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"I've got something to tell you. I'm dyslexic": The Lived Experiences of Trainee Teachers with Dyslexia

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Highlights

- Secondary school trainees with dyslexia have unique experiences.
- Trainee teachers with dyslexia bring strengths to the profession.
- University based challenges include lectures and accessing learning support.
- Placement based challenges include marking and unsupportive mentoring.

Abstract

Literature has explored the placement experiences of primary school trainee teachers with dyslexia but there is a scarcity of research on secondary school trainees or university-based experiences. This study examined the experiences of three primary and four secondary school trainees with dyslexia, encompassing both their university and placement-based experiences in England. This research highlighted the similarities in experience across training in a primary and a secondary school but found there are specific challenges associated with training to teach at secondary school level. We also captured the strengths trainees brought to the profession. Implications for initial teacher education providers are discussed.

Key words: teacher education; dyslexia; higher education; interpretative phenomenological analysis; teacher trainees

Introduction

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recognises the lack of diversity in the teaching profession internationally (Schleicher, 2014). Literature suggests that this extends to initial teacher education (ITE) programmes across the globe and that those with disabilities are under-represented (Keane, Heinz, & Eaton, 2017). In the United Kingdom (UK), under the Equality Act (2010), dyslexia is legally considered a disability, meaning that educational institutions and workplaces must make reasonable adjustments for people with dyslexia to protect them from discrimination. There is, however, contention as to dyslexia's definition and characteristics (Elliot & Grigorenko, 2014). This study adopts the Rose (2009) definition of dyslexia:

> *Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities* (p.10).

Bunbury (2019) argues that legal interventions such as the Equality Act (2010) are based on a medical model of disability that label a disability as a problem in need of a solution. They contend this approach reinforces the societal mechanisms that result in discrimination against disabled people, arguing that reform should focus on re-framing disability through a social model, where the focus is on transforming attitudes and removing social barriers to promote inclusion (Bunbury, 2019). The concept of re-framing 'disability' as a 'functional diversity' has been used to begin changing attitudes and mechanisms within education. As Campoy-Cubillo (2019) argues, terms such as 'disability' mean 'less able' whereas the term 'functional diversity' indicates a "diverse way of doing things" (p.2). If we are to promote diversity in the teaching profession and address this global issue (Schleichler, 2014), then attempting to reframe 'disability' in the workplace as a 'functional diversity' may be a way to achieve this.

Across the four nations of the UK, there is a devolved approach to teacher training. This leads to greater national divergence in approaches, with teaching in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland promoted as a research based profession, while training in England situates teaching as a practical, craft-based occupation (Beauchamp, Clarke, Hulme, & Murray, 2015). In England, trainee teachers can take an undergraduate route in to teaching, or they can train in service. Initial teacher education (ITE) can also be completed through a higher education institution (HEI) where, upon successful completion of the course, a trainee teacher will receive a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE; Swain, 2019). Throughout the course, trainees divide their time between university and school-based placements (Foster, 2019). Upon successful completion, trainees obtain qualified teacher status (QTS).
Griffiths (2012) acknowledges, with regard to ITE, that it is unclear where a training provider's responsibility to provide reasonable adjustments to those with disabilities stops and a placement school's responsibility begins. However, to ensure the successful completion of ITE, it is vital that trainees with dyslexia are catered for so that they are not disadvantaged in relation to their non-dyslexic peers (Griffiths, 2012). This may ultimately increase the diversity of the teaching workforce.

Existing literature has explored the experiences of dyslexic primary school trainees (Morgan and Burn, 2000; Riddick, 2003; Griffiths, 2012; Glazzard and Dale, 2013; Glazzard and Dale, 2015; Glazzard, 2018). However, there is a scarcity of research into secondary school trainees where the demands, routines and subject content are vastly different; teachers will teach different age groups and a limited amount of subjects in comparison to the one class and multiple subjects taught by primary teachers (TES, 2019). There is also a scarcity of research on PGCE students' university-based experiences. In view of this knowledge gap, we wanted to provide an original contribution to knowledge by investigating the experiences of both dyslexic primary and secondary school trainees. This was intended to bridge the gap in the current knowledge of experiences in the two sectors, particularly when being awarded a PGCE and QTS qualifies a graduate to work in either the primary or secondary sector, regardless of the setting in which their training took place (DfE, 2020). This paper also aimed to begin the discussion of the experiences of secondary trainees and determine whether there are any experiences unique to the primary or secondary sectors.

