lifelong challenges for John, leading to frustration and anger, especially within the confines of the traditional academic system. However, their journey took an alternative route when they found fulfilment as an apprentice builder, engaging in hands-on learning that suited their unique learning style. Eventually, they earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts and embarked on a career as a secondary school teacher, despite being introverted and uninterested in competition.

John had unwavering support from his mother, who provided patience and assistance throughout his adulthood. Despite facing difficulties during his academic pursuits, including challenges with writing and spelling, he managed to earn an Arts degree. His proudest moment came when he obtained a postgraduate degree in teaching, a significant achievement that made his mother proud.

Story Now: Today, John's story underscores the importance of recognising and accommodating diverse learning styles, advocating for alternative teaching methods, and acknowledging the impact of supportive networks. These factors collectively contribute to academic success for dyslexic individuals.

Proudest Moment: Obtaining a postgraduate degree in teaching, making their mother proud.

> "I got very angry and frustrated; I couldn't get things done on time. Very draining - it defeats you. The academic system runs you over so many times."

Key themes for John's story:

John's journey portrays his resilience and unique talents, as his story emphasises the importance of recognising and appreciating the diverse abilities that come with neurodiversity, particularly the qualities of compassion and empathy that he attributes to his unique cognitive profile.

His career path from an apprentice builder to a teacher is another example of his resilience and resourcefulness. This highlights the important role of a strong support network, such as the unwavering support from his mother in navigating the challenges he faces with dyslexia. Additionally, his academic achievements, including a postgraduate degree in teaching, are evidence that dyslexic individuals can excel with the right support and learning interventions, offering inspiration to others on a similar journey.

Helen, a manager, struggles with maths, but possesses a photographic memory for certain things. She can often rapidly arrive at answers intuitively without going through formal thought processes. Short-term memory issues and difficulty staying focused are other challenges she faces. Helen also has Irlen's Syndrome.

Background Story: Helen's story delves into the multifaceted aspects of her dyslexia, highlighting the presence of Irlen syndrome, mathematical challenges, a tendency to jump to answers without conscious processing, and difficulties with spelling. Despite these obstacles, Helen possesses a photographic memory and unconventional problem-solving skills that have enabled her to navigate the complexities of traditional educational settings.

Past Experiences: Helen's academic journey has been marked by the struggle to find accommodating learning environments within traditional educational settings. She recounts instances where some lecturers lacked flexibility in supporting dyslexic learners, emphasising the need for adaptable teaching methods. To manage these challenges, she adopted alternative learning approaches, including visual aids and support from inclusive education and disability services.

Her academic achievements are notable, with Helen excelling both in school and later in her tertiary studies. She earned an 'A' in science and pursued an Arts degree, then as a postgraduate making a unique contribution in the field of science research. These achievements defy expectations and illustrate her capability in tackling complex subjects. However, setbacks, such as not completing her thesis due to exhaustion and a lack of support, highlight the challenges she has overcome.

Story Now: Throughout her story, Helen passionately advocates for equal treatment and recognition of the strengths and potential of dyslexic individuals. She is concerned about the academic future of dyslexic children due to the lack of understanding of the complexities of dyslexia in learning. Her journey showcases the importance of resilience, unique problem-solving abilities, and the pressing need for more inclusive educational approaches.

Proudest Moment: Earning an 'A' in science and engaging in post-graduate scientific research, which for her demonstrated her capability to tackle complex subjects.

> "Reading and writing on screen, words move around. Can get the start and the end of things but things in the middle go, writing and making the connections between the start and the end, the pathways between."

Key themes for Helen's story:

Helen's journey spotlights the varied traits linked to dyslexia, emphasising the need for personalised support and adapted accommodations. Her story also highlights the challenges of navigating traditional education and the importance of flexible teaching methods.

Her academic success, especially in science and research, shows that dyslexic individuals can excel in diverse fields. Helen's story is one of resilience and advocacy, emphasising the importance of self-advocacy and equal recognition of dyslexic strengths and capabilities. Helen's journey highlights the need for more inclusive compulsory and post-compulsory education that acknowledges and supports the unique needs and abilities of dyslexic learners where everyone can thrive in the educational system.

