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Negotiating the Challenges of Social Work Training and Being Diagnosed With Dyslexia: A Narrative Account.

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of having dyslexia, noting the features of the specific learning difficulty and how this affects aspects of Social Work training and practice. This research uses the life history method to explore some of the professional and personal challenges of managing a dyslexia diagnosis whilst training on a professional accredited university programme to become a Social Worker.

The correlation between dyslexia and mental ill-health is discussed as the participant explains the difficulties she had negotiating the academic demands of the course, alongside the challenges associated with completing a practical placement.

This significance of this work is the original qualitative perspective, and although based on a singular life narrative, it offers reflections for individuals and institutions beyond the singular case study to generalised practice. Moreover, significance explores the balance between accommodating those with dyslexia and maintaining professional standards as a way of 'gatekeeping' the profession.

Keywords: Dyslexia, Depression, Narrative, Social Work Practice, Professional Standards.

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The Equality Act (2010) in United Kingdom (UK) defines a person as being disabled, if an individual has a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on their ability to perform normal daily activities. This legislation makes it illegal in England for educational institutions to discriminate - either directly or indirectly - against individuals with disabilities. It places a duty on educational institutions, including schools, colleges and universities, to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to educational provision to ensure that people with ‘protected characteristics’ are given the same opportunities as others to achieve their full educational potential.

Those with disabilities constitute a protected group and the terms dyslexia and Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) are specifically mentioned in the Equality Act. However, the term ‘reasonable adjustments’ is subjective, inadequately defined within this legislation and left open to interpretation, often resulting in differential provision for individuals who require additional support and resources to enjoy equality of opportunities.

As dyslexia is recognised as a disability within the Equality Act, those who disclose that they have an official diagnosis are protected against discrimination by law in England. Higher Education (HE) providers are therefore required by law to create academic programmes that are inclusive in relation to curriculum design, teaching and assessment. However, specific professional courses in England are regulated by external standards which are specified by a relevant professional body. This includes teaching, nursing and social work. Thus, students who study on courses which lead to professional qualifications are required to meet both academic and professional body standards before they can pass the course. These difficulties can make it more challenging for those with dyslexia to meet both the academic and professional body standards than other students and this often places them at a disadvantage.

The key dilemma is the extent to which educational provision can be adjusted to address the needs of those with dyslexia, through providing additional support to meet the standards, whilst also protecting the credibility of the professional qualification by ensuring that those who do not meet the standards do not gain qualification to practice within the discipline.

DEFINING DYSLEXIA

Dyslexia is derived from the Greek origin meaning ‘difficulty with words.’ The Rose Report (2009:29) offers a widely accepted definition:

- Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling.

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- Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed.
- Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities.
- It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points.
- Co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor co-ordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation, but these are not, by themselves, markers of dyslexia.
- A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds or has responded to well-founded intervention.

Dyslexia affects individuals differently and to differing degrees. Equally, not all the characteristics presented here affect all people with dyslexia. Some of the most common difficulties experienced by those with dyslexia include:

Information Processing

This can present learners with problems internalising information and responding to a task in written or verbal form (Irlen, 2010). Specifically, the retention of information, which is not broken down into stages, can be problematic for those with dyslexia, due to memory difficulties, specifically the short-term memory. People with dyslexia may experience difficulties with short term memory and information processing - holding information, retaining the order of events or remembering what has been asked of them (Thompson, 2013). On professional placements or during lectures, students may miss key pieces of information or may delay fulfilling tasks, due to forgetting information and specific requests. In addition, they may struggle during placements to complete essential tasks which relate to the professional standards. These difficulties may result in them being unable to complete the task or to fulfil it in a sufficient or timely way.

