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# 'It's more than confusing our b's and d's': a commentary on the lack of understanding of the needs of social work students who have dyslexia

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AQ1

Drawing on principles of auto-ethnography, this commentary offers for discussion reflections on a personal reaction to some of the struggles experienced when navigating the English social work placement landscape for a student who has a diagnosis (or label) of dyslexia/dyspraxia. Commenting on some of the challenges faced in order to try and survive the placement experience necessary to complete the programme, this account makes recommendations and suggestions for educators in university and in practice.

**Key words** dyslexia • social work placement

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## Wider practice context

In England, and most other parts of the UK, social work students typically spend at least 170 days in direct, supervised and assessed practice, spread across two main practice placements. The first placement of (at least) 70 days is typically spent in a private, voluntary or independent agency, with a second placement of (at least) 100 days generally taking place in the statutory sector within a local authority in the final year of study for both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

Students are assessed against the requirements of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (BASW, 2018), focusing on both practical and academic skills and abilities, and are required to critically reflect and report on their own practice experiences. Prior to the placement commencing, work takes place with students and educators to identify learning needs and opportunities, and to explore available options, taking account of practicalities such as geographical location of a placement and travelling time.

## Dyslexia and dyspraxia

Dyslexia is defined as ‘a specific learning difficulty that mainly affects the development of literacy and language related skills’ (BDA, 2007); according to Fuller et al (2004), it is the most common self-reported disability among undergraduates in the UK, accounting for 35 per cent of all disabled students. Acknowledged as a specific learning difficulty, dyslexia can impact everyone, including, of course, academics, social workers and students, as well as people with lived experience of using social work services and carers. In addition to being the most common self-reported disability among undergraduates, dyslexia is also the most common disability that will be encountered in the workplace, meaning that for a programme such as social work leading to a professional qualification, support for students is key to enabling the successful completion of the programme and future longevity of career. A diagnosis of dyslexia is highly significant for a variety of reasons, not least the fact that social work students with such a ‘self-declared disability’ are more likely to fail or to be delayed in completing their studies (Hussein, 2008). Although the impact of dyslexia varies substantially and has been said to be along a continuum, frequently reported difficulties include reading, spelling, note-taking, organising essays, timekeeping, expressing ideas verbally, concentrating and using short-term memory. The impact of dyslexia varies, of course, for each individual, and many of those with dyslexia find ways to manage and navigate academic life in some shape or form. For some students, this may mean hiding the fact that they have dyslexia from others.

As a lifelong condition, dyslexia has a significant impact on a person’s daily life, and therefore meets the criteria of a disability as defined by the Equality Act 2010: ‘a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’. Dyspraxia, also known as Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD), is covered under the Equality Act 2010; as such, education providers and employers (among others) are under a duty to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ for people with dyspraxia and/or dyslexia. Despite this, only around 40 per cent of students with dyslexia leave university with a degree classification of 2:1 or above, compared to 52 per cent of non-dyslexic students with the same IQ (Byrne, 2018). The idea of reasonable adjustments in placement may at times be subjective; social work placements are frequently in short supply, and in England, agencies are not obliged or commissioned to provide placements for social work students. Coupled with the student-supervisor power imbalance, this makes it difficult for students to articulate their needs in relation to such a lifelong condition as dyslexia and/or dyspraxia. Practice placements on professional programmes make up a large percentage of teaching and learning experiences; yet, as Boath et al (2018) note, they are a key trigger point for social work students dropping out of university.

## Social movement

This commentary communicates some of the key messages that came about through recall, reading my diary entries made at the time and conversations with friends and university tutors. Drawing on principles of auto-ethnography (Ellis et al, 2011) has allowed me to reflect through a narrative lens on the experiences of placement, and linked together with the academic literature regarding social work placements, this commentary offers a powerful example of my thoughts and feelings associated with a

1 social work placement. Within auto-ethnography, generalisations are difficult; however,  
2 the fact that auto-ethnographies are typically written in the first person and provide  
3 pragmatic examples of communicating one's lived experience makes them readable  
4 and offers a 'window' into a specific moment in time in such a way that helps readers  
5 get a sense of that experience.

