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## HUOM! TÄMÄ ON RINNAKKAISTALLENNE

Rinnakkaistallennettu versio *voi* erota alkuperäisestä julkaistusta sivunumeroiltaan ja ilmeeltään.

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# **Resilience strategies employed by teachers with dyslexia working at tertiary education**

## **Abstract**

This study investigates resilience strategies exhibited by teachers with dyslexia working at tertiary education. Narrative interviews of tertiary teachers' own perceptions of how dyslexia affects their work were analysed to understand how they cope in a challenging profession. Findings indicated a utilization of a range of resilience strategies; task-related strategies, personalizing work contexts, utilizing social support networks and nurturing self-esteem and self-efficacy. Developing individualized strategies is paramount to attaining a successful career in tertiary education. Self-awareness is required to build the strategies supporting teachers in fulfilling professional requirements and enable them to experience agency and self-efficacy in their work.

Keywords: teacher resilience, teachers with dyslexia, resilience strategies, adult dyslexia, self-efficacy

## **1. Introduction**

Diversifying the teacher workforce to better address the needs of the diverse student population has elevated the discussion to global level. Teacher diversity, however, has been typically considered in terms of race, culture, gender and ethnicity, and very little attention has been paid to other types of workforce diversities, such as age, disability, sexual orientation or religion as noted in OECD's document on *Fostering Diversity in the Public Service* (2009). Despite the acknowledgement of a variety of workforce diversities, minimal research exists about practising teachers with dyslexia or other learning disabilities (LD), although for more than a century researchers have been intrigued by dyslexia in adults (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2005). Dyslexia is a lifelong condition that affects individual's lives worldwide (Smythe, Everatt, & Salter, 2004) in a significant way, yet little is known about how adults with dyslexia fare in professions such as teaching, where mastery of reading and writing skills is vital. The present study strives to contribute to a better understanding of the professional lives of tertiary teachers with dyslexia (i.e., teachers, trainers or lecturers at vocational education and training (VET) as well as lecturers or academics at higher education).

Reading and spelling difficulties affect individuals' educational and occupational careers in many ways, and young people with these difficulties tend to choose academically less demanding educational programmes than their peers in secondary education (Savolainen, Ahonen, Aro, Tolvanen, & Holopainen, 2008). Those who pursue vocational training exhibit lower graduation rates relative to their peers without learning difficulties (LDs) (Stein, Blum, & Barbaresi, 2011),

and they often display underachievement which can lead to alienation and low self-esteem (Leather, Hogh, Seiss, & Everatt, 2011). Longitudinal studies have further indicated that adults with LDs have lower rates of employment and lower earnings (Vogel, Murray, Wren, & Adelman, 2007), and are employed in lower skill positions than adults without disabilities (Stein et al., 2011). On the other hand, research has indicated that difficulties related to dyslexia do not necessarily present a barrier for professional attainment, and, in fact, many adults with dyslexia can work effectively at the highest occupational levels (Reid, Came, & Price, 2008). The field of education is no exception. A number of studies on teachers with learning disabilities have further substantiated this (e.g., Authors, 2010; Duquette, 2000; Ferri, 2001; Ferri, Connor, Solis, Valle, & Volpitta, 2005; Griffiths, 2012; Riddick, 2003; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011). However, the literature also reveals that vocational success for adults with dyslexia is not self-evident and it does not happen without effort and deliberate control over a number of decisions in life (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992; Goldberg, Higgins, Raskind, & Herman, 2003) such as one's career choice.

Deepening understanding of career paths and resilience strategies of tertiary teachers with dyslexia is timely with the backdrop of the recommendations for key competences for lifelong learning by the European Parliament and the Council in their Reference Framework of Key Competences. In the Case Networks Report (2009), the requirement for competences concerning communication in the mother tongue and in foreign languages could potentially cause anxiety for teachers with dyslexia because they face the demands of supporting their students' competence development in these same areas. In addition, high workloads in the teaching profession, as well as increasing diversity among the student population have put pressure on all educators. Teachers' work has become an increasingly complex and intensive practice (Brante, 2009). A strong sense of competence and efficacy is required by teachers with diversities such as dyslexia who need to manage with the increasing text and media-related demands within the profession.

The challenging nature of the teaching profession is reflected in high rates of teacher attrition in some countries (Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010; Mansfield, Beltman, Price, & McConney, 2012), and a high degree of work-related stress (Brante, 2009). Studies into teacher resilience explore the characteristics and behaviours of teachers who respond positively to demanding circumstances and remain committed in their profession (Gu & Day, 2007). Teachers having a sense of competence, professional agency, and the ability to devise and use coping strategies are more likely to persevere in the face of adversity and adapt to new challenges (Mansfield et al., 2012). Persistence, desire to be successful, goal orientation and coping are also characteristics of those individuals who have

achieved professional success despite their specific reading and writing difficulties (Goldberg et al, 2003; Logan, 2009). Vogel et al. (2007) have hypothesized that educational organizations with increasing diversity among the student population can offer a particularly well-suited employment context for individuals with learning difficulties. They assert that these education professionals have specific knowledge about, and personal experience with special needs that would aid colleagues to learn more about inclusive practices. However, few researchers have explored how professionals with LD cope within the educational context. Consequently, the purpose of the current study is to increase understanding of how teachers with dyslexia working at tertiary education have developed and employed resilience strategies to deal with the challenges they face in work contexts.

