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## **A Vista of Dyslexia**

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In this paper I am sharing my personal reflections as a person with dyslexia. In my case, my self-diagnosis opened a doorway to a journey of discovery. On this journey I have learnt that the diagnosis of dyslexia leads to self-awareness. Self-awareness is an essential step to self-acceptance. Self-acceptance provides a foundation for the development of one's inherent potential.

I was honoured to be the first recipient of the Beechworth Bakery Award at Swinburne University earlier this year for outstanding career achievement of a person with a Learning Disability. In accepting this award I was required to make a public speech about my journey with dyslexia. This was not an easy process for me. My family, close friends and students have been aware of my dyslexia. However, I had not publicly spoken about it until then. I began the speech with words from the band REM "It's the end of the world as I know it." I felt as though this public 'coming out' as a dyslexic was the final step in my self-acceptance. I will share with you a little of the speech:

I have some very painful memories of school. I remember feeling as though I was drowning in a sea of letters that I didn't understand. I was terrified that the other kids would find out that I couldn't read and write like them. Why was reading and spelling just so hard for me when it is so easy for everyone else? I thought I must have been 'dumb', although my school reports assured me that if I just tried harder I would do better the next term. "With more consistent concentration in class her grades will improve ... Reading and spelling: D; Speaking and listening:

A ...Michelle needs to try harder". I hated school and would get out of it whenever I could. My orthodontist became one of my favourite people. His practice was in the city, which guaranteed me a whole day off school for a dental appointment. I had 9 fillings, braces, headgear and a plate!

Most of my time at school was spent in great anxiety and dread over schoolwork. On two occasions I was given detentions and I still to this day don't know what I did wrong. The only joy I experienced at school was when I was singing or debating. I am sure without the limited success I experienced in music and debating I would not have completed my secondary schooling. I just hated it. I became so frustrated and disappointed in myself because no matter how hard I tried my written work was always so inferior to my understanding of the topic. I didn't just hate school - I hated myself.

With a great deal of hard work and support from my family and some of my teachers I somehow managed to just pass VCE. I was accepted into a primary teaching course, which at that time, had the lowest entry score. I was terrified that someone would realize I was an impostor and I didn't belong there; after all I had only ever managed to read one book in my life. Then we went on teaching rounds and with my verbal skills, love of children and singing I excelled! My practical scores were consistently outstanding although my written exam marks were much lower. I was always so frustrated when it came to reading and writing. Throughout my undergraduate studies I slowly and painfully worked out strategies that helped me. I used a diary, colour coded things and bought my first word processor.

Now my Dad was retired I asked him to read to me whilst I listened. On my way to bed at night I would ask Dad to read set chapters and the next morning he would give me a summary in his own words. I would practise new spelling words that I needed to know such as 'English' and 'Excellent'. On teaching rounds I learned all over again by watching talented teachers teaching phonic based word study. I needed to work twice as hard as my colleagues so I got into the habit of getting up early to be prepared for the day ahead.

I began sharing my new discovery of patterns in English with children I tutored after school. My students thrived on the structured explicit teaching in phonics I gave them and I just loved it. I felt a strong sense of understanding for these children and had a compelling drive to help them because I had, after all, experienced these difficulties first hand. I was eager to learn more about these children and their difficulties in literacy, despite their best efforts and apparent intelligence. I enrolled in postgraduate studies in special education and I researched the area of Learning Disabilities and Dyslexia. I was shaken - I realised I was Dyslexic.

This new awareness of dyslexia came with such a shock - I thought dyslexics were people who wore strange coloured glasses! As I learned more I realised that my even profile of strengths and weaknesses were classic of a dyslexic. Poor short-term memory; that's why I couldn't remember instructions! Poor sequencing; that's why I couldn't recite my tables! Poor phonological and orthographical knowledge; that's why I couldn't find my classroom! I felt great relief as I began to understand why certain things were so hard for me - and that I really wasn't dumb after all! I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

I spoke about my newly discovered diagnosis with my Mum and Dad. Their responses were fuelled with anger. They were furious that I had suffered (and no doubt they had too) and that no one had picked my dyslexia before. If my parents had been informed they could have got me the right help. My parents' anger was contagious. I reflected on all the times I was embarrassed when I had to read aloud in front of my friends. When I was humiliated by being sent to a lower grade for suitable reading material. When I was terrified every Friday morning because of spelling tests! And all the wasted effort my darling Dad had spent on teaching me the multiplication tables. If only I had been diagnosed earlier I'm certain that my school life would not have been so painful and confusing. I could have understood that I was dyslexic - not dumb - and that there were other people just like me. This anger was ruminating in my head. This may have been a

necessary step in dealing with my pain but it was not at all helpful to moving forward.