Memory

Those with dyslexia can also experience difficulties with memory, Succinctly, 'short term memory is a temporary storage system' (Quin and Macauslan, 1991, p. 104). Individuals with dyslexia are likely to demonstrate poor short-term memory for information, such as facts, times, dates locations, coming events and so forth. Weak working memory (problems retaining various pieces of information whilst undertaking an activity) can be significant when seeking to retain and recall information. For example, students may find it difficult to take notes whilst listening, and may experience problems with understanding complex questions or following multiple instructions (Hall, 2009). During a placement, the mentor or supervisor should be aware that retaining instructions in the short-term memory can be difficult for students with dyslexia. Strategies which may be useful include breaking instructions into manageable steps, avoiding multiple-part questions and allowing a staged answering process, which uses prompts to remind the

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student of the next part of the question. This avoids the stress of having to memorise a full question and allows the individual to focus upon how they will answer it.

Concentration

Dyslexic learners may have weak listening skills, their attention span may be limited, and they may find it difficult to maintain a structured focus (Janover, 2004). This can make working, focussing and completing lengthier tasks difficult. Within a placement or university environment, the mentor needs to be aware of this by planning in brief periods away from the task, before re-focussing upon it.

Hannell (2016) suggests that it is important to be aware of the concentration difficulties that students with dyslexia may experience and to be patient with them. In some individuals, compensatory approaches, including over-learning and sustained concentration, can lead to mental ill health (Alexander- Passe, 2015).

Communication Skills

It is possible that some individuals with dyslexia may misunderstand oral or written information. Difficulties in being unable to ascertain the consequences of their speech and/or actions may mean they can fail to understand body language, when engaging in oral exchanges. Moreover, missing the implications of what a conversation is about or incorrectly interpreting information is common (Reid, 2011). This might present difficulties in university settings when given specific tasks to do within a timescale. Additionally, on placements, ascertaining a service user's wishes when working with a vulnerable client who may not wish to continue a dialogue could be damaging to a positive working relationship. Understanding the needs of a dyslexic learner is vital to ensure that effective verbal and non-verbal exchanges are made and information is transferred correctly.

Sequencing, Organisation and Time Management

Dyslexia can affect the clarity and coherence of presenting a sequence of events in a logical, structured way, which is organised, clear and chronological. Consequently, in written tasks, not only incorrect sequencing of number and letter strings, but also muddled sequences of ideas can occur. Pumfrey and Reason (2013, p. 81) argue that 'sequencing difficulties are associated with traditional notions of dyslexia.' Within a practice placement, responding to sequencing items chronologically, in a specific way or order, or within a time-limit, can be difficult skills to acquire. Therefore, understanding potential deficits in these areas is essential to helping those with dyslexia.

General organisation, time management and chronology can be addressed by creating small, manageable, achievable, realistic and time orientated (SMART) targets, which are written in consultation with the individual.

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Speed of Processing in Thought and Execution of Literacy-based Tasks
One understanding of dyslexia, applying the medical model of disability, is that it is a neurobiological disorder which affects reading, writing and articulation of a range of activities (Lyon, Shaywitz and Shaywitz, 2003). The term 'dyslexia'is derived from the Greek, 'dys' – difficulty, 'lexis' – word and 'lexia' – 'reading' (Roos, 2018). Dyslexic learners often need longer to read information and may have some difficulties in summarising the content of what they have read. Moreover, opportunities for students to have part or whole texts read to them, or to use assistive technology, such as 'dragon' or 'claro read' computerised software, can provide a useful way of helping to make sense of academic texts.

Due to difficulties in perception, processing information and general reading of words, students may find it takes them significantly longer to read information and may need to re-read words and phrases multiple times to elicit meaning. The interlocking difficulties associated with the nature of reading and the application of literacy-based tasks difficulties may become apparent when completing assignments in an academic format, compliant with the institution's requirements. Peer and Reid (2012) underline the importance of providing additional time and showing consideration when marking the work of dyslexic students, due to the time it takes a learner to decode the text, read the question, formulate ideas and compose answers.

Moreover, educational institutions and associated placements need to be aware of the time it takes students to read, and complete tasks associated with readings, making allowances for dyslexic learners to access literature in a way which promotes their success. On placement, practice educators and supervisors may need to consider supporting the student with reading and understanding key terms. This is specifically poignant as they may have to articulate or write an appropriate response if asked to action something by a service user or member of staff when working within the organisation, or inter-professionally.