Megan is currently working toward a tertiary qualification related to her work in supporting children with educational needs. Expressing herself in words can be a challenge for her. She relies heavily on letter and word shapes and has a strong visual orientation. Often, she needs to read something multiple times to fully grasp it, especially when stress is a factor. She thrives in a calm environment with minimal visual distractions.

Background Story: Megan's story begins by shedding light on the specific challenges she faces in relation to dyslexia and her artistic strengths. She discusses how certain triggers related to the shape of letters and words can impede her reading and writing process. Megan's cognitive style is characterised by visual thinking, and she occasionally experiences letter interchange errors. Reading and writing can be a start-stop endeavour for her, often requiring re-reading to grasp the text's meaning. She emphasises the significance of a quiet environment for optimal concentration, as stress exacerbates these challenges.

Past Experiences: Megan attributes her strengths to her primary school teacher, Miss Cherry, who played a pivotal role in her dyslexia journey. Miss Cherry encouraged Megan to express herself freely in writing, using green ink to symbolise support rather than correction. This approach recognised that Megan's work presented opportunities for improvement rather than being entirely wrong.

English literacy remains a significant challenge for Megan, underscoring the importance of proofreaders in her academic journey. She recalls an early assignment experience where her content was strong, but occasional tense usage issues due to dyslexia emerged. Megan's ability to hide these challenges in spoken language makes them less immediately obvious to others. To overcome these hurdles, Megan values having someone proofread her work and provide feedback on clarity. She emphasises that not all educators fully understand her needs and prefers personalised support over a focus on grammatical details like tenses and punctuation.

Story Now: Megan's story underscores her resilience and determination to succeed. She has identified triggers and adapted her environment to enhance concentration. Her ability to separate environmental factors from personal challenges has been vital in adapting to academic settings.

Her strengths lie in her keen observational skills, intuitiveness, and ability to make accurate judgments about people and situations—skills nurtured by Miss Cherry's teaching approach. These skills have proven invaluable, particularly in the hospitality industry, where understanding customers' needs and emotions is paramount. Megan also draws strength from her belief in a spiritual entity, providing support and companionship throughout her dyslexia journey.

Proudest Moment: Megan's proudest moments are associated with academic accomplishments, such as earning an A on an assignment. Miss Cherry's early

guidance and support significantly influenced Megan's approach to challenges and learning.

> "I remember writing my very first assignment that I hadn't written, you know, it was a 3,000-word thing. And I was just like, I know I was all over the place, but I felt like I was in shock."

Key themes for Megan's Story:

A central theme in Megan's story is the invaluable support she received from her primary school teacher, Miss Cherry. Miss Cherry's encouragement and teaching methods had a profound impact on Megan's dyslexia journey, emphasising the vital role educators play in the lives of dyslexic individuals. Megan's struggles in English literacy stresses the importance of proofreaders and personalised support. This theme highlights the need for understanding and accommodating dyslexic individuals in academic settings, ensuring they have the assistance they require.

Another theme in Megan's story is her resilience and determination to succeed despite dyslexia-related challenges, illustrating the power of a positive mindset and self-advocacy in overcoming obstacles. Her ability to adapt her environment for optimal concentration shows the importance of flexibility and adaptability in academic settings for dyslexic individuals.

Megan's strengths in keen observational skills, intuitiveness, and accurate judgments are nurtured by Miss Cherry's teaching and have proven invaluable in her career and personal growth. Her belief in a spiritual entity providing support adds a unique dimension to her story, a strength she draws on. Finally, Megan's emphasis on individuals with dyslexia driving their own journey and managing their challenges with the right support and tools is a central theme, indicating the importance of self-determination and self-advocacy in achieving success despite dyslexia-related hurdles.

Anahera is employed by a Government agency working with young people while pursuing a Bachelor's degree. She finds math, particularly beyond the basics, to be challenging. On the other hand, English has become less of a hurdle for her over the years, although she occasionally struggles with page organisation and referencing.

Background Story: Anahera's journey with dyslexia encompasses challenges in both English and mathematics, with the latter remaining particularly daunting. Referencing and complex oral explanations in group work have also posed difficulties for her. Her journey highlights the persistence of these challenges and the need to adapt to succeed.