Over time, this anger changed to empathy - my teachers were not intentionally cruel or vindictive - they just didn't know about dyslexia. Well, now I did and it was going to become my life's work to become expert in this field and increase the broad awareness and general acceptance of dyslexia. I want people to know what they can change about dyslexia and how to do it; and what they can't change so they know how to compensate for it. I want to make sure others don't suffer unnecessarily like I did.

My self-acceptance allowed me to connect with other people with dyslexia. I am greatly fortunate to have daily contact with other dyslexic in my tutoring practice. Many of these students and their parents have been central in my self-acceptance of dyslexia, and I, in turn, have helped them move to a self-acceptance of their dyslexia. After a further 10 years of teaching, studying and researching in this field, I'm finally able to say that I'm pleased God made me dyslexic. I'm dyslexic for a good reason: I know how we learn and how we feel. This is my place in the world.

The experience of self-acceptance being imperative to success can be seen in the experiences of Tom O'Toole, founder of the Beechworth Bakery. His story demonstrates how self-awareness and self-acceptance were necessary to see new possibilities. These possibilities included making new goals and overcoming self-limiting thought from his negative school experiences.

Tom O'Toole suffered as a child at school because of his dyslexia. In his book Tom writes about failing kindergarten and being told he was just dumb. The other kids called him the mad bad-tempered kid and he proved them right every time! These experiences of being 'hopeless' at school developed into an 'incredible inferiority complex'. Although successful at the practical parts of being a baker, Tom was too frightened to go to bakery school because he knew he'd fail. He changed his apprenticeship 3 times in order to dodge bakery school! Tom's dyslexia meant that he had a real disability in reading and writing and he had never been a person who would ask for help. Tom managed his business and life by yelling at people and developed a problem with alcohol. Tom failed in business and contemplated suicide. His wife left him with two young daughters aged three and five. When his wife left he also lost his reader, scribe and bookkeeper. He couldn't even write a cheque on his own. His children also lost their mother.

Aged 32, Tom went to a counsellor and learned to be 'honest with Tom'. He did courses in communication and self-awareness and his self-

image gradually began to change. His self-acceptance allowed him to utilise his strengths and develop strategies to compensate for his weaknesses. Not only did he make the Beechworth Bakery Australia's most successful bakery, he turned around the struggling town of Beechworth, winning the 1994, 1995 and 1998 most significant regional attraction in the Victorian Tourism Awards. Tom is now a popular international motivational speaker (O'Toole & Tarling, 2004.)

The story of one of my past students, Melissa, also illustrates how self-acceptance of dyslexia helped her by firstly allowing her to receive specialist tutoring, and secondly to reach her dreams of becoming a teacher.

Melissa was relieved to receive the diagnosis of dyslexia in Year 11. She felt as though she was at last given a recognised label, instead of 'the problem child'. The diagnosis of dyslexia explained the difficulties she had been experiencing throughout her school life. She, and her family, learned about dyslexia, and got the right sort of help. Her self-acceptance enabled her to become an informed self-advocate during her final year of secondary schooling and throughout her university degree. She is now happily married and enjoying a successful teaching career (Smith, 2004)

The three case studies just described along with my knowledge from working with children and young people with dyslexia created the opportunity for me to work as an advocate for other individuals with dyslexia. I would like to think that my advocacy role will save some children from the debilitating and humiliating experiences that were part of my schooling. To this end, I have developed an assessment device to alert teachers to the critical knowledge needed to be literate at the single word level and for those teachers who lack this knowledge a training program to teach this knowledge will be first tried in the latter part of 2006.

This critical knowledge is described by the term phonological processing.

Dyslexia does not inhibit overall language development, rather, it is a localised weakness in a specific component of the language system: the system of phonological processing. In a multiple case-study, deficits in phonological processing were shown to be enough on their own to cause dyslexia (Ramus et al, 2003). Whilst some dyslexics may have other areas of deficits such as visual processing deficits, motor coordination deficits, and auditory processing disorders, the universal deficit was in phonological processing. It was also noted in this study that whilst the auditory processing deficits did not cause the problems in phonological processing, they did

have significant impact on them, resulting to some extent in an aggravated phonological deficit.

The diagnosis of dyslexia would include a range of assessments. There are cognitive abilities of phonological processing and rapid automatic naming. It is also imperative to assess the key literacy skills of single word reading, spelling and comprehension.