Sensory Sensitivity and Visual Stress
Stein and Kapoula (2012, p. 95) explain that 'one of the many consequences of dyslexia could be that it makes the person more sensitive to the types of stimuli that can stimulate stress of the visual cortex, triggered by hypersensitivity to contrast or pattern glare, i.e. increasing susceptibility to visual stress.' Meares Irlen Syndrome or visual stress is the difficulty the brain has in reading and processing information (Irlen, 1991). Visual stress, Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome (SSS) / Meares Irlen Syndrome, can be described as difficulties related to reading due to the appearance of text. Namely, this is where the reader experiences the appearance of rivers of water flowing through the text or words which seem to blur, move or jump. Nijakowska (2010, p.53) states that '[those with dyslexia] ... often complain about vision-related symptoms such as 'jumping letters', 'dancing lines' or 'blurred text.'

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The correlation which exists between visual discrepancies and literacy problems is not difficult to see and problems with reading can be transferred to writing and spelling.

Literacy
Some learners will have delayed development of academic reading and writing skills. Broomfield and Combley (2009, p.11) argue that 'the dyslexic learner's most observable difficulty is in learning to read'. Where achieved, lifelong, residual problems can make spelling, writing and reading stressful experiences due to the imbalance between perceived demand and response capacity (Lawrence, 2009). These include difficulty tracking words, letter rotations and 'bizarre inconsistent spelling errors and untidiness of penmanship' (Snowling, 1996, p. 3).

Complications often exist in extracting the nuances of textual information and spelling unfamiliar words is often reported among those with dyslexia (Martin, 2013). Brunswick (2012, p. 95) writes: *[participants experienced]* 'decoding difficulties, would re-read information once or several times, and need strategies to support their understanding or recall of the text.' Therefore, during university lectures and seminars and on placements, adjustments to allow the student to experience success, despite the significant literacy difficulties, need to be carefully considered.

THE IMPACT OF DYSLEXIA AT UNIVERSITY AND ON PLACEMENT

On professional registration programmes, those with dyslexia may find working on paperwork or electronic portfolios difficult alongside balancing the challenges of the practical aspects of placement. Awkward sentence construction and difficulties with spelling, punctuation and grammar make writing assignments harder work for students with dyslexia compared to their non-dyslexic peers. Some universities recognise the additional workload of social work students with dyslexia and request that markers ignore the syntax, spelling or structuring errors and focus instead on marking positively the content of the paper. This recognises the significant additional workload of those who have dyslexia (Social Work and Dyslexia, 2004; Universities of Reading and Hull).

In social work, being the 'case-holder' or the 'named person' for several 'cases' can be difficult because this requires careful organisation and time-management. Sequencing cases by organising them into alphabetical order can also be challenging for some dyslexics. In addition, memorising and recalling the underpinning theory which relates to the assessment of a service user can also be challenging. Some dyslexic students may find it difficult to recall specific theoretical approaches which should be applied to specific real-life cases. Those with dyslexia could miss indicators of well-being, thus making it difficult to 'intervene with authority' in a service user's life.

From reviewing the literature, gaps exist in relation to the impact dyslexia has upon those on professional registration courses (Caplain, 2018). Equally, the provision for those with

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SpLDs varies across institutions (Abel, 2013). At present, there does not appear to be a uniformly accepted approach and higher education establishments appear to interpret dyslexia and inclusive practice in different ways which creates confusion and inconsistency.

There is a need to recognise that dyslexia and the comorbidity of the condition does not occur within a vacuum and professional registration courses should be adapted to cater for the needs of students with dyslexia. Treating everyone 'equally' is not synonymous with inclusion. As Warnock noted, putting every individual under one roof, teaching and assessing them in exactly the same way, regardless of needs is not inclusive education (Warnock, 2005). Inclusive education necessitates differential pedagogical approaches in order to ensure equality of opportunity for students with specific needs.