6 Social work students are encouraged to be reflective (Knott and Scragg, 2016); yet,  
7 how and if such reflections translate into action is less obvious. Reflecting following  
8 a placement experience by making reference to my diary entries in relation to the  
9 struggles experienced on placement, and relating these to the dyspraxia and dyslexia  
10 literature, may seem like an unconventional approach for an academic piece; yet, it  
11 provides a powerful way of stimulating discussion and debate. This commentary ends  
12 by offering some practical suggestions regarding what I believe needs to take place  
13 to further support (social work) students with dyslexia and dyspraxia in placement.

14 Auto-ethnography is sometimes referred to as a narrative and a dialogue where  
15 the focus is on the author (Witkin, 2014), and it provides a unique opportunity to  
16 comment on, illuminate and develop wider understanding of an issue. Memories of  
17 experiences, diary entries and recall are key resources in writing auto-ethnographically,  
18 and it is this that I have attempted to do in order to highlight some of the relevant and  
19 pressing issues. Auto-ethnography is not about uncovering hidden 'truth' and meanings;  
20 rather, it is about 'enriching understanding' (Witkin, 2014: 4) of a phenomenon.

## 21 22 **My background**

23  
24 My early experience of education was challenging; primary school was a daily struggle  
25 with spelling tests, understanding grammar, using punctuation and memorising facts.  
26 Looking back at my early school reports, I see that I was described as a pleasant and  
27 hard-working pupil and I recognise that many of my difficulties throughout primary  
28 school were mitigated through support and positive working relationships with  
29 teachers and teaching staff. In the final year of primary school (Year 6), I experienced  
30 great anxiety as I realised that in comparison with my peers, I had what I saw as  
31 weaknesses within my academic abilities and as a consequence may 'fail' and therefore  
32 be segregated in high school. This did not occur and I started high school initially  
33 with my friends, though was soon placed in different 'sets' to them.

34 I struggled in most areas; learning languages seemed impossible, as did memorising  
35 facts for history and memorising information and communication technology (ICT)  
36 systems. My strengths were found in the practicality of physical education (PE) and  
37 philosophy associated with religious education (RE). Mainly because of my interest  
38 in sport, I was a (semi-)popular young person who became known for brawn and not  
39 brains. I would frequently mistake the meaning of words, use them incorrectly and  
40 display a poor general knowledge, being either 'teased' or 'bullied' for this, depending  
41 on perspective. I truly believe that not all my peers (and/or teachers) meant this in a  
42 sinister way, but it was nevertheless equally damning to my confidence and sense of self.

43 Leaving school, I scraped through maths and science but had to retake English  
44 (maths and English being prerequisites for future college courses). I see now how both  
45 the primary and high school curriculums were not designed for me (and I suspect  
46 any student with dyslexia and dyspraxia), being as they were exam- and test-based.  
47 At college, I thrived as I felt a sense of control over my grades for the first time in  
48 my life. I was now completing diplomas and national certificates, which meant that I

1 was able to research and complete coursework, and not face the pressure of frequent  
2 exams and tests. My grades increased significantly as I felt a new sense of control  
3 and started to engage in extracurricular activities such as volunteering in the library,  
4 learning martial arts and offering my support on open nights.

5 Achieving a degree as an undergraduate added to my new-found confidence. My  
6 degree in sport development was incredibly challenging and a similar pattern emerged  
7 from my school days: in project work and practical assignments, I scored highly; in  
8 written assignments and academic tests, I floundered. Working in a social care setting  
9 alongside studying for my degree allowed me to think about the future and what I  
10 might be able to achieve with a professional qualification. Despite some misgivings,  
11 I took the plunge, and several years after graduating, I was back at university again,  
12 only this time as a postgraduate student following a professional programme.

13 Formal education has never come easy to me. I find it much easier to speak rather  
14 than attempting to get the structure right on paper – or figure out the spelling of a  
15 word. If the spell check does not understand the word I am trying to use (a regular  
16 occurrence), then it can be disheartening, exhausting and frustrating to identify  
17 appropriate synonyms, especially if it is then a word that exercises less impact. This  
18 additional reasoning and wrestling with my own thoughts is taxing, frustrating and  
19 demotivating. This is especially the case when it may be the same word that I have  
20 misspelled or misplaced over and over again. On occasions, reading also becomes  
21 time-consuming and a chore due to needing to read the same page several times  
22 and processing what I am reading. For example, recalling social work theories  
23 proves difficult, though in practice and conversation, I can appear well versed in  
24 my understanding and application. Social situations have always been somewhat  
25 challenging as I have always had a sense of not being intelligent enough to say anything  
26 meaningful and would often hide behind other more noted and acknowledged  
27 attributes, such as my physical prowess. Despite these difficulties, I managed to keep  
28 up with academic work throughout university and flourished during my first social  
29 work placement – a ‘practical’ one with lots of opportunities for verbal discussion  
30 and practice.