When it is established that a student has significant deficits in literacy matched with the characteristics of poor phonological processing (there may of course be other deficits in areas such as motor development, visual and auditory processing) and other factors have been excluded as main causes, the term dyslexia is used to describe an individual's literacy learning difficulties.

The term dyslexia provides the opportunity for parents and/or the individual with dyslexia to gather information. It opens up opportunities for discussion such as attending workshops and seminars and to find professionals skilled in the area of dyslexia. It is also an invitation to discover and share in the life stories of successful individuals who have dyslexia themselves.

An understanding of dyslexia will allow the realisation that some deficits require compensatory strategies to cope with weak abilities in some aspects of learning such as rapid automatic naming. Other deficits such as phonological awareness can be addressed as this deficit will respond favourably to appropriate remediation. This information can be gathered when professionals use the label of dyslexia.

Whilst there is clear research evidence that the key difficulty in dyslexia is phonological processing, it would seem that this knowledge has not permeated the teaching profession. This is one missing link. Australian research reports that more than one third of beginning teachers in their study felt ill-prepared to teach any aspect of literacy, and more than half felt unprepared to teach spelling, phonics and grammar (Greaves & Rohl, 2005).

There is a second missing link, that is, each teacher's phonemic awareness. A teacher's own literacy performance may be adequate, but it does not guarantee detailed insights into phonological processing and the structural aspects of language. Often, counter-intuitively, adult skilled readers find it difficult to correctly relate phonemes to graphemes in written words (moats, 1994; Munro, 1998). Put simply there are two processes, being able to manipulate the 44 phonemes in our language and then linking them to the conventional letter patterns for each word.

Underdeveloped knowledge of the phonological properties of words may be of little consequence for most adults as many read from their visual memory, however, teachers need mastery of this foundation knowledge if they are going to be able to explicitly teach phonological processing to beginning readers and especially to students with dyslexia.

To assess a teacher's knowledge of the phonological processing, a screening tool was developed by the author. It is called the Hutchison Adult Sound Screening (HASS). It is unique, in that, it is a pen and paper test designed to assess the abilities of adults to hear sounds in words. Other such similar assessments are orally presented as can be seen in the administration of the Phonological Assessment Battery (PhAB) and the Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test - Revised. The HASS consists of 14. The three phonological skills tested are phoneme counting, syllable counting and phoneme identification. The instructions are as follows: How many individual sounds in each word? How many syllables in each word? Choose a letter or letter string that best represents the third sound in each word.

The assess phonological knowledge a convenience sample of 107 trainee-teachers enrolled in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the Bachelor of Education (Primary) was used. The maximum score on the HASS was 42. The teachers' average score was 30. The results of this assessment showed that these teachers have a 72% mastery of these foundation skills.

**Table 1. HASS scores of 2<sup>nd</sup> year trainee teachers.**

<b>HASS</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
2 <sup>nd</sup> Year Teachers	107	30.28	5.589

Shortly after the HASS test was administered, an adult spelling test was also administered to 86 of the 107 second year trainee-teachers. The adult spelling test has 30 words. The average score was 16.

**Table 2. Spelling scores of 2<sup>nd</sup> year trainee teachers.**

<b>Spelling</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
2 <sup>nd</sup> Year Teachers	86	16	5.187

To test whether the scores on the phonological processing test would predict the scores on the spelling test a Pearson correlation was applied to the two data sets. There was a significant positive correlation between the HASS scores and spelling scores, showing that poor spellers were also poor on identifying sounds in words ( $r = 0.307, p = .004$ ).

As a consequence of this research, trainee teachers were well informed of the central role of phonological processing. In addition, the research identified those teachers whose own lack of phonological processing skills would prevent them from effectively teaching reading to students who also lacked phonological processing abilities.

While not the purpose of the research, a number of the students came to understand that they had dyslexia. Their scores showed they had significant deficits in both spelling and phonological processing. These students and some others who were weak in skills have requested assistance in developing these foundation skills, which will be offered to small groups.

It would not be difficult for teacher education institutions to screen all trainee-teachers for adequately developed phonological processing abilities using a pen and paper test such as the HASS. Teachers need mastery of this foundation knowledge if they are going to be able to explicitly teach beginning and struggling readers and especially students with dyslexia.

My self-awareness of dyslexia, and the later self-acceptance of dyslexia as part of who I am, has been critical in my life and in my career. I consciously decided to move into teacher training, with the aim of reducing the number of children who have the awful school experience that I had. I am working to increase the broad awareness and general acceptance of dyslexia in Australia, but this would not have been possible without firstly my own self-acceptance of dyslexia. Self-acceptance of dyslexia has been a catalyst for changing many lives for the better.

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