## **2. Dyslexia as a hidden disability**

The true nature of dyslexia has puzzled researchers and other professionals for almost 120 years (Nicholson & Fawcett, 2010) but no conclusive definition or underlying causes of dyslexia have been found. The definition of dyslexia is particularly elusive in adulthood as the primary indicators of literacy weakness are not as apparent as in childhood due to compensating strategies that have been developed over time (Leather et al. 2011). A widely acknowledged definition used by the International Dyslexia Association (Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003) emphasizes the neurobiological origin of the condition, but also considers the associated, secondary difficulties that the underlying cause may lead to. Dyslexia has typically been defined as unexpected literacy difficulties in individuals who otherwise possess the necessary intelligence and motivation for literacy learning (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2005). The primary difficulties are presumed to be related to deficits in phonological coding that are manifested by slow and inaccurate reading and spelling weaknesses. The secondary difficulties, poor reading comprehension and limited vocabulary, may further manifest in difficulties in learning foreign languages (Lyon et al., 2003). Dyslexia is often associated with conditions such as arithmetic difficulties (Landerl & Moll, 2010), poor motor skills co-ordination or clumsiness (Stoodley, Harrison, & Stein, 2005), and poor organization and time management skills (Reid et al., 2008). Among a subgroup of individuals the literacy weaknesses extend into adulthood and into the workplace (Gerber & Price, 2008; Leather et al. 2011) instigating potential problems as literacy plays such a fundamental part in many professions. Adults with dyslexia have been reported to have lower self-esteem than their non-dyslexic peers (Riddick, Sterling, Farmer, & Morgan, 1999), difficulties in coping with distractions and having to work longer and harder in order to achieve to the same level as their non-dyslexic peers (Leather et al. 2011).

Calculating the level of prevalence of dyslexia in the adult population is challenging. Depending upon the definition and the criteria used, the estimates vary from 4-9% (Landerl & Moll, 2010) up to 17.5 % (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2005). Then again other studies illustrate that the number of students with specific learning difficulties entering higher education has been increasing (Griffiths, 2012; Valle et al. 2004), and that dyslexia has been noted as the largest and most commonly declared disability category in HE in the UK (Griffin & Pollak, 2009). Furthermore, Valle et al. (2004) noted that one-fourth of college students with LD enrolled in the teacher education programmes. Despite the knowledge of the presence of such students in teacher education programmes, little is known about practising teachers with dyslexia or other LDs.

### **3. Understanding teachers with dyslexia**

The teaching profession is highly appreciated in many countries which can potentially bolster the myth of educators being omniscient. Consequently, the issues around disclosure of learning difficulties among teachers can be very sensitive. In their study on disclosure of dyslexia in the workplace, Gerber and Price (2008) discovered that 85% of adults with dyslexia did not disclose their condition to their employers for fear of becoming victims of discrimination. Presumably partly due to issues linked to disclosure there is little research available on the effects of dyslexia in employment situations. Some researchers have reported low job satisfaction levels amongst individuals with a background of dyslexia (Leather et al., 2011), while some others have found these individuals to be highly successful despite their shortcomings in literacy (Logan, 2009; West, 2010 in Leather et al., 2011). Research has further indicated that the provision of appropriate accommodation or development of compensatory strategies can increase the likelihood of successful employment for adults with dyslexia (Gregg, 2009).

A number of studies have documented that dyslexic adults can develop ingenious compensatory strategies to overcome their difficulties (e.g., Everatt, Steffert, & Smythe, 1999; Gerber et al, 1992; Goldberg et al, 2003; Hellendoorn & Ruijssenaars, 2000; Logan, 2009; McNulty, 2003; Paananen, 2006). According to these studies, adults with dyslexia can develop successful ways of controlling, coping with and compensating for their deficits, which may develop into transferable skills that are useful in responding to challenges at work. Hellendoorn and Ruijssenaars (2000) studied personal experiences of growing up, living and coping with dyslexia in Dutch adults and their negative or positive ways of coping. The negative coping strategies involved behaviours such as avoidance,

camouflage and overcompensation, and the positive strategies encompassed openness about dyslexia, asking for help and gaining self-control. Although the majority of participants had earlier experienced some problems in their vocational training and early careers, at the time of the investigation a number of them held high-level jobs or studied for them. McNulty's (2003) narrative study into life stories of adults who were diagnosed with dyslexia as children showed that compensation included areas of competence within the individual and the resources within the environment. Individuals creating successful compensatory strategies for work and personal life exhibited a more positive sense of work ethic. Other researchers, such as Logan (2009) and Paananen (2006) have provided corroborating portrayals of adults with dyslexia creating and developing individual compensatory strategies that can be utilized in work contexts.