We used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA: Smith & Osborn, 2008) to explore the lived experiences of seven PGCE trainees with dyslexia in the UK and gain an in-depth insight in to how each trainee made sense of their own unique, ideographic experience as both teachers and learners. We examined their journey throughout their PGCE course, encompassing their experiences learning with their ITE higher education institution and with their placement schools. To address these objectives, the study explored the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1) What are the placement-based experiences of trainee primary and secondary school teachers with dyslexia enrolled on a PGCE in England?

RQ2) What are the university-based experiences of trainee primary and secondary school teachers with dyslexia enrolled on a PGCE in England?

RQ3) Are there experiences unique to being a dyslexic trainee teacher in either the primary or secondary sector?

In line with the recommendations in Dunn and Andrews (2015), we used person-first and identity-first language interchangeably. We wanted to reflect some of the participants' own preferences as they frequently referred to themselves as ‘dyslexic’ and respect the concerns of disability advocates who also promote the use of identity-first language (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). This extends into the authors’ use of language throughout the paper.

Literature Review

Internationally, literature acknowledges that past life experiences for qualified teachers with a specific learning disability (SLD) shapes and influences their professional identity and practice. In one study of Israeli teachers, participants viewed their disability as an asset, citing their negative lifelong experiences as the reason for their entry into the profession. They expressed a desire to create safe and empowering learning experiences for their students (Benchetrit & Katz, 2019).

This positive view of disability is also consistent with the literature on qualified teachers with dyslexia, specifically. One study demonstrated that some fully qualified teachers see their dyslexia as a strength, acknowledging that they have a greater empathy with students, prioritising inclusion within their own classroom (Burns & Bell, 2010). In addition to these strengths, literature also acknowledges that dyslexic teachers can face barriers at work. Burns, Poikkeus and Aro (2013) found that fully qualified teachers faced adversity in the workplace but employed resilience strategies which contributed positively to self-esteem, self-efficacy and job commitment. One study argued that their participants accepted their own strengths and weaknesses as part of their own professional identity and took opportunities to disclose their dyslexia to their students, reframing their difficulties so that they were viewed positively (Burns & Bell, 2011).

In relation to primary school ITE, dyslexia has proven a significant barrier for some trainee teachers. Those placed with children under six years old will spend a substantial portion of time preparing them for the phonics screening check (Glazzard, 2018). Government policy in the UK prioritises the role of synthetic phonics in early reading development and trainee teachers must develop mastery of synthetic phonics to meet the teachers' standards (DfE, 2011). Trainee teachers in England are assessed regularly on their knowledge and teaching skills in relation to synthetic phonics. The ITT Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019) provides a framework for ITE programmes and synthetic phonics therefore forms part of the ITE curriculum. As dyslexia arises from phonological deficits in the processing of speech sounds (Rose, 2009; Snowling, 2013), this may present a barrier for some trainees with dyslexia in comparison to their peers.

Whilst secondary trainees may not have to teach synthetic phonics, they may be expected to teach and read aloud texts which will be more challenging than those taught at a primary school level. In lessons such as English, the current texts taught as part of national qualifications in England include 19th century novels such as *Great Expectations* (AQA, 2014). Indeed, the increase in challenge does not relate simply to English, but since 2010 it has been government policy to increase the level of challenge across all subjects studied as part of national qualifications (Ofqual, 2018). Furthermore, in secondary schools there is an increased emphasis on disciplinary literacy. This involves using subject specific, academic terminology and portraying confidence in the skills of reading, writing, and speaking and listening within each individual subject (EEF, 2019). The focus on developing high levels of literacy amongst pupils at secondary school could pose challenges for dyslexic secondary trainees.

Literature has shown how for successful completion of ITE courses, support services offered by training providers need to be effective. Morgan and Burn (2000) highlighted how the support offered by the ITE provider to one dyslexic primary school trainee was instrumental in allowing them to complete the course and obtain QTS. Griffiths (2012) found primary school trainees held feelings of inadequacy and deficit views of themselves, although they acknowledged they brought strengths to the profession, such as a greater degree of empathy and understanding with disabled pupils (Griffiths, 2012). The study claimed these feelings could have been alleviated by greater communication between placement schools and the ITE provider, allowing trainees to be on an equal footing with their non-disabled peers (Griffiths, 2012).