MENTORING PRACTICE: DEALING WITH THE COMPLEXITIES OF DYSLEXIA ON PROFESSIONAL REGISTRATION PROGRAMMES

A specific challenge relates to the tension which can exist when implementing the duties of the Equality Act and serving as a 'gate-keeper' of the profession (Bernard, Fairtlough, Fletcher and Ahmet, 2011). Institutions are required to provide reasonable adjustments to ensure equality of opportunity but, at the same time, filter out those who are unsuitable for the professions. The role of the mentor is fundamentally one of supporting the student in balancing the demands of an academic and professional course and ensuring they are meeting the required standards to practice their profession. In England, social work students are assessed against The National Occupational Standards for Social Work (TOPSS).

Speed (2014) suggests that despite the existence of these national standards, at present there is no universal practice among higher education institutions about how to implement inclusion whilst maintaining academic and professional standards. According to Speed (2014), efforts to act in a way to mediate support for students is dependent upon the institution and can be subjective. Therefore, it is possible that a student with dyslexia may have a greater chance of graduating successfully in a vocation if they were at a university which is more inclusive of the needs of those with SpLDs. For example, from an internet search on higher education providers in England, some universities appear to take a much more serious- minded approach to optimum provision for those with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

One University has a *'Best Practice Guide'* for disabled social work students. It outlines how important it is for students to feel safe in disclosing a disability and the adjustments that should be implemented to ensure that they have a successful placement (University of Hull).

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Equally, another university has a well-established Student Enabling Centre, in which an empathetic approach to differentiated marking exists (through the use of stickers for the non-penalisation of marks for errors indicative of SPLDs when marking written assignments) and differentiated assessment if on placement (through allowances made for the difficulties caused by dyslexia) (University of Southampton). This raises interesting questions. Are these universities acting as beacons and the individuals within them as bastions of best practice in relation to the Equality Act? Or are they allowing unsafe practitioners to enter the professions? It is questionable whether universities should make reasonable adjustments to teaching and assessment given that this could result in unsafe professional practices. Conversely, meeting the professional standards is the indicator that a student is safe to practice. If reasonable adjustments are made prior to the end-point assessment to enable students with dyslexia to meet the standards, it might be argued that the standards have been met and that the student is safe to practice.

It is also important to emphasise that in the UK, the Equality Act places a duty on employers to make reasonable adjustments to support employees with dyslexia. The key to assessing professional competency is whether practitioners with disabilities are able to meet the standards after reasonable adjustments have been provided. The quest for inclusive practice can therefore become blurred. Sapley, Turner and Orton (2004, p. 30) state that:

> *'the way in which the standard is applied must not discriminate ... Qualification bodies need to show that the application of any standard does not count as direct discrimination and that the standard can be objectively justified.'*

The question may be asked: what constitutes as reasonable adjustments? The fine balance between ensuring professional competence through completion of The National Occupational Standards for Social Work (TOPSS), and creating inclusive practice, needs to be evaluated with judicial caution – should the trainee be helped with assignments on account of them having dyslexia? Or, should the individual be treated in the same way as others on the course, to ensure the same standards are being equally assessed across the training? Moreover, the mentor has the responsibility to act as a '*gate keeper*' of the profession, to ensure that those who meet the professional standards are permitted into the profession and that those who do not are barred from entering it. However, whilst in England, standards for professional-body registration are specified, judgements about whether or not these have been met are often subjective rather than evidence-based.

This study explored the experiences of one student who had studied on a professional social work course in England. A qualitative life history approach was used to collect data for this study and this is outlined in the subsequent section

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METHODOLOGY

This study uses a storying methodology known as life history. In relation to narrative research, it has been argued that:

> *'Quite possibly, it is the principal way of understanding the lived world. Story is central to human understanding - it makes life liveable, because without a story there is no identity, no self, no other.'*
>
> (Lewis, 2011, p. 505).

It has been suggested that life stories are 'lives interpreted and made textual. They represent a partial, selective commentary on lived experience' (Goodson, 2001, p. 138). Dhunpath (2000) has argued that 'the life history approach is probably the only authentic means of understanding how motives and practices reflect the intimate intersection of institutional and individual experience in the post-modern world' (p. 544).

