

"I'm depressed not stupid"

The experience of learning for the TAFE student with a mental illness: Implications for policy and pedagogy?

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A Confession

- In 2001, 2709 enrolled students in TAFENSW disclosed a mental illness.
- In 2006 this figure had grown to 5,119.
- Students who disclose a mental illness generally have lower course and subject completion rates than most other disability groups and the vocational education and training sector as a whole (Cavallaro et al, 2005).



To Better Understand the Lived Experience

- Exploratory study
- Influenced by phenomenology
- Large TAFENSW regional Institute
- 5 participants



The Participants

Sarah (41) diagnosed with psychotic depression

Tom (22) diagnosed with depression

Aaron (22) diagnosed with depression, anxiety and aspergers disorder

Adam (24) diagnosed with depression and anxiety characterised by paranoia

James (24) diagnosed with bi-polar disorder.



The Lived Experience

- The self
- The secret
- The learning
- The future



"It is impossible to quiet the sounded bell" The multiple functions of non-disclosure

"It's kind of like a personal thing that's in my head I've got to deal with. It's no one else's problem and um...I don't want to involve any other people...um...like with it..." James

"It just wasn't necessary. As I said, they treated me like everybody else, and of course they didn't know and that's why they treated me like everybody else." Sarah



Prevalence Data

- 1 in 5 Australian adults have symptoms commensurate with a diagnosis of mental disorder (Andrews et al, 1999; ABS, 2008)
- This fits with other developed countries (Keyes, 2007)
- Non- disclosure seems to be the norm for TAFE students



What might this mean?

- For policy makers
- For funding decisions
- For TAFE teachers
- For other educators



Limitations and Possibilities

- Raises more questions than it answers
- Lack of transferability
- Effect of place
- Stigma and other things



The Final Word...

I just ah... hope for good days. Sometimes you just feel good for an hour or two or whatever...well not good but like when it becomes bearable and you can study and yeah...yeah, also just for your own sort of well being really, so you can clarify some things " and go "OK yeah, now I know what is going on". Adam