Although there are a number of investigations on adults with dyslexia, there are only a few studies particularly focusing on teachers or teacher trainees with learning difficulties (Authors, 2010; Duquette, 2000; Griffiths, 2012; Morgan & Rooney, 1997; Riddick, 2003; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011). These studies note that the participants developed a range of specific compensatory strategies which were used in work contexts, however, the specific nature of these strategies had not been investigated. Research on teacher resilience, on the other hand, has identified and listed strengths and strategies that teachers rely on in the face of adversity (Castro et al., 2010). These findings have offered some perspectives in understanding the attributes teachers with dyslexia utilize to cope and maintain their commitment in teaching.

#### **4. Perspectives to teacher resilience**

Teacher resilience is an emerging and rapidly growing field of research. The roots of resilience stem from the disciplines of developmental psychology and psychiatry where the construct was used in the 1970s to portray the characteristics and positive adaptation of children classified as being at risk due to negative life circumstances (Gu & Day, 2007). Since then the complexity of the interaction between individual and environment in the process of the development of resilience has been acknowledged to a greater extent (Mansfield et al., 2012). Attention has been drawn to, for example, environmental factors such as family and community (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000), personal dispositions and agency (Castro et al. 2010), and multidimensional and social construction of resilience (Gu & Day, 2007). Instead of being understood as an innate quality, resilience is depicted as "relative, developmental and dynamic, connoting the positive adaptation and development of individuals in the presence of challenging circumstances. It develops along with

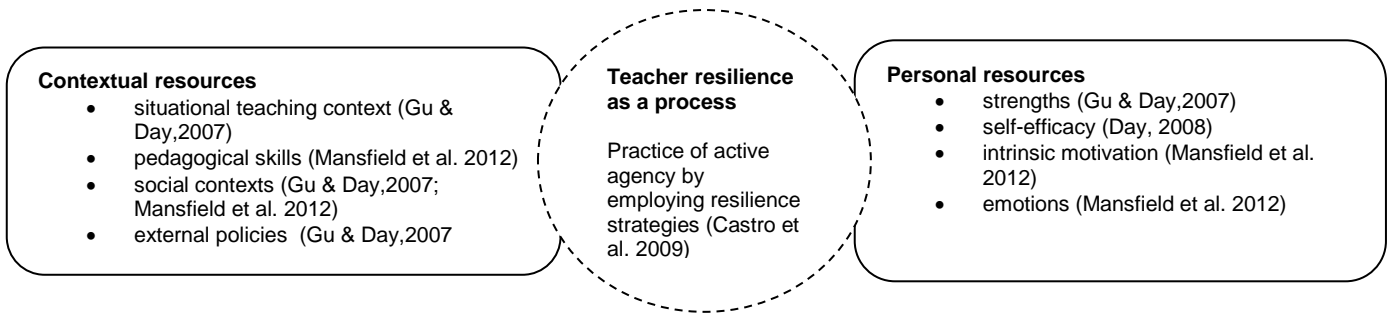
and manifests itself as a result of a dynamic process within a given context” (Gu & Day, 2007, p.1305).

In the context of teaching, of particular interest are the social dimensions of teacher resilience including personal, professional and situated factors identified by Gu and Day (2007) and emotional factors emphasised by Mansfield et al. (2012). Gu and Day (2007) further state that individuals may demonstrate resilience in certain professional contexts but fail to do so at another time or in another space. Subsequent research has explored the role of personal strengths and resources (e.g. Brunetti, 2006; Gu & Day, 2007), a sense of self-efficacy (Day, 2008), protective and risk factors within the environment (e.g. Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011), as well as skills and strategies associated with developing resilience and maintaining one’s professional commitment (e.g. Castro et al., 2010; Gu & Day, 2007; Sharplin, O’Neil, & Chapman, 2010). The literature indicates that a layer of protective factors, both individual and contextual, are incorporated in the process of resilience development which reduce the impact of an adverse situation (Kumpfer, 1999; Mansfield et al., 2012). These protective factors have been demonstrated to enable teachers to maintain their effectiveness in work (Gu & Day, 2007).

Recent studies on protective layers have detailed actual strategies teachers employ when confronting challenges (Castro et al., 2010). The employment of resilience strategies has been related to the demonstration of teacher agency as teachers utilize strategies to prevail over difficult situations (Castro et al., 2010). Hitlin and Elder (2007a) introduced a variant of human agency, labelled identity agency that refers to individuals’ capacity to act according to the expectations of a certain role. For example, the role of a teacher involves to a large extent ‘taken-for-granted’ behaviours that teachers are expected to recognize and act upon. Hitlin and Elder (2007a) further argued that passively following the socially prescribed role expectations does not entail agency, whereas successful achievement of a social role takes effort and therefore defines actors as agents. Fulfilling the chosen role strengthens the sense of self, avoids embarrassment and enhances the self-efficacy beliefs that are said to be the key factors of agency (Bandura, 1997). In addition, those with higher levels of self-efficacy feel more competent and effective (Hitlin & Elder, 2007b).

To sum up, this paper adopts the position of resilience as a multidimensional and socially created construct evolving over time (Gu & Day, 2007; Mansfield et al., 2012). We view teacher resilience as a process, whereby teachers practice active agency in line with Castro et al. (2010) by employing specific strategies to build and develop resilience in challenging social contexts. The complex,

idiosyncratic and inter-woven nature of resilience is reflected in the range of personal and contextual attributes that contribute to teacher resilience. Figure 1 demonstrates the overlapping and inter-woven aspects of resilience.



