

Critical and Radical Social Work

'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

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	CRSW-D-20-00022R1
Article Type:	Voices from the front line article
Full Title:	'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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Order of Authors Secondary Information:	
Keywords:	Dyslexia; Social Work Placement
Additional Information:	
Question	Response
Word Count	3732
Commentaries should be no more than 4000 words including abstract (75 words maximum) and references.	
Conflicts of Interest Please declare any possible conflicts of interest, or state 'The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest' if there are none. Further information about conflicts of interest can be found in our Ethical Guidelines .	The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest
Funding Information:	

'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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Abstract:

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

Word count:

3731

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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

Abstract:

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.

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) (British Association of Social Workers [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 traveling time.

Dyslexia and Dyspraxia:

Dyslexia is defined as ‘a specific learning difficulty that mainly affects the development of literacy and language related skills’ (British Dyslexia Association

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2007), according to Fuller et al (2004) it is the most common self-reported disability among undergraduates in the UK accounting for 35% of all disabled students.

Acknowledged as a specific learning difficulty, dyslexia can impact on 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 amongst undergraduates, dyslexia is also the most common disability that will be encountered in the workplace, meaning for a programme such as social work leading to a professional qualification support for students is key to enable a 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 et al 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.

A lifelong condition, dyslexia has a significant impact on a person's daily life, therefore meets the criteria of a disability as defined by The Equality Act 2010.

Defined in the UK under the 2010 Equality Act a disability is:

"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, may also be known as Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD), is covered under the Equality Act (2010), and as such education providers and employers (amongst others) are under a duty to make "reasonable adjustments" for people with dyspraxia and/or dyslexia. Despite this only around 40% of students with dyslexia leave University with a degree classification of 2:1 or above compared to 52% for non-dyslexic students with the same IQ (Byrne, 2018). The idea of reasonable adjustments in placement may be at times subjective, social work placements are frequently in short supply and in England agencies are not obliged or

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commissioned to provide placements for social work students, this coupled with the student/supervisor power imbalance 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 and yet are as Boath et al (2018) note 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 social work placement. Within auto-ethnography generalisations are difficult, however as auto-ethnographies are typically written in the first person and provide pragmatic examples of communicating one's lived experience makes them readable and offers a 'window' into a specific moment in time in such a way that helps readers get a sense of that experience.

Social work students are encouraged to be reflective (Knott and Scragg, 2016) and yet how and if such reflections translate into action is less obvious. Following a placement experience and reflecting making reference to my diary entries in relation to the struggles experienced on placement relating to dyspraxia and dyslexia literature may seem like an unconventional approach for an academic piece and yet provides a powerful way of stimulating discussion and debate.

This commentary ends by offer some practical suggestions regarding what I believe needs to take place to further support (social work) students with dyslexia and dyspraxia in placement.

Auto-ethnography is sometimes referred to as a narrative and a dialogue where the focus is on the author (Witkin, 2014) and it provides a unique opportunity to comment, illuminate and develop wider understanding of an issue. Memories of

1 experiences, diary entries and recall are key resources in writing auto-
2 ethnographically and it is this which I have attempted to do in order to highlight some
3 of the relevant and pressing issues. Autoethnography is not about uncovering hidden
4 'truth' and meanings, rather it is about 'enriching understanding' (Witkin, 2014:4) of a
5 phenomena.
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8 9 My background