Riddick (2003) concluded that trainees with dyslexia performed well in the classroom but had low confidence in their own abilities and were fearful of being ‘found out’ by experienced teachers. Participants would also have benefitted from mentoring by a teacher with dyslexia (Riddick, 2003). This desire to have a positive role model was also reflected in Glazzard and Dale (2013). Their participants with dyslexia training in a primary school were inspired by some practising teachers, but this positivity was outweighed by teachers who lacked empathy and patience (Glazzard and Dale, 2013). Furthermore, the trainees in this study acknowledged how their personal experiences of dyslexia had influenced their professional identities, referring to themselves as caring and empathetic teachers (Glazzard and Dale, 2013). Similarly, Glazzard (2018) found that when training primary school teachers, mentors acknowledged the trainees’ strengths which included being skilled in teaching children with special educational needs and greater pedagogical creativity but were quick to counterbalance these strengths with weaknesses such as teaching phonics or literacy.

Whilst trainee teachers do have ‘placements’ where they develop their teaching practice, they are also still learners within a university setting. Although not a full master’s degree, a PGCE is equivalent to master’s level study and is accredited by an HEI (Gov.uk, 2020). Current literature acknowledges barriers to learning in HE for students with dyslexia. Often, students use compensatory strategies for example, recording lectures, using assistive technology or accessing support services at their institution (Pino & Mortari, 2014). Literature has also suggested university support services are not tailored towards dyslexia, catering for physical disabilities and general learning disabilities (MacCullagh, Bosanquet, & Badcock, 2016). Furthermore, research has shown how some academic staff lack enough knowledge to effectively differentiate for students with dyslexia (Ryder & Norwich, 2019).

Despite research into the experiences and identities of primary school trainees with dyslexia in their ‘placement’ schools, to the authors’ knowledge, there are no studies that look at the experiences of dyslexic secondary trainees, or the experiences of primary or secondary trainees as master’s level learners in UK HEIs. We aimed for this study to begin the discussion of secondary school trainees by taking a holistic view of ITE provision across both primary and secondary sectors. This was intended to begin the discussion of the experiences of secondary school trainees in their placement schools and begin the discussion of both primary and secondary trainees as learners within their HEIs. We intended to bridge the knowledge gap and determine whether there are experiences unique to either sector.

Methodology

Design and Participants

This study used purposive sampling. The study was advertised during lectures on a PGCE course and through word of mouth. Students were invited to register their interest in participating by emailing the lead researcher. Inclusion criteria required participants to selfidentify as dyslexic. Seven participants took part in a semi-structured interview. The mean age of the participants was 24.7 years (SD = 2.49, 23-29 years). Open ended questions were used to encourage participants to relay detailed, considered accounts. Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Participants were recruited from two HEIs in England. The participant group was composed of three trainees currently enrolled on the secondary PGCE course at a higher education institution and one newly qualified teacher previously enrolled on the same course at the same institution (HEI A) and three PGCE primary trainees currently enrolled at a different institution (HEI B). All but one participant was diagnosed with dyslexia as an adult. Whilst exploring this was not within in the scope of this study, without an earlier diagnosis, the participants diagnosed as adults may not have had access to support services or the awareness of dyslexia to develop coping strategies earlier in life. This may have affected their experience as a trainee. All identifiable information was removed, and participants were asked to choose their own pseudonyms (Table 1) to protect anonymity.

Table 1
Participant Information

Name	Age	Gender	Age of Dyslexia Diagnosis	Higher Education Institution	Subject	Teacher Status
Emily	23	Female	21	HEI A	English (Secondary)	Part time PGCE. 2nd Year.
Marie	24	Female	18	HEI A	English (Secondary)	Newly Qualified Teacher
Andromache	24	Other	19	HEI A	Classics (Secondary)	Full time PGCE.
Kevin	23	Male	Key Stage 2 (ages 7-11)	HEI A	Music (Secondary)	Full time PGCE

Chloe	22	Female	Second year of university	HEI B	Primary Education (5-11)	Full time PGCE
Harley	28	Female	Final year of university	HEI B	Primary Education (3-7)	Full time PGCE
Sally	29	Female	27	HEI B	Primary Education (3-7)	Full time PGCE

Data Collection

Individual interviews were conducted between September 2019 and May 2020. Ethical approval was granted by both host institutions. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before any data collection took place and it was made clear that participants would be asked about their experiences as a trainee teacher with dyslexia. Participants from HEI A were interviewed within a private, comfortable room on the ITE university campus. Interviews that took place in May 2020 were conducted on an online conferencing software as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. Given the sensitive nature of the interview, all participants were reminded they did not have to answer any questions they did not wish to, were offered breaks and reminded of their right to withdraw.