Past Experiences: Despite these challenges, Anahera's pragmatic approach and meticulous work style have played a significant role in her success. She demonstrates resilience learned from a 'rough background', using setbacks as opportunities for growth and adaptation.

Anahera places a high value on practical training, interactive learning, and discussions as effective tools for comprehension. She fondly remembers a primary school teacher who recognised her potential beyond behavioural challenges and encouraged interactive learning.

Story Now: Anahera's strengths are rooted in observation and intuitive learning. She prefers watching and applying knowledge from people rather than relying on traditional reading methods. She has an intense need to delve into and understand the workings behind mathematical approaches she uses in her work. Currently, she is pursuing a bachelor's degree with online learning and a flexible tutor to guide her, especially in referencing.

Proudest Moment: Earning a diploma in numeracy and literacy after 16 years without formal qualifications.

> "In school the frustration would make me [be violent], you can't do that at work, and someone said you need to find strategies, other ways of dealing with things like dealing with the people aspect. The people aspect really does me in because I find it hard enough to write a report, I need a lot of peace and quiet when I'm writing reports, because I need time to take what I think in my head, and just type it."

Key themes for Anahera's story:

Anahera's journey brings to light the idea that dyslexia comes with both unique challenges and strengths. Her story shows that being adaptable and resilient in the face of obstacles is essential when dealing with dyslexia. Her story reflects her resilience and ability to adapt when facing setbacks and challenges and reveals that learning from adversity can be a stepping stone to success, showing the importance of perseverance.

Additionally, Anahera's preference for practical training, interactive learning, and discussions illustrates the effectiveness of alternative teaching methods for dyslexic individuals. Her story also highlights the critical role of a primary school teacher who recognised Anahera's potential beyond her behavioural challenges. The significant impact of supportive educators in her dyslexia journey is evident. Anahera's strengths also lie in observation and intuitive learning, further demonstrating the diversity of learning styles among dyslexic individuals.

Claire, a healthcare assistant at a hospital, initially pursued a full-time degree at a polytechnic but faced difficulties with academic tasks due to dyslexia. She describes herself as slower in various tasks and often struggles to keep up with reading assignments. Her reading is more like skimming, as she has difficulty absorbing the meaning of the text. Writing is also slower than typical, and she faces difficulties with spelling, particularly with vowels.

Background Story: Claire's story as a dyslexic individual is characterised by specific dyslexic characteristics, including a constant feeling of time pressure and challenges in absorbing and processing information within set timeframes. While she could read, her reading style resembled skimming the surface, often requiring multiple readings to fully comprehend. Spelling posed occasional challenges, particularly with words containing many vowels. Claire's parents modelled a self-sufficient attitude which encouraged Claire to find her own solutions to problems.

Past Experiences: Throughout her school years, Claire faced difficulties in reading aloud and received limited support for her math-related struggles. To cope with these challenges, she developed her own strategies, such as utilising technology for text-to-speech functions and dictation. Problem-solving skills became essential in navigating her educational journey, as she learned to interpret nonverbal cues and enhance her communication skills.Claire emphasises the significance of educators recognising and accommodating diverse learning styles, as this empowerment can enable dyslexic individuals to excel. With a proper diagnosis and understanding of her condition, she gained the language to communicate her needs more effectively.

Story Now: Claire's strengths lie in empathy, excellent communication skills, problem-solving abilities, and a visual thinking approach, all of which have proven invaluable in her work with individuals with disabilities and mental illnesses. She has the ability to avidly communicate her ideas creating complex visual commentaries with her colleagues respecting her work experience and insight.

Proudest Moment: Having the resilience to continue her education and gain a deeper understanding of herself despite the obstacles she faced.

> "I now understand myself better. Like I said, not just in my study, but in life in general, I didn't have language around why I am the way I am, why I think the way I think. Whereas I do now, which has been just a game-changer for me."

Key themes for Claire's story:

Claire's journey is a tale of resilience and self-discovery. She faced her dyslexia head-on, learning how to overcome its challenges and gaining a deeper understanding of herself. Along the way, she found that dyslexia can manifest in various ways, such as struggles with reading and feeling pressured by time. Her story emphasises the importance of recognising and accommodating these unique traits in individuals with dyslexia.