*Figure 1.* Elements of teacher resilience as understood in the present study

The present study aims to increase understanding of how tertiary teachers with dyslexia practice resilience strategies in work contexts and how those strategies might be associated with the practicalities of their profession. This paper considers the following specific research questions: What kinds of strategies do tertiary teachers with dyslexia employ to overcome challenging situations at work? How are these strategies and resources utilized in resilience building?

## **5. Methodology and design**

A narrative, exploratory method was selected due to its strengths in developing new understanding of intricate phenomena. Narratives express a form of knowledge that uniquely describes human experiences. As a holistic approach narrative inquiry has the potential to examine issues with complexity, multiplicity and human centeredness (Webster & Mertova, 2007). It has been utilized in educational research to examine a wide array of themes and concepts from teacher identity (e.g., Elbaz-Luwish, 2007; Watson, 2006) to perspectives of diversity and multiculturalism (e.g., Milner, 2008).

### *5.1. Participants*

The participants were selected based on both general and specific criteria. Firstly, teachers who would volunteer to take part in the study and were willing to talk and share their experiences about this sensitive phenomenon needed to be found. More specifically the participants needed to have been diagnosed as having dyslexia, and they were required to hold a teaching position in tertiary



education. The recruitment of suitable participants began towards the end of 2007. This was not a simple task due to the relatively small population of teachers falling into the selection criteria. Ultimately, six Finnish teachers, three women and three men, either in further (i.e. VET – vocational education and training colleges) or higher education (i.e. universities and universities of applied sciences) volunteered to share their experiences of being a teacher with dyslexia. It should be noted that the small number of participants in this study cannot be extrapolated to represent any statistical representation of the proportion of teachers who may have dyslexia.

The investigation necessitated adherence to clearly thought out ethical guidelines. Particular care was taken when approaching the participants to ask them to participate in the research on this sensitive educational issue, which had high personal significance for them. In 2008 four potential participants were found. They were initially approached by a fellow professional known to them previously who briefly explained the purpose of the research. The participants were then asked to contact the first author for further details and to register their willingness to participate in the study, resulting in three teachers making contact and agreeing to share their stories. Later in 2009, as news of the current study spread through affiliation with the earlier recruited participants, three other educators contacted the first author and wished to be included in the study. This voluntary willingness to participate in sharing one's experience in this divisive topic was considered a positive and encouraging sign of its importance. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the process. The names used in this article are pseudonyms (see Table 1 for an overview the demographics of the participants and the pseudonyms used). The types of organizations and the disciplines of teaching the participants represented were as follows: two taught at a VET college, one in the field of art and design and the other in building technology; three lectured at a university of applied sciences representing media and journalism, business and administration, and adult education; and one participant lectured at a university in the field of information technology. Their experience in teaching varied from 3.5 to over 30 years with all having been diagnosed with dyslexia in adulthood.

TABLE 1: Demographics of participants

Name	Gender	Age	Years in teaching at the time of the interview
Anne	Female	Mid 40s	15
Jussi	Male	Late 40s	Over 10
Matti	Male	Late 50s	Over 20
Kaisa	Female	Late 40s	5
Pekka	Male	Late 50s	Over 30
Liisa	Female	Mid 30s	3,5

### 5.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The empirical data for this study were collected in Finland using six narrative interviews each of which took place in private locations selected by the participant. This necessitated the first author travelling to different parts of the country. The interviewees were asked to talk about their experiences as dyslexic teachers, and were encouraged to express their thoughts as openly as possible. Three of the tertiary teachers were interviewed in 2008, and the remaining three interviews were conducted in 2009 and 2010. The interviews did not have pre-established time limits but continued until the interviewees felt they had said everything they wanted to say. The interviews were conducted by the first author and they typically lasted from an hour and a half to over two hours. The responses were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, and then analyzed following the procedures described in the following paragraphs.

The qualitative analysis of the teachers' narrative interviews followed the features of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analytical method was selected as appropriate due to its flexibility, applicability to a wide range of theoretical and epistemological approaches, and suitability for analysis of different types of narrative data. In thematic analysis, the content is the exclusive focus; it pays attention to 'what' is said rather than 'how' or 'to whom', reporting the events and experiences rather than the aspects of 'the telling' (Riessman, 2008, p. 54). The utilized thematic analysis method is realistic (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in that it aims at reporting individuals' experiences and the reality of the interviewees' lives as they expressed them.

The thematic analysis process was an inductive, data-driven approach focusing specifically on what the participants recounted about their experiences at work. The six narrative interviews of tertiary teachers with dyslexia were used to identify the resilience strategies they utilized in work contexts.