Questions were open ended and written to be respectful and sensitive whilst being clear and concise. For example, *"Tell me about your experience of your first day in a placement school."* The interviewer's questions were guided by the participant's previous answers to ensure that participants controlled the direction of the interview where possible. Each interview lasted on average 51 minutes, totalling 5 hours and 57 minutes. After the interviews were concluded, all participants were debriefed and given the opportunity to ask questions.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed in accordance with the principles of IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This methodology is contingent on a small sample size which enabled a thorough exploration of each case before commonalities were identified across all data. IPA acknowledges that the communication between researchers and findings is not a direct one (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Not only does it rely on participants making sense of their own experiences, but also the researchers attempting to make sense of a participant making sense of their own experience, a phenomenon termed double hermeneutics (Smith, 2015).

IPA derives from phenomenology, the study of experience and consciousness (Smith and Osborn, 2008). This research takes an interpretivist approach to data analysis and the presentation of findings. Ontologically, IPA derives from relativism (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Subsequently, we acknowledge that there is not a single truth to human experience and that both researchers and participants play a role in the construction of this truth. In using IPA, the researchers are at the centre of the interpretative process and their own life experiences will influence the findings. For example, one of the researchers in this study identifies as dyslexic. However, whilst we acknowledge that individual bias will have affected the interpretation of data, authors made active attempts to maintain epistemological reflexivity. We continually returned to interview data to support interpretations so that any of these biases were controlled. This subjectivity is seen as central to the research process rather than an epistemological limitation (Shaw, 2010).

The analytic process consisted of a number of stages. Firstly, each interview was transcribed verbatim by the researchers. Transcriptions totalled 50,097 words. At this stage, the authors wanted to capture the ideographic experiences of participants. Secondly, transcripts were read repeatedly by the researchers to develop familiarity with their content, with initial notes made on the transcripts and attempts to summarise and paraphrase what the participant had said. Thirdly, data were explored methodically to identify emergent themes across the dataset. However, in clustering data into superordinate themes we aimed "to respect convergences and divergences in the data – recognizing ways in which accounts from participants are similar but also different" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p.73). In other words, we acknowledged that different participants may have individual variations in how a theme manifested. Final themes and associated data that represented that theme were shared and agreed between researchers to enhance inter-rater reliability. Three superordinate themes are presented in this paper.

Findings

This section presents the essence of participants' training experiences. Researchers determined and agreed upon three superordinate themes: "Experiences of managing disclosure"; "Experiences of receiving support from mentors" and "Adapting to learning environments and professional demands."

Experiences of managing disclosure

This theme encompasses how trainees managed disclosing dyslexia. Having the autonomy to manage when and to whom they disclosed gave them agency in building their own professional identity and, in some cases, supporting their pupils.

All participants reached a point in their training where they felt the need to disclose their dyslexia. Sometimes this was to the senior management of a placement school, their school-based mentor, their university, the classes they taught, or individual pupils with dyslexia who needed support. Participants thought about who they were disclosing to and how. For example, Andromache decided to pre-empt their arrival at their placement secondary school with what they termed "the email of doom" where they carefully explained their needs. Similarly, in her placement primary school, Chloe felt the need to take control over the process of disclosure to avoid being forced to disclose. She explained how she disclosed her dyslexia to her pupils' parents, telling them "I'll be extra careful in my planning." Chloe reassured the parents that her dyslexia would not negatively impact the pupils she taught. Chloe still approached disclosure from a deficit perspective; she feared that she would be perceived as potentially damaging to pupils' education. Chloe also chose to disclose to her class:

> *Extract 1 – There was a child who was very knowledgeable, and I found that in some of my presentations there may have been a comma that might not have been in the right place, but the child would pick it out. I said to the children [...]if you need to go and look in a dictionary or you need to ask for help that is fantastic because that's something I have to do too and then they were like 'why?' and I said 'because I've got dyslexia' and I felt the children were more allowing of me.* (Chloe, 22, primary).

Chloe wanted to maintain control over the disclosure to avoid any questions about her suitability to be a teacher, providing a legitimate justification for any grammatical mistakes or omissions. Chloe perceived that the class were "more allowing" of her implying that, despite being young children, they were more understanding and accepting of the fact that she may make grammatical errors as a result of her dyslexia.