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11 My early experience of education was challenging, primary school was a daily
12 struggle with spelling tests, understanding grammar, using punctuation and
13 memorising facts. Looking back at my early school reports, I see I was described as
14 a pleasant and hard working pupil and I recognise that many of my difficulties
15 throughout primary school were mitigated through support and positive working
16 relationships with teachers and teaching staff. In the final year of primary school
17 (Year 6) I experienced great anxiety as I realised that in comparison with my peers I
18 had what I saw as weaknesses within my academic abilities and as a consequence
19 may 'fail' and therefore be segregated in high school.
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29 This did not occur and I started high school initially however was soon placed in
30 different 'sets' from my friends.
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33 I struggled in most areas, learning languages seemed impossible as did memorising
34 facts for history and memorising ICT systems. My strengths were found in the
35 practicality of P.E and philosophy associated with R.E. Mainly because of my interest
36 in sport I was a (semi) popular young person who became known for brawn and not
37 brains. I would frequently mistake the meaning of words, use them incorrectly and
38 display a poor general knowledge, depending on perspective being either 'teased' or
39 'bullied' for this. I truly believe that not all my peers (and/or teachers) meant this in a
40 sinister way, but never the less it was equally damning to my confidence and sense
41 of self.
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50 Leaving school I scraped through maths and science but had to re-take English
51 (maths and English being pre-requisites for future college courses).
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55 I see now how both the primary and high school curriculums were not designed for
56 me (and I suspect any student with dyslexia and dyspraxia) being as they were exam
57 and test based. At college I thrived as for the first time in my life I felt a sense of
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1 control over my grades. I was now completing diplomas and national certificates
2 which meant that I was able to research and complete coursework and not face the
3 pressure of frequent exams and tests. My grades increase significantly as I felt a
4 new sense of control and started to engage in extra curricular activities such as
5 volunteering in the library, learning martial arts and offering my support on open
6 nights.
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11 Achieving a degree as an undergraduate added to my new found confidence, my
12 degree in sport development was incredibly challenging and a similar pattern
13 emerged from my school days, in project work and practical assignments I scored
14 highly, in written assignments and academic tests I floundered. Working in a social
15 care setting alongside studying for my degree allowed me to think about the future
16 and what I might be able to achieve with a professional qualification. Despite some
17 misgivings I took the plunge and several years after graduating I was back at
18 university again only this time as a post graduate student following a professional
19 programme.
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29 Formal education has never come easy to me. I find it much easier to speak rather
30 than attempting to get the structure right on paper, or figure out the spelling of a
31 word. If the spell check does not understand the word I am trying to use (a regular
32 occurrence) then it can be disheartening, exhausting and frustrating to identify
33 appropriate synonyms, especially if then it is a word that exercises less impact. This
34 additional reasoning and wrestling with my own thoughts is taxing, frustrating and
35 demotivating. This is especially the case when it may be the same word that I have
36 misspelled or misplaced over again. On occasions reading also becomes time
37 consuming and a chore due to me needing to read the same page several times and
38 processing what I am reading. For example recalling social work theories proves
39 difficult although in practice and conversation I can appear well versed in my
40 understanding and application. Social situations have always been somewhat
41 challenging as I have always had a sense of not being intelligent enough to say
42 anything meaningful and would often hide behind other more noted and
43 acknowledged attributes such as my physical prowess. Despite these difficulties I
44 managed to keep up with academic work throughout university and flourished during
45 my first social work placement-a 'practical' one with lots of opportunities for verbal
46 discussion and practice.
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The second placement presented more of a challenge to me-this placement for social worker students in England is anecdotally referred to as 'the statutory one' typically taking place in a local authority with a reputation for being fast paced with a high turnover of cases, students are told they need to be prepared to 'hit the ground running' which at the outset seemed a challenge for any student let alone one labelled as having 'additional needs'. Despite some anxieties I approached this placement as an opportunity to learn and hone my skills, after all I reasoned I only had to get through 100 days.....

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

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Day 1

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

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Day 7

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Today I completed a Honey and Mumford (1982) learning styles questionnaire my scores were:

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Activist – 5/20 Reflector – 20/20 Theorist – 16/20 Pragmatist – 12/20

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This is very interesting as I know am a very deep thinker, often over analytical and a philosophical individual. Do I think too much? Some questions for supervision might be: Do I have a good balance? The right balance? (between theory and practice). Do I need to be more of an activist?