Furthermore, Claire highlights the transformational power of educators supporting diverse learning styles. Proper diagnosis and understanding can empower dyslexic individuals to thrive academically. Central to her narrative are her strengths in empathy, communication, problem-solving, and visual thinking. These talents have played pivotal roles in her personal growth and professional endeavours.

William, now retired, expresses that he couldn't comprehend reading or writing throughout his life, finding no connection to either of these skills.

Background Story: William's journey as a dyslexic individual was marked by several challenges, particularly during his school years. He faced strict punishments for his struggles with reading and writing and received no support for his dyslexia. Additionally, he had a strict father who punished him for underperforming academically, mirroring the punishments he faced in school. His inquisitive nature often got him into trouble, and fear was a constant emotion throughout his childhood and early adulthood. To cope with these challenges, he resorted to self-sabotage as a coping mechanism.

Past Experiences: Despite these challenges, William persevered, driven by an inner determination because support for managing his dyslexia at school and at home was virtually non-existent. His inquisitiveness and thirst for knowledge remained constant in his journey.At the age of 40, a life-changing discovery occurred when he found cross-core muscle testing. This discovery helped him make sense of his dyslexia and provided him with a supportive community that didn't judge him. It was his first encounter with the term 'dyslexia'. He began exploring natural healthcare, gaining a new perspective on balancing his body, which led him to seek further information on the subject. William embarked on a journey of learning about left and right brain functions, ultimately diminishing the impact of his dyslexia. This process involved connecting physical actions with learning letters and words.

Story Now: Post-school, William successfully obtained his electrical certificate. The hands-on, practical nature of the discipline played to his strengths, enabling him to excel in areas such as numbers and computerisation. His talent for programming further influenced his success.

Proudest Moment: William recalled his proudest moments as receiving a Collins dictionary that he could use and immense pride in his daughter, who, like him, has dyslexia. She has become a successful school teacher, passing on her knowledge and achieving great success with her students. Finally, learning that there was a word, 'dyslexia' to describe what was going on in his head was another significant milestone in his life.

> "At 40 years of age, I discovered cross-core muscle testing, and it was like a bombshell landed on me. I grew another 2 metres because I had found a reason for my dyslexia, it made sense. This was the first time I had heard the word 'dyslexia'."

Key themes for William's story:

William's story is one of resilience and determination. He faced many tough challenges in his younger years and didn't receive much support from teachers or his family; but he never gave up on his quest for knowledge and self-improvement.

His journey involved discovering more about himself, for example, when he found out about cross-core muscle testing and understood his dyslexia better, it "*changed everything*". This discovery helped him accept himself more and marked a significant turning point in his life.

William's exploration of natural healthcare and learning about how the left and right sides of the brain work led him to trying different ways to manage his dyslexia and discover his potential. His strengths of analytical thinking and practical skills played a big part in his achievements later in life, for example, when he successfully achieved an Electrical Certificate.

“Dyslexia has given me a gift to be my own boss and to line up those ducks [so I can move forward now]. I can write a CV and cover letter and apply for jobs.” Project participant Te Aroha, 2023.

Te Aroha holds casual employment and has a history of dealing with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). She openly discusses her dyslexia characteristics, which include experiencing words moving when reading or writing, and words not coming out in the expected order when speaking. She can feel overwhelmed by information. However, she excels in listening, sensing emotions, and reading body language.

Background Story: Te Aroha's dyslexic characteristics include a focus on non-verbal communication, storytelling, and a problem-solving mindset. Her unique approach to learning is influenced by these traits, as well as the weight of a violent family background and the trauma of being separated from her whānau, leading to PTSD. Her story reflects the complex interplay of fragility, boldness, and fear within her.

Past Experiences: Te Aroha has faced numerous challenges in her educational journey. While she successfully completed educational courses, such as a Mental Health Certificate with 400-word assignments, the leap to a diploma level with a 1000-word assignment became an insurmountable hurdle. Her knowledge and skills are often overshadowed by the struggle to put her thoughts into words.

Her schooling experience has been marked by frequent changes of schools and the inability of teachers and the system to recognise her needs beyond her disruptive behaviour. Te Aroha talks about how words are still a barrier for her, and she needs help from understanding people to access support services for dyslexics.