In the first phase of the analysis it was essential to become familiar with the interview data. This was a time-consuming process as the transcriptions were read and re-read several times and their accuracy against the recorded interviews was checked. Secondly, the transcriptions were initially coded into accounts where teachers relayed instances of adverse situations or problems they had faced at work and how they had dealt with these situations. The situations related to work commitments typically required writing skills (e.g., reports, students' feedback, minutes of meetings, instructions, emails, writing on a board, written lesson plans), and reading skills (e.g., assignments, letters, reports, text books, articles). Other circumstances were face to face interactions (e.g., teaching and training sessions, presentations, meetings, negotiations, discussions, assessment discussions, international work commitments) and online teaching activities (e-teaching). Accounts of resources used by the teachers in their narratives included aspects of personal strengths and qualities, self-efficacy talk and capacities to rebound in different working contexts. The initial codes were drawn into a thematic map in order to discover and name any emerging themes, which were discussed and reviewed within the research team. Finally, the themes that emerged from the data were further examined and redefined into four groups: task-related strategies, strategies for personalizing work contexts, social support networks, and nurturing self-esteem and self-efficacy.

## **6. Findings**

Participants in this study disclosed a variety of challenging situations which they encountered as a result of dyslexia. In response to those situations a range of specific resilience strategies was employed in assisting them to achieve the practicalities of their work. The four central themes that emerged were indicative of participants' narratives in varying degrees. In the subsequent paragraphs we firstly report strategies employed in tasks requiring specific skills (reading and writing), and then findings about other strategies utilized i.e., personalizing work contexts, social support networks, and nurturing self-esteem and self-efficacy.

### *6.1. Task-related strategies*

The practice of teaching involves numerous tasks, responsibilities and work commitments requiring specific strategies. For the purposes of this paper, only those tasks that included a mention of

coping strategies by the participants are included. These tasks required writing skills (e.g., students' feedback reports, writing on a board and lesson plans), reading skills (e.g., assignments) and preparations for project presentations and training sessions. Teachers utilized a variety of multisensory strategies of which the most commonly employed were a range of visualization techniques, mnemonics (strategies to prompt memorization), and planning and organization strategies. Visualization and visual thinking was utilised in various tasks, but they were particularly evident in tasks requiring writing and reading skills. It has been previously identified that teachers with dyslexia tend to avoid spontaneous writing on a board (Authors, 2010). The board was, however, effectively used otherwise by the participants. For example, instead of writing whole words on the board, the teachers used different types of figures, drawings, single letters, acronyms and abbreviations to illustrate the topic discussed. Anne said that, "I rather draw on the board than write", and Matti added, "In a teaching context I use the board a lot, as I draw on it. Drawing has always been my strength." Visualization as a strategy was effectively used in reading and evaluating students' assignments. Pekka, for example, explained himself to be 'seeing' and, thus, understanding the main content of a student's paper as a visual element, "I'm a total visualist. When I'm reading students' assignments I perceive them as a figure." Another example of this strategy was Liisa's approach of giving colour coded feedback to students.

When I supervise students' final thesis, I will go through their text by using colour codes to indicate different stages in the text. If a student's paper gets lots of different colours, I'll contact them and tell them that I will send them colour coded feedback and arrange time for a discussion. Then we'll both have the coloured thesis in front us and I'll explain which system I've used e.g., orange means comments, green indicates my suggestions and red parts of the text need rewriting. Some students find it helpful but not all of them do.

Instead of devising written teaching session plans the teachers would rather rely on visual interpretations. Jussi said that, "I draw my lessons plans as I have to clarify everything for myself beforehand through a figure". Matti plans his teaching sessions by using authentic visual elements such as landscapes where he attaches the topics to be taught, or if the authentic scene is not available, he will draw one on paper.

I prefer to have a landscape in front of my eyes, to look through the window. I recognize shapes, lights and shadows and other things onto which I attach the teaching contents. If I don't have it [the landscape], I'll draw it. This is what I use and need, I guess, I could say every day and sometimes many times a day.

Because the lessons plans, project presentations and similar tasks were planned in the teachers' mind and depicted typically in a short-hand visual format, it necessitated the teachers developing techniques to recall the topics from memory. To trigger their memory during teaching sessions a number of strategies i.e. mnemonics were employed. These triggers could consist of, for example, a single picture on a presentation slide, concrete features of a classroom such as pictures on a wall or even a view from a window. Kaisa explained this in the following way, "In a teaching situation I have lots of prompts. I can use the classroom so that when I look outside through the window I'll remember one point, a picture on a wall can remind me of something else. I create these maps in my mind to remember things." In addition, physical activities such as walking were used to recall the ideas to be mentioned and discussed in the session. This was evident in Matti's account who described that while moving around the class he was also 'walking through' either the authentic or a self-created landscape (i.e. his lesson plan) in his mind to trigger his memory.

Another important feature emerging from the interviews was coping with the requirements of the tasks by making careful mental and concrete preparations beforehand. This meant devoting a lot of time for planning and preparations in advance. The issue of extra time was a significant strategy for the interviewed teachers, the time ratio allotted for preparation varied from a few hours to 20 hours. "If someone needs an hour to complete something, it will take 20 hours for me. The mental processes are so complicated in my mind that it doesn't happen quickly. It is very slow", Matti concluded. A lot of time was also devoted to reading students' assignments as Kaisa revealed, "I need an awful lot of time to read students' assignments, because my reading is so slow", or creating teaching materials as described by Liisa, "because I read and write really slowly, it takes ages to produce teaching materials. And I'll write everything that I'll use on the board beforehand at home."

