

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

OF

LEARNING

DIFFICULTIES

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# ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to develop a greater understanding of the experiences of school life for students who consistently found learning difficult, their perceptions of the difficulties they faced with their learning and how this had influenced their lives, socially and academically. It was hoped that their perspectives would highlight those structures and strategies that were of the most value in supporting them, as well as those that had a negative impact on their achievement and adjustment.

Eight people with learning difficulties each participated in a series of three individual, in-depth interviews about their experiences of school. The participants, five male and three female, ranged in age from ten to twenty five years. Four were primary school students, in Years Four, Five and Six. Two students were in Year Nine at high school, while a further two participants had completed their schooling. One was currently unemployed, while the other had completed a university degree and had been teaching for three years.

Participants were chosen from randomly selected government schools in the ACT, nominated by the school as fitting the selection criteria. Learning difficulties were defined in terms of their meeting criteria that were indicative of teacher and parent concern for academic underachievement over a period of at least two years. The selection process was also guided by criteria to locate key informants, i.e. individuals who may have been able to highlight specific issues related to the relationships between learning difficulties and socioeconomic status, social competence and employment opportunities.

Interviews with each participant took place over three separate sessions of approximately fifty minutes' duration. Data was analysed using Hycner's guidelines for phenomenological analysis. Interviews were transcribed and coded, with an

independent researcher validating identified themes. An agreement rate of 88% was achieved. Interviews were then summarised and returned to the participants to confirm whether the interpretation of their perspectives was accurate. Themes that were common across the interviews were discussed in relation to current research.

The results of this research study confirmed the central role played by quality teachers and best teaching practices in being able to enhance learning and to meet the needs of individual students. These factors were an integral part of engaging students in the learning process and promoting successful learning experiences. The study also emphasised the importance of parents, particularly mothers, in the adjustment of the participants to the everyday demands, academic and social, of school life. The necessity of establishing and sustaining effective early intervention programs was also highlighted, as was the value of listening to the voices of individuals with learning difficulties when making decisions on their behalf.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis has been a production involving many people.

I would like to thank the principals and the teachers who so generously shared their time and energy to assist with the selection process for this research. Without their assistance, this study would not have been possible.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to those individuals who shared their experiences with honesty, openness and great patience. I hope I was able to do some justice to their thoughtful, articulate reflections on school life. To their parents too, for their faith and trust in allowing their children to become involved, as well as for their practical support in arranging interviews, I offer my sincere thanks.

Thank you to my supervisor, Tony Shaddock, for his professionalism and positive encouragement through the *bleak and challenging*, as well as the exciting times. His guidance, quiet sense of humour and ability to keep life in perspective enabled this project to eventually take a practical shape and reach a conclusion. My thanks also are due to Sally Osborne, whose advice and feedback as my second supervisor has been invaluable. I would also like to thank Amanda Mackenzie for her assistance with the analysis of the data in this study.

The eternal good humour and practical assistance of my colleagues has also been invaluable, enabling the timetable juggling and time out of class that made interviewing during school times possible.

To my husband Steve, who has cooked, cleaned, shopped and generally maintained a semblance of organisation in our family throughout this process, I remain eternally grateful. His support has enabled me the freedom and the flexibility to complete this study in the midst of family and work commitments.

To my family, who waited so patiently and so long, thank you.

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