Story Now: Recently, Te Aroha has started building a support network, including a literacy and numeracy tutor and a pending full SPELD test to address her dyslexia-related challenges. Despite her difficulty with words, Te Aroha possesses a unique strength in understanding people and environments, relying on a visual approach to organise her thoughts.

Proudest Moment: Completing the Wananga o Aotearoa Literacy Certificate and having Kaiako confirming her unique gifts.

> "Dyslexia has given me a gift to be my own boss and to line up those ducks [so I can move forward now]. I can write a CV and cover letter and apply for jobs."

Key themes for Te Aroha's story:

Te Aroha's journey has several significant themes. Firstly, her story identifies her distinct characteristics that often accompany dyslexia, such as a strong focus on non-verbal communication and problem-solving. These traits define how she learns and interacts with the world around her.

Secondly, Te Aroha's story delves into the impact of a traumatic family background and PSTD on her life, revealing her remarkable inner strength in overcoming these significant challenges. Her educational path has been marked by hurdles, including

difficulty articulating her thoughts and a lack of recognition of her needs within the educational system. Despite these challenges, Te Aroha's journey highlights the importance of seeking support and finding resources, the diversity of dyslexic strengths, and the value of accommodating different learning styles to enable success.

In summary, these individuals have embarked on unique journeys with dyslexia, each marked by distinct characteristics and challenges. Their stories collectively illustrate resilience, self-discovery, and transformative shifts in perspective.

Their experiences highlight the power of neurodiversity, the importance of accommodating diverse learning styles, and the invaluable support of mentors and educators in overcoming obstacles. Their stories showcase remarkable creativity and analytical abilities and an unwavering thirst for knowledge, demonstrating the triumph of determination in the face of adversity.

Discussion

This research project explored the experiences of dyslexic learners in Aotearoa New Zealand, across compulsory school and tertiary education environments. The study was not only significant in addressing a national and global research gap but also timely, given the current educational reforms and policy changes in New Zealand and globally. By focusing on the perspectives of dyslexic individuals, the study offers a unique lens into their challenges and successes, especially as discussions around dyslexia gain momentum in both national and international arenas.

The primary goal was to shed light on the experiences of dyslexic learners, especially in tertiary education settings. By capturing the narratives of individuals with firsthand experiences of dyslexia, the study provides key insights that can inform educational strategies and policies. The lack of representation of dyslexic voices in the broader educational discourse of Aotearoa New Zealand accentuates the importance of this research.

Previous research endeavours into the experiences of dyslexic learners, such as a 2016 project funded by Ako Aotearoa, highlight the innate understanding dyslexics possess regarding their learning needs, the support they need from others, and the ways they can support themselves. These insights are reflected in the themes and findings from this study as they emphasise the importance of individualised learning approaches and the need for diverse educational support and resources.

The methodology used, comprising semi-structured interviews and narrative analysis, allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' learning experiences. Five themes emerged from the narratives: Recognition, Reconciliation, Resourcefulness, Resilience, and Reflection. These themes represent the multifaceted journey of dyslexic learners, from the pivotal role of recognition in shaping their educational and career pathways to the resilience they show in the face of challenges. Additionally, their reflections communicate their personal growth and the transformative power of reframing their ways of thinking and being.

Dyslexia affects individuals in different ways. For many, it can present considerable challenges, but it is essential to understand that dyslexia is not a reflection of intelligence or potential. Whilst traditional reading and writing were identified as challenging for some of the participants, several emphasised their strengths, such as visual processing, the creative arts, sporting agility, and intuitive problem-solving.

External support systems and networks play a pivotal role in the learning journey of dyslexic people. Support from family members, teachers, and mentors can make a significant difference in helping them navigate academic and personal challenges and help foster confidence and self-expression. Also, early recognition and intervention is vital. Recognising dyslexia and its associated challenges at an

early stage initiates the implementation of inclusive educational approaches at an early age. As evidenced by the participants' narratives, there is a clear gap in the acknowledgement and frequency of assessment and early intervention for dyslexia.