Azzopardi (2009) has highlighted how life histories connect 'the individual and social dimension of the informant's experience' (p. 83). According to Lewis (2011) story is a 'principal way of understanding the lived world' (p. 505). The social world is complex, messy and contradictory and events may be unconnected. Life history approaches can potentially capture the complexity of human life by focussing on the ways in which narrators (informants) make sense of their personal experiences and narrate their own lives.

Goodson and Sikes (2001) emphasise that 'life history work is interested in the way people do narrate their lives, not in the way they *should*' (p. 16). A well-established theme in the literature on life history approaches relates to the notion of 'giving voice' to marginalised people (McLaughlin and Tierney, 1993; Dhunpath, 2000; Chase, 2005; Lewis, 2011).

McLaughlin and Tierney (1993) coined the phrase *Naming Silent Lives*. The potential of life history research to provide voice for oppressed and marginalised groups has made it a popular choice for those who believe in the power of research to advance social justice (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). Clough (2002) argues that research exists largely for the purpose of 'turning up the volume' (p. 67) on the voices of those who have been marginalised or silenced.

This study complied with university ethical standards and sought permission from the participant by way of a signed formal consent which explained the nature of the research.

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DATA COLLECTION

The participant for this study was a social work student with dyslexia. The sample selection was purposive in that she wished to share her experiences of studying on a pre-registration course whilst having dyslexia. We have used the pseudonym 'Suzanne' to refer to her throughout this paper. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview. Data were digitally recorded and transcribed. We asked Suzanne to describe her experiences of managing a 'dyslexic' identity whilst she studied on a professional registration course.

Key questions that we explored are listed below:

- As a student diagnosed with dyslexia what were your experiences of the social work curriculum, teaching and assessment in the university?
- How would you describe your experiences during periods of placement?
- To what extent were differentiated approaches used to support you?
- Evaluating your overall experience at the university, what was successful and what could be improved?

RESEARCH DATA

The demands faced by students on professional registration courses such as teaching and social work are challenging. Matthews, Simpson and Crawford (2013) write about the placement journey as challenging, informative, self-developing and normally, successful. However, having dyslexia and/or mental health issues can make being on placement a far more daunting experience, which does not always culminate in happiness or indeed success.

Universities are required to assess students on professional courses against their own set of professional standards and the standards specified by the Professional Regulatory Body. At the beginning of a social work placement a student is required to complete a *'declaration of fitness to practice'.* However, for those with dyslexia and those with identified mental health needs, the initial declaration of 'nothing to declare' can seem both fake and unethical.

Suzanne reported feeling that she was breaking the code of Social Work values, namely integrity, by ticking the 'nothing to declare' box and signing a 'fitness to practice' form. However, she also felt that this would allow her placement to commence. In contrast, declaring her disability would result in the convening of a 'fitness to practice board.' One of the possible outcomes of this could be the recommendation for suspension or the termination of her studies if Suzanne's disability meant that she was not fit to practice. Suzanne duly signed the fitness to practice papers and chose not to declare her disability so that she could progress with her studies in a timely way.

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From the first day Suzanne found herself with a portfolio to complete comprising of a word count totalling nearly 12,000 words. Additionally, she was required to undertake an intense placement in which she was responsible for meeting the needs of service users.

The academic component of the course was extremely challenging; writing three case studies, critical analyses, a review of duties and some critical stance perspective papers was overwhelming for Suzanne. Suzanne knew from the start that the university had no policy for differentiating the grading of work for students who had specific learning difficulties (SpLDs) and her work was graded in exactly the same way as her peers, despite the fact that they did not have dyslexia.

From previous grades Suzanne was aware that the lengthy policy meant that she would be heavily penalised, at least by one academic grade, for things which were indicative of dyslexia, such as awkward sentence structure, spelling, punctuation and grammatical difficulties and difficulties conveying ideas in academic language. Furthermore, the way in which her work was marked was often negative and subjective.

Suzanne reported she felt she received little support for her dyslexia diagnosis, despite disclosing she had dyslexia (a report obtained shortly before commencing the social work training course). One of the lecturers stated that in the social work profession she was required to write professional documents such as case notes and court reports and consequently there was no differential treatment or consideration when grading her work. Moreover, Riddell and Weedon (2006) found the quantity and quality of provision for dyslexia was inconsistent across Universities in England. Consequently, the support, was dependent upon which university it was and who the lecturers were.