31 The second placement presented more of a challenge to me – this placement  
32 for social work students in England is anecdotally referred to as ‘the statutory one’,  
33 typically taking place in a local authority with a reputation for being fast-paced and  
34 having a high turnover of cases. Students are told that they need to be prepared to  
35 ‘hit the ground running’, which at the outset seemed a challenge for any student, let  
36 alone one labelled as having ‘additional needs’. Despite some anxieties, I approached  
37 this placement as an opportunity to learn and hone my skills; after all, I reasoned, I  
38 only had to get through 100 days.....

39 The following comments are taken from my diary written at the time:

40  
41 Day 1

42 I’m feeling the pressure of needing to make this placement work – what can  
43 I do? I just need to relax, breath & trust myself I must remember I know  
44 more than I realise.

45  
46 Day 7

47 Today I completed a [Honey and Mumford \(1982\)](#) learning styles  
48 questionnaire my scores were:

1 Activist – 5/20 Reflector – 20/20 Theorist – 16/20 Pragmatist – 12/20  
2 This is very interesting as I know am a very deep thinker, often over analytical  
3 and a philosophical individual. Do I think too much? Some questions for  
4 supervision might be: Do I have a good balance? The right balance? (between  
5 theory and practice). Do I need to be more of an activist?  
6 I found myself laughing at a comment my colleague said about the learning  
7 styles questionnaire “It’s supposed to be a bit of fun.” Do I reflect, think &  
8 analyse too much? I thought this statement was excellent for reflection –  
9 which perhaps answers my own question.  
10

11 Day 15

12 Induction period has now finished but I still wonder when will I feel  
13 competent? Confident? Capable? I’m ready for things to start to click into  
14 place but they aren’t yet.  
15

16 Day 25

17 Today I know I need to complete a care plan and gather more information.  
18 I am still hoping I can turn a corner today and become more like the social  
19 worker I want to be, competent and confident that I know what I am doing.  
20

21 Day 27

22 Meeting with my practice educator today. Pretty anxious about this as I  
23 feel like I’ve failed momentarily – I cannot keep up with the pace and the  
24 volume of work that is coming my way. Not sure what to expect. I hate  
25 that I’ve tried so hard, continued to fight tooth and claw for my masters –  
26 only to fall at the last hurdle – it feels so unfair to pass everything other than  
27 placement and lose everything!  
28 (Following meeting) I think my sense of humility, honesty & self reflection  
29 allowed me to come across well and I found the meeting went really well.  
30 I feel as though I am starting to come into my own.  
31

32 Day 40

33 Supervision with my practice educator – I can’t keep up – I know I need  
34 to step things up but I haven’t got anything more to give. I’m trying my  
35 best and it’s still failing.  
36

37 Day 50

38 All I can think of is two years wasted. I can’t cope with statutory social work  
39 with all the pressures and bureaucracy.  
40 I need to think of ways I can use my skills in similar roles  
41 It’s all happening again – it’s not them after all – it’s me  
42 Half way through – to come so far and fall so short of the mark – to be  
43 able to demonstrate that I am competent enough to deal with several social  
44 work ‘cases’ at a time  
45 What the hell am I going to do?  
46  
47  
48

## Day 51

A meeting today with my mentor when I was given a caveat that if things (particularly my ability to juggle several cases successfully at a time) did not improve then it would appear that (from the placement's perspective) social work may not be for me:

I'm crippled with anxiety

I feel like I'm drowning

I want time to stop

I want to run away from everything and everyone

I'm not coping

I'm not managing

I'm failing

## Day 55

I wanted to phone in sick today

I wanted to drive past work to somewhere quiet and escape

I wanted to ignore/avoid the reality that I'm not managing – again – with no excuse.

## Day 56(review of placement due tomorrow)

Can't think this far – possibly just typing

I don't know how I'm going to get through today.

My world feels like it's crumbling around me

I feel like I've missed something

I hate that I want to succeed and can't

I feel like I am dying a slow death – and everyone knows it.

## Day 65

Big assessment 2 today

I went back after three days off (Agreed processing days) and felt incredibly overwhelmed by the volume of my cases in my tray and the time it was taking to complete all the phone calls that was needed before I could start on assessment paperwork.