### *6.2. Strategies for personalizing work contexts*

The participants' accounts revealed that they were capitalizing on their strengths. For example, those teachers who were skilled in practical tasks worked as lecturers in VET colleges in their specialist field. Jussi was very clear about his strengths, "I know how to make things with my hands.

It is the handicraft profession that I want to teach.” Other strengths the teachers described relying on were good oral skills. Teaching sessions were predominantly based upon discussions and dialogues as Anne commented, “My teaching is mainly discussing and talking, it’s just so natural”. Liisa’s disclosure reflects a similar idea, “I like to talk and sometimes I have to kick myself to keep my mouth shut and allow the students to speak”. Discussions were used as a student assessment method as Matti explained that, “I prefer assessment discussions and I must say I’m good at it”.

In addition to being aware of their strengths and how they can capitalise on them, the teachers were aware of their limitations and took them into account when personalizing work contexts. An example of this is offered by Kaisa who explained that, “I read others’ body language a lot. For me face to face interaction is really important as I need signals from the others to be able to continue, because I have some difficulties in my thinking process and executive functioning skills. Therefore big teaching groups are difficult for me.”

In personalizing their work contexts, the participants also utilized students as resources in the classroom situations. Jussi spoke about employing his students when drawing written conclusions from collaborative group work, “In group work tasks students will do the written conclusions, because it’s impossible for me to write down notes and focus on the spoken message at the same time”. Matti continued that, “I prefer that people think about issues together. I ask students to write down the conclusions of the discussion as they are very good at it.” The interviewees described using a range of student-centred methods to keep students active and engaged, but this strategy also served to avoid difficulties they might have experienced if they had conducted a teacher-led session.

The participants’ accounts of personalizing their work contexts also included references to external work environments. The interviewees preferred to have a personal working area reserved which could be equipped according to their specific needs. Some utilized effectively IT technology, such as spell checking, reading programmes or digital recorders whereas for others the essential supportive resource was a quiet place containing familiar structures and elements that they could rely on when completing challenging tasks. Liisa described how her office walls were covered with flip chart-type resources where the syllabus of the course was written on.

I needed to create an action plan for a course that was taught by a number of teachers. I covered my office with ‘wallpaper’ and put everything there – who’s teaching what and when and what the aims were. I used different colours for different topics and

people. The other teachers wanted to have the plan by email, but I told them that they should visit my office as the plan was on the wall. They were male teachers teaching technology and they were impressed. One of them said that he had never seen a three-dimensional syllabus.

### *6.3. Social support networks*

All of the interviewees recounted that throughout their adult life they have been surrounded by people who have given them support and encouragement. This social network typically consisted of a spouse, family members, friends and/or some trusted colleagues. The social network had many functions, for instance, it could be relied on to check spelling, to provide definitions for unfamiliar words or clarifications of written instructions. “I have good colleagues to whom I’ve been able to tell that I have this problem and they have proofread my texts”, commented Anne. Whereas Pekka said, “My wife has helped and still helps me a lot. I’ll write on a computer, but she proofreads the text”. Similarly, Liisa acknowledged the help from her husband, “I needed to learn to pronounce the name of the UN Secretary-General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar y de la Guerra, correctly and that was difficult. I practiced it with my husband, he said it first and I repeated and repeated. I was like a parrot. It took a long time. I still can’t write his name, I know it’s a long one, but I can pronounce it now.”

A social network was also a source of positive support, guidance and realistic expectations of their goals. Kaisa recalled, “Home has always supported me, they believe in me”, and Jussi stated, “I’ve been and still am supported by my family and friends and it’s really important to me. They have accepted my dyslexia and the kind of person it has made me”. The teachers stressed the importance of collaborative work with trusted colleagues. Certain tasks, such as project report writing was shared by a number of colleagues as Kaisa explains, “Usually I’ll create a frame for a text and then I’ll write it together with my colleagues”. In other cases the teachers shared responsibilities; the interviewees volunteered to do tasks for their colleagues that they felt comfortable with (e.g., planning the project outline), and, in turn, the colleagues would complete other tasks that were challenging for the interviewees (e.g., transferring students’ grades into an electronic assessment system). Kaisa continued to explain, “Doing things together has increased in educational organisations; you just have to find suitable partners. I tell them the areas that I’m not good at.” Jussi declared similarly, “My work team is great. I feel that I’m as integrated as everybody else.”

### *6.4. Nurturing self-esteem and self-efficacy*

The interviewees depicted teaching as their preferred profession and they conveyed being aware of their individual limitations as a teacher. The participants' accounts divulged that they relied on a number of ways to maintain and enhance their self-esteem and self-efficacy. Typical of the teachers' accounts of understanding dyslexia was that they characterized it as being only one aspect of them. In their accounts dyslexia was thus, compartmentalized or reframed. This idea was expressed by Liisa in the following way, "It's a part of you, some days you can't find any words at all and some other days everything goes smoothly. It's so unpredictable." Kaisa stressed that, "You know, when you've lived with this problem all your life it's difficult to see where the differences are. I don't see that I do things differently. There is no right or wrong way to learn." Although the participants reported having come to terms with the difficulties that dyslexia had created for them they also recalled and described situations when they felt overwhelmed at work. Liisa reported occasions when she had felt vulnerable and hurt by others' comments:

I get really upset when a colleague blurts something out [silence]. You know, this dyslexia is such a thing that when there are crisis situations at work then you're led by the nose. Sure, self-esteem is then at stake. Once I needed to give a presentation in English in front of the staff members at my university. I was panicking. But you just have to learn to laugh at yourself, although lots of crying is needed as well.