An example of negative experiences of this are illustrated by Suzanne who felt let down by the university, a former polytechnic college, that they were prepared to allow her admittance on the course, yet did not cater for her needs in any effective way. She was further shocked at the attitude of some of the lecturers towards her difficulties caused by dyslexia. Suzanne stated:

> *'It's shocking, they are supposed to help and be empathetic, allowing me to be on the course and yet they have no regard for my difficulties and just suggest I 'get over them'. I find it degrading to suggest that I have been careless in proof-reading or not taken enough time with an assignment. One essay was marked by the Head of School stating that I had been downgraded because I had 'a number of careless errors which could have easily been avoided'.*

Suzanne expressed how she felt let down by a profession and university which prided itself on being inclusive and accommodating. The student Well-being Centre included student dyslexia support. Suzanne explained that they had been less than helpful in supporting her with the planning or proof-reading of assignments.

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During placement, Suzanne had to familiarise herself with a range of specific and generic procedures. Memorising complex systems proved difficult, as a key feature of dyslexia relates to difficulties with short-term memory. Suzanne stated she was made to feel 'silly' in front of her new colleagues when she was tested on what she had learnt from the company manual. Suzanne felt that the university should have made alternative arrangements for helping her with the challenges of the placement. Being asked to form interpretations based upon new information was also difficult. She expressed how she exhibited 'faking' behaviour, by trying to appear as if she had understood, but inwardly she felt *'fraudulent'* and *'out of her depth'*.

As the weeks progressed Suzanne, who was now, by her own admission, exhausted, felt her general mood declining. Her ability to cope with the now significant demands of quite complex cases, and academic work for the university, was declining. Suzanne recalled falling into a heap on her bed and crying. She off-loaded some of her stress and anxiety to those nearest to her, relationally. Some encouraged her to persevere. Others spoke of her need *to 'call it a day'*. Suzanne, totally exhausted, about halfway through the final placement, wondered what to do. Would her mental health decline if she continued this course until the end, or should she walk away forthwith, to preserve herself from spiralling into depression? As she pondered these things, and desperate to finish the course, she aimed to complete the placement, knowing that she would have to do this if she was to graduate as a Social Worker and Register with *The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)* [the Professional Regulatory Body in the UK].

Suzanne, determined to succeed and demonstrate resilience, despite adversity and setback, felt that had she received support from the university in the initial stages of pre-placement, during placement, and from the placement itself, she would have never been feeling so 'low' and despondent. She wondered whether to raise concerns with the placement provider and to make a complaint to the university. After reflecting, she sent an email expressing her disappointment with how she had been treated during the various stages of placement and her whole university experience to date.

She also raised apprehensions through a 'whistleblowing' policy, after she was asked to fabricate information by adding her signature to agree that she had received supervision on certain days, when this was not the case. Consequently, she raised a 'concerns meeting' about the placement with the help of her practice educator. Within a short space of time, the university had escalated the issues and involved the Head of Programme and module coordinators.

A 'concerns meeting' was raised and issues were brought forth. Suzanne recalled not having her opinions listened to at all, assuming an 'independent' enquiry would occur. However, the investigation was internally conducted with a view geared towards supporting the university and the placement. Moreover, the tutors argued that the system and the placement were acting within the Equality Act and even if some

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misconduct had occurred on placement, it would not be further investigated due to the scarcity of placements and it was recommended that Suzanne should seek to go back there with a more positive attitude and gain the most from the valuable learning opportunity that was being afforded to her.

Suzanne was given the option to continue her placement or begin another one. She indicated that beginning another one would be preferable. She had assumed that she would be able to begin with the days accrued (35 of 70). However, the module co-ordinator insisted she started the placement again. Suzanne felt utterly betrayed by the university and that her complaint had fallen on, not just 'deaf ears', but wilfully 'hostile lecturers', resulting in a deterrent to others who may also have been mis-treated.