I found myself laughing at a comment my colleague said about the learning styles questionnaire "It's supposed to be a bit of fun." Do I reflect, think & analyse too much? I thought this statement was excellent for reflection – which perhaps answers my own question.

Day 15

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

Day 25

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

Day 27

Meeting with my practice educator today. Pretty anxious about this as I feel like I've failed momentarily-I cannot keep up with the pace and the volume of work that is coming my way. Not sure what to expect. I hate that I've tried so hard, continued to fight tooth and claw for my masters – only to fall at the last hurdle – it feels so unfair to pass everything other than placement and lose everything!

(Following meeting) I think my sense of humility, honesty & self reflection allowed me to come across well and I found the meeting went really well. I feel as though I am starting to come into my own.

Day 40

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

Day 50

All I can think of is two years wasted. I can't cope with statutory social work with all the pressures and bureaucracy.

I need to think of ways I can use my skills in similar roles

It's all happening again – it's not them after all – it's me

Half way through – to come so far and fall so short of the mark-to be able to demonstrate that I am competent enough to deal with several social work 'cases' at a time

What the hell am I going to do?

Day 51

1 A meeting today with my mentor when I was given a caveat that if things (particularly
2 my ability to juggle several cases successfully at a time) did not improve then it
3 would appear that (from the placement's perspective) social work may not be for me:
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6 *I'm crippled with anxiety*
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9 *I feel like I'm drowning*
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11 *I want time to stop*
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13 *I want to run away from everything and everyone*
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16 *I'm not coping*
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19 *I'm not managing*
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21 *I'm failing*
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24 Day 55
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26 *I wanted to phone in sick today*
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29 *I wanted to drive past work to somewhere quiet and escape*
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31 *I wanted to ignore/avoid the reality that I'm not managing – again – with no excuse.*
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36 Day 56 (review of placement due tomorrow)
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39 *Can't think this far – possibly just typing*
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41 *I don't know how I'm going to get through today.*
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44 *My world feels like it's crumbling around me*
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46 *I feel like I've missed something*
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49 *I hate that I want to succeed and can't*
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51 *I feel like I am dying a slow death – and everyone knows it.*
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54 Day 65
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56 *Big assessment 2 today*
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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. I can't do anymore or try any harder that I am doing. I feel like I'm driving with the hand brake on.

I'm feeling anxious about not being good enough – quick enough – efficient enough.

What will be will be.

This was my last diary entry and at a point where I left the office that night using only single responses to questions because I was using everything I had to hold back the tears. I felt at a total disadvantage and not able to utilise my skills. I felt like I had come to a gun-fight armed with a rock and a small thin stick.

It was at this point that a decision was taken by my mentors that the placement would end.

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

Recommendations and conclusion

The impact of austerity and the at times pervasive neo-liberal approach to social work practice means most social workers carry high case loads (Diaz et al, 2019) resulting in the fact that students on placement particularly within local authorities are invariably being used as an extra pair of hands. There are huge implications for supervision and management of students when practitioners themselves may be struggling with an unmanageable case-load and yet there has been little research carried out regarding the implications of this for all concerned. Regarding universities, my early exploration of this topic indicates there are significant knowledge gaps in the educational institutions regarding students who have dyslexia (Oloffson, 2012). How much students themselves reveal regarding their diagnosis is variable. The labels of dyslexia and dyspraxia may be seen themselves as social constructions (Collinson, 2019), for example a bilingual study evidenced, that you may be dyslexic in one language but not in another (Smythe & Everatt, 2004). For Collinson (2019) people with dyslexia should be seen as an 'othered' group the concept of which is socially constructed. For a profession dedicated to upholding people's rights, challenging oppression and promoting social justice, social work has

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some way to go before the exclusion (implicit or explicit) of students with dyslexia/dyspraxia is addressed. An inclusive discourse regarding openness and transparency recognizing 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 ok to be different. No platitudes of 'super powers' are needed here, rather knowledge and understanding that students with such labels may bring something different to practice that 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 be a better route than speed alone.

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