Similarly, Emily implied that she was concerned with making a good impression at her placement secondary school and conveying a persona of professionalism and expertise. She viewed her dyslexia as something that could potentially harm this professional persona. Being able to choose when and to whom to disclose, allowed Emily control over the construction of her professional identity. Emily expressed how she chose to disclose her dyslexia to her mentor and placement school early, stating "I didn't want to go in and shoot myself in the foot.” She was self-conscious of publicly displaying her own literacy skills and felt the need to disclose “in case I was missing out words in lessons.” Emily did not want her grammar and sentence construction to be confused with incompetence or a lack of subject knowledge. Whilst Emily was very forthright about disclosing her dyslexia to her school and colleagues, she did not believe in taking the same approach with her classes:

> *Extract 2 - I wouldn't have a problem with it [telling her classes about her dyslexia] if there was a need for it. I don't think it's something that you need to go in and be like wearing a big flashy sign [...] I would happily stand there [and say I have dyslexia]. I’m not one for trying to cover anything up. I think it’s still a bit taboo. But I think if I weren't teaching English it would be fine but it's like ‘but you're a dyslexic English teacher’ and I'm like ‘yep, I know.’ I know there were maths teachers and stuff at the school that were openly dyslexic with the children, but I think because it was English, it’s really hard. Because I was training it wasn't like they were my classes once they're actually my classes then it might be something that I would do [...] it depends like if they would then like use that to cause an issue in your class.* (Emily, 23, secondary).

Despite not being “one for trying to cover anything up” Emily expressed caution about disclosing to her classes. The decision of whether to disclose to her classes is something she rooted in her professional identity, carefully considering the impact her disclosure would have on how her classes perceived her. Emily felt torn; the classes she taught were not her ‘real’ classes. As a trainee, Emily was gradually expected to take more ownership over a class as the year progressed. However, the class remained the responsibility of a fully qualified teacher and she would never become solely responsible for them. Emily wanted her class to trust her competence, before revealing something that she believed may inhibit the development of that trust. Emily’s lack of official ownership over the class meant that she was unable to make meaningful relationships with them that would have allowed her the time and space to disclose. Furthermore, Emily’s decision to disclose to her classes appeared to be rooted in her status as a trainee English teacher. She perceived a workplace discourse associated with both having dyslexia and being an English teacher where the two are viewed as incompatible. Emily noted how the school environment made it acceptable for mathematics teachers to be open with pupils about having dyslexia. Emily believed that this binary between English teaching and dyslexia could potentially be damaging to her professional identity as disclosure to her classes “would be fine” if she was not teaching English.

Dyslexic trainees acknowledged that they brought strengths to the profession. This included a greater emotional empathy towards pupils with dyslexia; trainees perceived themselves as role models for these pupils. Sometimes, in instances whereby trainees disclosed their dyslexia to their class, it was to support pupils with dyslexia. In a secondary placement, Marie said that she “did mention it to one class in a light-hearted way. I just said I’ve got something to tell you, I’m dyslexic […] it was nice for them [pupils with dyslexia] to see that.” Similar sentiments were also expressed by Kevin:

> *Extract 3 - I've talked to specific students. So there’s a Year 10 student he got quite flustered because he’s quite severely dyslexic and I just got to his level and I said ‘I’m dyslexic’ and then it was like being a positive role model for students with dyslexia because I can show them that no matter how you are feeling everything is not impossible and that they can still do it.* (Kevin, 23, secondary).

In order to become a teacher in the UK a person must hold, at least, an undergraduate degree; they need to have been successful in education. Kevin was aware of his power to portray himself as someone who has successfully dealt with similar challenges and implies that he finds this a rewarding experience. In this example, he was able to allay the fears of a pupil with dyslexia and act as part of an effective support structure for them. He acted with the intention of motivating the pupil so that they “can still do it” (Kevin). Kevin chose to do this on a 1:1 basis, rather than in front of the class. These participants highlighted that disclosing their dyslexia can be important when they perceive a child in need of support.

Experiences of receiving support from mentors

Throughout the PGCE, trainees are placed under the tuition of a school-based mentor (SBM). This is a fully qualified teacher, who can offer professional guidance and support. They may also have a university-based mentor (UBM) who offers both practical and academic support. This theme encompasses trainees' experiences of receiving support from both university-based mentors and school-based mentors. Although all participants had different experiences of this support, they all fundamentally agreed that having a UBM and an SBM who understood their needs as a trainee with dyslexia was integral to the success of the PGCE.