After much soul-searching Suzanne decided to explore the options of whether financially and emotionally, terminating studies would be better. Through telephoning the National Health Service (NHS) student bursaries, she found out that a termination of a placement part-way through the course would result in her being liable to pay back around £1500 pounds including child care costs. Thus, she had no choice but to finish the course, given that she could not afford to pay back the funds.

Suzanne decided to start a new placement in a different setting. Taking into account the days she had already completed in the previous placement, Suzanne was now required to complete an additional 70 days during the summer holidays when all the other students were on vacation. Suzanne sought to *'keep her head down'* but working excessively long hours continued. The staff at the new placement setting were a little more understanding and allowed her time to complete some of her paperwork and helped her shape some of her ideas into appropriate academic language.

As with the initial placement Suzanne felt stressed and worn out, working through the summer, without a vacation and with, in her words, *'little meaningful contact'* with her children, which took its toll on her emotional health. Suzanne felt the spiralling, iterative nature of depression re-occurring. She recognised the symptoms from previous experiences. Suzanne, now a significant way through the placement, did not know where to turn. By admitting she felt depressed, she would have her placement suspended at best, or at worst, terminated. Taking a day off, Suzanne, decided to take regular breaks, away from the computer and service users. Despite having a lot of work to do, she felt that she may be able to see her way to the end of the placement.

Near the end of the placement, Suzanne suffered with declining mental health and this seemed to have been exacerbated by having to complete final evaluations, which involved complex theoretical analysis of the differing factors in theory, assessment and methods of analysing, intervening and reviewing action. Suzanne sought to fight the depression, explaining how some days she awoke with *'a fog around her',* a *'black hand'*

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on her. However, Suzanne, determined not to be sent to a 'fitness' board, pushed through.
Finally, reaching her last day, and being signed off as 'completed', a hurdle was overcome. However, Suzanne suggested that she felt completely unsupported from start to finish. She stated:

> *'I felt as though they were all sitting around waiting for an issue to arise which they could jump on and have me off, or create some drama. Perhaps because they miss the action of the high-speed work of child protection, they want action?'*

DISCUSSION

Suzanne's account raises significant questions over the role of how supportive or not universities are to those with dyslexia and depression and, when concerns are raised, whether or not there is a robust system for dealing with them. Doel (2010, p. 8) writes, 'not all placements go well. However, this is not inevitable; there is usually a chain of events that leads to the breakdown of the placement ...'. This narrative highlights failings from the start: Suzanne was not given adequate support and appropriate differentiated assessment, which could have made all the difference to her. The placement provider should have been informed of her dyslexia and how to help her succeed. The repeat of the additional part of placement was unnecessary and unfair. Systems to seek support when she felt that her mental health was declining should have been in place rather than a reactive, unhelpful approach which forced Suzanne to take time off from her placement.

It could be argued that more should be done to acknowledge the hard work those with dyslexia have to do in order to meet the required academic and professional body. Grant (2010) notes that those with dyslexia have to work ten times harder than those who do not have dyslexia. This makes many aspects of academic and practical work most tiring. What seems clear is that a level playing field does not exist and the institution a student attends may affect their outcomes. Some universities are empathetic to the difficulties dyslexia brings and adopt a proactive approach, whereas others do not have sufficient provision to support those who may find aspects of university life difficult.

When analysing the United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (USA) provision for twenty randomly-selected different universities for support for students with dyslexia, it was found that seven of them used differentiated marking policies and twelve had specialist centres for students to access support. Although all the twenty universities had some form of provision, this varied significantly from drop-in sessions, exam support and

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access arrangement provisions to specialist tutors working with the British Dyslexia Association to help students to structure assignments and plan for examinations. Although it is important that courses such as Social Work and teaching have professional standards, and completing them whilst ill is unadvisable, universities should be supportive rather than destructive of their students.