## Day 66

I'VE NOT GOT THE SKILLS to be a social worker

Its not working

I can't take anymore of this!

I'm sure this isn't how it's supposed to feel

Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I can not change.

The strength and courage to change the things I can

And the wisdom to know the difference.

I'm at the end of my tether and pushing against every boundary I have, extra classes, extra reading, additional note taking and in depth discussions.

1 I can't do anymore or try any harder that I am doing. I feel like I'm driving  
2 with the hand brake on.  
3 I'm feeling anxious about not being good enough – quick enough – efficient  
4 enough.  
5 What will be will be.  
6

7 This was my last diary entry – and at a point where I left the office that night using  
8 only single responses to questions because I was using everything I had to hold back  
9 the tears. I felt at a total disadvantage and not able to utilise my skills. I felt like I had  
10 come to a gunfight armed with a rock and a small thin stick. It was at this point that  
11 a decision was taken by my mentors that the placement would end.

12 Reflecting on the diary entries from a 'safe' distance of time and place, I consider  
13 how I feel dyslexia/dyspraxia has shaped and influenced me both personally and  
14 professionally. There are benefits that I do recognise, for example, understanding that  
15 I think differently and process information differently has allowed for a profound  
16 sense of empathy towards other people who have diagnoses or labels. I understand  
17 some of what it means to be different and not 'fit in' to conventional norms, and I  
18 therefore believe I have a powerful perspective. This can make me relatable to others  
19 who are perceived by society as 'different' or perhaps as an ideal mediator between  
20 service users and family members when trying to build understanding. I have always  
21 been a far better listener and observer due to not wanting to put myself on the radar  
22 of others by getting something wrong, so my contributions tend to be in matters  
23 that I have a good grasp of and plethora of knowledge/experience about. I always  
24 prefer to engage in verbal debates as opposed to written exchanges. Although these  
25 refined skills have been incredibly useful on a practical basis in my support work  
26 and hopefully in my future career, the additional time taken to process things and  
27 memorise details have come at a price to my confidence and self-esteem.  
28

## 29 **Recommendations and conclusion**

30  
31 The impact of austerity and the, at times, pervasive neoliberal approach to social work  
32 practice means most social workers carry high caseloads (Diaz et al, 2019), resulting in  
33 the fact that students on placement, particularly within local authorities, are invariably  
34 being used as an extra pair of hands. There are huge implications for supervision and  
35 management of students when practitioners themselves may be struggling with an  
36 unmanageable caseload; yet, there has been little research carried out regarding the  
37 implications of this for all concerned. Regarding universities, my early exploration  
38 of this topic indicates that there are significant knowledge gaps in the educational  
39 institutions regarding students who have dyslexia (Oloffson et al, 2012). How much  
40 students themselves reveal regarding their diagnosis is variable. The labels of dyslexia  
41 and dyspraxia may themselves be seen as social constructions (Collinson, 2019), for  
42 example, a bilingual study evidenced that you may be dyslexic in one language but  
43 not in another (Smythe and Everatt, 2004). For Collinson (2019), people with dyslexia  
44 should be seen as an 'othered' group, the concept of which is socially constructed.  
45 For a profession dedicated to upholding people's rights, challenging oppression  
46 and promoting social justice, social work has some way to go before the exclusion  
47 (implicit or explicit) of students with dyslexia/dyspraxia is addressed. An inclusive  
48

discourse regarding openness and transparency that recognises positive features, not just so-called deficits, is needed.

What I believe is needed is a greater appreciation of what dyslexia/dyspraxia means for individuals in general and a removal of the tiresome myths and assumptions that are frequently made, for example, that people are intentionally disorganised, forgetful or overwhelmed, and that people 'use' dyslexia as an excuse to get out of doing things. Additionally, for a student on placement, what is needed is some recognition of the impact of 'otherness' that having dyslexia/dyspraxia brings about. I feel that students need to know that it is alright to be different. No platitudes of 'superpowers' are needed here; rather, knowledge and understanding that students with such labels may bring something different to practice is much needed. There needs to be a removal of the stigma that many students face by being afraid to be seen as not coping, or of being overwhelmed. The fable of the tortoise in the race against the hare appears relevant here: lateral thinking and creativeness can be powerful tools and sometimes a better route than speed alone.

### Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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