The interviewees dealt with these instances and other constraints that they faced as teachers by developing effective means to reduce stress and thus, maintain and boost their self-esteem. Matti described:

I wonder how it is possible that people can use that kind of language. That annoying talk challenges one's self-esteem and can even crush it. In those instances I think that "oh dear"....I'll have to go jogging at the end of the day to get rid of the thoughts. My strategy is that you have to take care of your self-esteem one way or another.

Some participants utilized family members and friends to bolster their self-esteem as Jussi reported, "My family and my friends have protected me. Family is really important for me". Others relied on larger social support networks and humour, "We talk about it [dyslexia] in the coffee room. I don't hide it; it's a good topic to joke about", confessed Pekka.

Indications of nurturing their sense of self-efficacy were numerous in the interviewed teachers' accounts. The participants described themselves in perseverant and determined terms; comments like "It takes ages to produce something" and "Lots of hard work has been required" were



commonplace in the teachers' stories. They recollected keeping going despite adversities and were willing to do whatever was necessary in order to accomplish the required tasks. As Liisa stated, "I just needed to get through the barrier of how I can teach in English, an area that is very challenging for me". The narratives demonstrated a considerable amount of positive self-efficacy talk. Liisa explained that, "My strength is when I have students with LD and I try to find alternative ways to work with them. It is easier for me to get a feel for their circumstances." And Kaisa revealed that, "this [dyslexia] is so ingrained that if I don't progress one way, I'll find alternative methods". A strong sense of self-efficacy was expressed in connection with self-awareness as Pekka exclaimed, "My way of thinking is that I'm not going to hide in a closet because of this [dyslexia]". The other participants expressed similar positive comments about believing in themselves as teachers and being efficient facilitators of their students learning. Anne stated, "Someone might say he or she is a very effective teacher, although I haven't seen a perfect teacher yet. I just like teaching so why shouldn't I be allowed to do it."

## **7. Discussion**

This paper aimed to increase understanding of how teachers with diversity, in this particular case with dyslexia, developed and practiced resilience strategies to deal with the adversities they face at work. The paper asserted the belief that coping with dyslexia within an educational setting is closely linked to the conception of teacher resilience that is understood as a complex and interwoven process with personal and contextual resources contributing to its manifestation (Gu & Day, 2007; Mansfield et al., 2012). To view teacher resilience as a multidimensional, socially constructed process in which teachers continuously develop and employ specific strategies to rise to the challenges is reinforced by the data in this study. We believe that resilience strategies provide possibilities for tertiary teachers with dyslexia to manage and sustain themselves given the current realities of their teaching context.

Based on the data of the current study we obtained two important insights of the manifestation of the resilience strategies by tertiary teachers with dyslexia. Firstly, we recognised that notwithstanding the shortcomings attributable to dyslexia the participants were able to successfully respond to challenges in work and nurture their self-efficacy as a teacher by developing and implementing resilience strategies. On one hand, the strategies developed were highly individual and interwoven with contextual factors from their work settings and task demands, and on the other hand, the strategies demonstrated some common elements that were characteristic of all of them. It appeared that the development of the individualized resilience strategies that undoubtedly

required dedication of time and resources to create the conditions necessary for them to teach, seemed to be more significant and relevant to the participants than experience gained through the length of their service (length of teaching service varied from 3.5 to 30 year). Despite this individualized and interactive process between the internal and external resources the employed resilience strategies displayed common aspects of information management and processing, utilization of social networks, and affective elements of resilience.

The information management and processing aspects were noted in specific tasks relating to language and literacy duties, and in personalizing work contexts to suit their abilities. Due to the nature of the teaching profession and the awareness of professional competence of teachers being seen as one of the most critical issues affecting educational outcomes (e.g. Caena & Margiotta, 2010), teachers are required to continuously manage information and update their skills. The participants in the current study capitalized on their strengths and were more likely to process information holistically and visually rather than sequentially. This is in line with Cooper's research on tertiary education suggesting that 80% of dyslexic and 55% of non-dyslexic learners preferred to solve problems visually rather than verbally (Cooper, 2009). Furthermore, the interviewees had selected a specific field of educational employment that accentuated their preferred style for dealing with information, e.g., tertiary teachers who worked at VET colleges described utilizing their good practical skills in practice of teaching. Although implemented differently, the participants in this study demonstrated a variety of strategies to bolster the practical conditions necessary for them to teach, such as being prepared and using effective teaching skills, similar to the profession-related dimension of teacher resilience by Mansfield et al. (2012).