Suzanne was failed on several accounts. Chiefly, adequate, tailored support was not employed for her benefit. Lomax, Jones, Leigh, and Gay (2010, p. 99) suggest that a way to reduce stress is to 'identify sources of support both within and outside your placement.' However, for Suzanne, as a single mother, her family were geographically distant and without university support Suzanne felt lonely and isolated. These feelings of loneliness can be a feature of placement (Bellinger and Ford, 2016) but in Suzanne's case were exacerbated by the feeling of lack of empathetic support for her holistic needs. According to Reardon:

> *Social work educators, including professionals serving as field instructors, confronted by a student with mental health difficulties face a complex dilemma. On one hand, social work education prides itself on being inclusive and recognizes that students with mental health challenges can become effective clinicians and advocates. On the other hand, educators have an ethical duty to ensure that students who graduate from their programs can deliver high-quality services that do not harm clients.*
>
> (Reardon 2012, p. 10).

One university encouraged students to disclose mental health issues with a view to supporting them but noted that once support was implemented, they still had to meet professional standards. After reasonable adjustments have been made the student must still meet the learning outcomes and course requirement of hours in practice of their course. Disabled students are not exempt from meeting academic or clinical requirements. This indicates the support for the individual, recognising equality of access and on-course provision to meet the student academic standards of a social work training course.

CONCLUSION

This work has provided original insights into dyslexia, how it may be viewed by some institutions and individuals within them. This research acknowledges that generalisability is not possible from this research and further research is needed to further validate the sentiments and extrapolations made.

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A research tool, such as a questionnaire, could be used to enhance the number involved in the study, thus improving validity and providing further participant experiences. Despite Suzanne making it clear that she had dyslexia to the university, one aspect of Suzanne's account which may have contributed as a factor for less support, particularly on placement, was she initially failed to identify how dyslexia affected her. Further research into the benefits or limitations of disclosing a dyslexia diagnosis, and its implications, may provide further lines of enquiry. Moreover, Bartlett, Moody and Kindersley (2010) suggest that obtaining a dyslexia diagnosis can put individuals in a dilemma of whether to disclose it or not due to perceived negative treatment they may receive – a key reason Suzanne chose, at first, not to say anything about how dyslexia affected her work on placement.

This research highlights a number of key lessons, which may help individuals to feel more confident in seeking a dyslexia assessment or disclosing they have dyslexia. Higher educational institutions may need to specifically consider and review - what are their policies for helping those with dyslexia? And, how are these implemented for pre-registration programmes (such as social work)?

Furthermore, it could be asked: what lessons can be learned from Suzanne's experience and what improvement should be made for social work training?

First, ensuring staff are aware of the specific needs of those with dyslexia is an important factor in ensuring students feel supported and their needs are catered for in a clear way. Second, whilst acknowledging the student needs to meet professional standards, reasonable adjustments to support students with dyslexia should be made. These should be negotiated between the student, placement provider and the university. Third, and finally, the development of continuing professional learning opportunities for university staff seems to be an important aspect of infusing a culture of accepting dyslexia and not discriminating against it.

In summary, there exists an inconsistency in provision for those with dyslexia at university. Not all universities recognise the implications of having dyslexia when completing a degree course; some institutions offer support for those with dyslexia, whereas other universities and academics within them are sceptical about making 'reasonable adjustments.' The assessment processes can leave individuals like Suzanne feeling despondent and struggling to complete the academic components of the course.

Suzanne's account illuminates the difficulties faced by universities when seeking to address the most effective ways of supporting students to achieve their potential. However, it also highlights a further aspect – how supportive is the institution of dyslexia? Suzanne, as a single parent and mature student, moving to the former polytechnic college, felt that her diagnosis of dyslexia would be seen sympathetically (in terms of

access to provision) by any university she applied to. On reflection, she felt as though she wished that part of her investigation into various universities included looking at the level of support, and indeed attitudes of the head of school and their colleagues, into their understanding and support for those with dyslexia. Suzanne's experiences illustrate the importance of obtaining a diagnosis of dyslexia and securing a place at universities which offer study support and a sympathetic approach to working through the life-long challenges that dyslexia can bring.

It is clear that universities and placements have to protect service users from incompetent practice. At the same time they have a duty to support students who may be struggling to evidence the Professional-Body Regulatory Standards, due to difficulties related to having dyslexia, rather than lack of ability.

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