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Conclusion

The participants in this study have each embarked on unique journeys with dyslexia, navigating through a spectrum of challenges such as Irlen syndrome, mathematical difficulties, struggles with reading, writing, and spelling. They have also experienced profound self-discovery and undergone transformative shifts in perspective. Their narratives are marked by resilience, unwavering determination, and a commitment to overcoming obstacles – stories of personal success and the power of persistence.

Alongside their challenges, they each possess unique talents and characteristics, highlighting the strengths that dyslexic individuals bring to the world. Their stories emphasise the importance of recognising and accommodating diverse learning styles and advocating for more inclusive educational approaches. Together, these individuals' stories illustrate the multidimensional nature of dyslexia, and the potential for personal and professional growth, resilience, and success when supported and understood.

There are indications throughout the narratives collected from the participants that sharing their stories had several benefits for them. Their willingness to openly share their experiences and challenges with dyslexia raises awareness about the emotional impact of dyslexia on the individual, highlighting the power of self-advocacy, family and peer support, and informed, understanding education providers. By sharing their stories, they contribute to a broader understanding of dyslexia and its social, emotional, psychological, and practical implications.

The act of recounting one's journey often involves self-reflection. By articulating their experiences, challenges, and triumphs, the participants gained a deeper understanding of themselves and their journey with dyslexia. Sharing their personal experiences led to validation and highlighted the importance of a strong personalised support network.

Several narratives reflect resilience and personal growth as the participants emphasised the significance of recognising and leveraging individual strengths when managing the challenges dyslexia can create. Their experiences can inspire and guide other dyslexic individuals as well as a much wider network directly and/or indirectly connected with them. The act of sharing in the project offered them a platform for advocacy, self-reflection, validation, and personal growth.

With the right resources and support, individuals with dyslexia can overcome challenges, harness their unique strengths, and achieve their goals. The stories shared by the participants in this project provide a deeper insight into the multifaceted experiences of individuals with dyslexia and offer invaluable insights into the lived experiences of dyslexic learners in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Recommendations

1. Provide specialised training for teachers and educators on dyslexia, equipping them with strategies to support dyslexic learners effectively, such as the use of alternative assessment methods that cater to the strengths of the individual dyslexic learner.

2. Establish peer support groups where dyslexic learners can share experiences, strategies, and advocate collectively.

3. In partnership with the participants of this study, create and evaluate a model that:
   - Integrates dyslexic mentors to guide adult dyslexic learners.
   - Focuses on fostering self-advocacy within the Aotearoa tertiary system.

Project Outputs

Two of the interview questions asked the participants to consider what advice they would give to other dyslexic learners (interview question 4) and teachers/educators of dyslexic learners (interview question 10). These are described below and will be developed as two separate Guides.

i) **Advice for Dyslexic Learners:** *A Guide for Dyslexic Learners*

**Guidelines for Dyslexic Learners* will be developed as one of the project outputs in collaboration with Ako Aotearoa.

The participants' comments provided valuable insights and advice for other dyslexic learners. They emphasised the diversity of dyslexia and the challenges of late diagnosis as it can often go unnoticed or is misunderstood. However, they stressed that a diagnosis should be seen as a guiding sign rather than an excuse and that it is essential to embark on a personal journey of learning and adapting and have supportive companions along the way.

Key takeaways included trusting oneself, persevering in pursuing goals, experimenting with different techniques, and focusing on one's strengths rather than perceived weaknesses. Dyslexia was seen as a unique perspective on the world, not a limitation, and participants encouraged sharing stories for increased awareness. They emphasised that dyslexia extends beyond school and affects all aspects of life, but with the right strategies, it can offer unique advantages. Seeking help, asking for support, being unashamed, and not letting dyslexia hold you back were also key messages.

Furthermore, the feedback emphasised that dyslexia is not related to intelligence, and individuals should work to find learning methods that suit their style. They talked about the need for understanding and patience from others and encouraged teachers to diversify assessment methods. The importance of self-belief, persistence, and seeking external support, especially in the workplace, was underlined. In conclusion, the feedback messages collectively conveyed the idea that dyslexia is a difference rather than a disability and individuals take pride in their unique abilities, embrace their distinctive strengths, and confidently ask for help when needed.