Resilience and professional performance of the participants was discovered to be enhanced by their use of social networks (e.g. families, friends, trusted colleagues) in terms of seeking help and asking for support. Informal support from family members and colleagues has been considered an important source of assistance in managing challenges at work among adults with learning difficulties (e.g. Goldberg et al.2003; Leather et al. 2011) as well as being a crucial dimension in teacher resilience (e.g. Day, 2008; Gu & Day, 2007; Mansfield et al. 2012). Recent research has shown that resilient teachers have the capacity to build networks, take advice (Mansfield et al. 2012) and use help seeking strategies (Castro et al. 2010). A salient aspect in the current study was the interviewees' perception of ample opportunities for social support that were likely to contribute to their observations that despite the challenges they felt fully integrated into their working communities.

Affective elements of resilience strategies employed by the interviewees' involved utterances nurturing their self-efficacy and self-esteem. The interviewees' narratives portrayed them as competent teachers within their current work contexts and thus supported their feelings of self-efficacy. This finding is consistent with another recent study on teachers with learning disabilities by Vogel and Sharoni (2011) who identified experiences of high self-efficacy as being indicators of teacher effectiveness. Leather et al. (2011) further suggest that feelings of competence in performing well at work and self-efficacy are factors affecting success among dyslexic adults. Self-efficacy beliefs have been identified by Bandura (1997) as key elements affecting performance when faced with obstacles and failures. Self-efficacy has also been suggested to contribute strongly to teachers' resilience and through that to teachers' effectiveness (Gu & Day, 2007). In his book about dyslexic identity, Burden (2005) points out that self-efficacy beliefs function as a mediator for other self-beliefs on attainments in work settings. Individuals' strong sense of competence in any particular professional area enhances perseverance and commitment to tasks set as they are not seen as threats but challenges to be mastered (Burden, 2005). In the light of Hitlin and Elder's (2007a) conceptualization of identity agency, teachers with dyslexia in this study were enacting according to expectations of the role of a teacher. They were active agents in creating and adopting various strategies to compensate for their areas of limitation and to feel more competent and effective (Hitlin & Elder, 2007b).

Secondly, this study showed that the development of individual resilience strategies appears to be a key to successful employment for a teacher with dyslexia. The process of development, however, does not happen immediately. It calls for intimate knowledge about one's abilities and disabilities, patience and introspection. Subsequently, manifestations of the strategies vary from teacher to teacher and from one work situation to another, and modification of resilience strategies would be required. More importantly, they are required to be actively sustained and personally and interpersonally reinforced over time. The disposition of a specific resilience strategy was interpreted as resulting from the interaction between the individual's strengths and external working environment in which the teachers were involved. It should be acknowledged that the tertiary teachers with dyslexia in the current study demonstrated resilience in their current employment and certain work contexts, but they may initially fail to practice similar qualities if work contexts should change. Attention should be paid to the fact that the strategies reported here describe activities of a specific group of tertiary teachers with dyslexia who had conquered the educational hurdles and found employment. Although other studies (c.f. Beltman, 2011) have concentrated on contextual

factors such as an organization's leadership having either a supporting or hindering effect on teacher resilience, they are not addressed in this study.

The current findings need to be viewed in the light of a number of limitations. The small sample size and selecting teachers only from tertiary education may be raised as a limitation. Another limitation is that the participants were volunteers and possibly represented individuals who stand out as exceptions. Consequently, appropriate caution should be exercised when generalizing these qualitative findings to other individuals with dyslexia in different cultures or work environments. It should also be noted that this small and selective number of cases cannot be used as any statistical representation of the proportion of teachers who may have dyslexia. Furthermore, the findings are based on participants' self-reported data, and no triangulation took place from other sources such as employer and student satisfaction surveys or observations of the teachers' practices. Although the findings of this qualitative investigation emerged from a small dataset consisting of the interviewees' subjective accounts, we would suggest that they highlight crucial issues on this important topic. Our work can be seen as an extension of the ongoing research on teacher resilience and the need to develop strategies by offering insights into those that enhance resilience and successful employment.

## **8. Conclusion**

This study has shown that although adults with dyslexia face adverse situations at work both individual and contextual attributes mediate the achievement of successful employment. The thematic analyses of the interviews revealed that the employed resilience strategies contributed positively to the perceptions of the participants' self-esteem and self-efficacy and commitment to work as tertiary teachers. As Vogel et al. (2007) suggested, educational organizations can offer particularly well-suited employment contexts for individuals with diversity. Teachers with dyslexia may bolster the awareness of diversity within the educational organization and provide ways in their working community to support students. Therefore it would be desirable if issues around disclosure and workplace adjustments could be discussed and acknowledged both at individual and organizational level. Students with dyslexia or other learning difficulties at all educational levels, including teacher education, should be supported in becoming aware of their own strengths and weaknesses as a learner and as a future professional. This should be a part of the ongoing professional identity building process. Although dyslexia is an international concern, the perceptions of it within employment contexts vary in different countries (Smythe, et al., 2004). Therefore research is needed to determine how this topic is perceived in different cultures and

educational systems. Additional studies may also explore how immigrant teachers, teachers with other diversities, or indeed practitioners with dyslexia in other professions employ strategies in their work. By providing a supportive and accepting environment for all teachers, including teachers with dyslexia or other diversities, educational organizations can contribute towards developing a truly inclusive work community.

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