> "See the label as a gift, not a handicap - see it as a way to stand your ground rather than not belonging. Don't give up and don't be ashamed. Don't let it hold you back. You can still do things just in a different way and with some support."

ii) **Advice for Teachers:** *A Guide for Teachers and Vocational Educators of Dyslexic Learners*

**Guidelines for Teachers and Vocational Educators of Dyslexic Learners* will be developed as one of the project outputs in collaboration with Ako Aotearoa.

The feedback from participants offers valuable insights and advice for educators and teachers working with dyslexic learners. A recurring theme is the need for empathy and understanding, especially in contexts like mihimihi (traditional Māori introductions), where emotions are valued. They emphasised that educators should never judge dyslexic individuals and should instead approach them with curiosity and 'open ears'. They also talked about the importance of recognising the emotional needs of dyslexic learners, acknowledging that the journey of a dyslexic learner is as much about how they feel about themselves as it is about their technical challenges.

Additionally, the feedback highlighted the significance of adopting a flexible and creative teaching approach. Teachers should prioritise the individual needs and strengths of dyslexic learners, focusing on their interests and talents. Providing multiple ways to convey information, including visuals, activities, and discussions, was suggested as an effective teaching strategy. Employing technology and accessible learning materials, such as Moodle and handouts, can also facilitate the learning process for dyslexic learners.

Several participants talked about the necessity of dispelling misconceptions about dyslexia. Educators need to recognise that dyslexia is not indicative of low intelligence or laziness, but rather a unique challenge that affects each person differently. Teachers can offer reasonable accommodations and adjustments, such as extra time and assistive technology, and provide clear, simple instructions with frequent feedback. Encouraging dyslexic learners to identify and develop their strengths and interests can boost their self-esteem and overall academic success. Ultimately, the feedback highlighted the importance of inclusive, holistic, and student-centred teaching methods to support dyslexic learners effectively.

> "Embrace diverse approaches to tasks and consider tailored feedback. By recognising that with some adjustments in teaching methods, expectations, or assignment approaches, dyslexic learners can thrive and excel."

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule: Dyslexic Learner Journey and Experience

Self and Project Introduction

1. Who we are - whakapapa? Our role in this project is to present yours and other participants' voice of experience in a manner that can provide teachers and teaching and training institutions with greater understanding and ideas of how they can support dyslexic learners.

2. Are you okay with me turning the zoom/audio recording on? Before we get started, I need to make sure that we have a common understanding of what the interview process will be and that you understand your rights.

3. Have you read or listened to the audio of the Information Sheets? Do you have any questions about the information or process that you want to ask me? Do you consent to take part in the research?

Contextual Information

To help us tell your story well we need a bit of information about you:
- What age bracket do you fit into: <20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, >50?
- What gender do you identify as: male, female, ….
- What ethnicity/ethnicities/Iwi/hapu do you identify with?
- What job/study/occupation are you now in?
- What do you understand to be your particular dyslexic characteristics?

Strength and Resilience

1. What are your strengths as a dyslexic person? Do you believe that your strengths have played a role in developing effective strategies to navigate dyslexia-related difficulties?

2. Can you tell me a story about what your strengths are and how you have used them?

3. What do you think has influenced your strength and ability to keep on going?

4. What advice would you give to other dyslexic individuals who may be struggling with building their resilience?

Managing the Challenges of Dyslexia

5. Were there any subjects or activities in school or post-school study or training that you particularly struggled with because of your dyslexia? How did you manage these?

6. Can you share a specific example of a challenge or setback you faced due to dyslexia and how you managed to overcome it?

7. How did you find the strength to overcome this challenge?

Support Mechanisms and Strategies

8. What support was offered/provided for you at school or post-school study or training? Did this support work for you?

9. Were there any specific types of teachers, trainers or teaching methods or strategies that worked well for you as a dyslexic student? What are these?

10. Looking back, what advice would you give to teachers or educators on how to better support dyslexic students like yourself?

11. What is your proudest memory of your study or training?

Additional questions (time permitting)

1. How do you tackle assessment tasks like tests, exams, writing assignments, or preparing for practical tests?

2. What helps you most of all to succeed in the training or study that you have done?

Ako Aotearoa

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