Whilst on placement in a secondary school, Andromache expressed how they appreciated it when their SBM celebrated the things they got right. They say, "I keep getting positive feedback [...] they tell me the kids are engaged, they tell me my subject knowledge is great which it doesn't feel like it is." Like all participants, Andromache expressed how having their strengths highlighted by a mentor was encouraging. For Andromache, to have some of their fears, that their subject knowledge was not adequate, allayed by their mentor gave them confidence. However, despite positive experiences of their SBM in their first school placement, Andromache expressed concerns about their second placement:

> *Extract 4 - My fear for the next placement is I just need to get lucky basically and get just one more mentor that's gonna be understanding because if the mentor's not then the placements gonna die a death because there's no way it's gonna function.* (Andromache, 24, secondary).

Andromache explained how fundamental a supportive mentor was to the success of a school placement. Andromache expressed a feeling of powerlessness; they needed to "get lucky" to obtain effective support from their mentor at their second placement. Andromache accepted that if they are not supportive "there's no way it's [the placement] gonna function." Their placement success and subsequent success as a teacher, hinged on the supportiveness of their mentor.

Andromache's narrative highlights the importance of supportive and understanding mentoring. Unfortunately, the experience of mentoring varied between participants. With some SBMs being less understanding than others. Marie explained:

> *Extract 5 - My first mentor was a very busy man, but we would have our weekly meetings. He knew I was dyslexic, and he was unsure how I could be an English trainee and dyslexic. So I had to explain to him that I had strategies in place to cope and I assured them that it would be only small things that they wouldn't really notice.* (Marie, 24, secondary).

Marie's decision to disclose that she has several coping strategies in place, comes from recognising a power imbalance between herself and her mentor; she does not want to seem a nuisance, aware that he has other priorities. Marie's mentor put her in a position where she had to reassure him that being a person with dyslexia would not inconvenience him and she has developed coping strategies to do her job effectively. For Marie's mentor, being both an English teacher and dyslexic were incompatible. Whilst Marie stressed her independence, having a mentor who did not understand how to support a dyslexic trainee meant that she was at risk of not receiving adequate support.

As a result of a mentor's limited understanding of dyslexia, Harley was made to feel as if her dyslexia was going to be detrimental to the children's learning in primary school. She said how her mentor "made her feel this overwhelmed responsibility that if I don't make sure every single word I write is correct, I'm really going to deter these children from learning." Harley explained that mentoring was more beneficial when issues such as grammar and spelling were addressed in a light-hearted way by a mentor in a previous placement. One of

Sally’s mentors did not understand the difficulties Sally faced and did not offer her any reasonable adjustment:

> *Extract 6 - In my first placement they wanted to know about us and help us […] in my second placement I did not get any help. It was just expected that I could do everything that they could do in the same time […] It took me longer to write a lesson plan and it just wasn’t acknowledged. I spent a whole weekend doing lesson plans. I got everything done for the Monday and explained to my mentor that I’d not done one thing and I’m gonna do it tonight and she was like ‘you should have done it by Sunday night’ […] I was trying my best it just took me a lot longer than if she was doing it.* (Sally, 29, primary).

Sally’s account highlighted how trainees can be supported. She valued how her first placement school wanted to know about her to give her tailored, individualised support. However, at another placement, Sally’s mentor judged her against the standard of a fully qualified teacher, rather than a trainee. The demands placed on her in a new setting were excessive and not considered to adequately support someone with dyslexia. Sally felt as if her mentor lacked empathy and was unable to see Sally’s perspective. Sally explained how her mentor “understood that the children couldn’t get there but I don’t think she understood that I couldn’t get there.” Sally used the idiom “get there” to represent achieving learning goals and outcomes. Her mentor empathised with children and understood how it would take time for them to develop skills and knowledge but would not empathise with Sally and adopt the same viewpoint for someone learning to teach.

Similarly, participants expressed how it was important that their university-based mentor understood the potential impact dyslexia may have on their training. When trainees found things difficult on placement, it was important they had someone, separate from the school, to discuss their issues with. Emily explained how their UBM “just gets it.” She added:

> *Extract 7 – [UBM] has been brilliant to be fair and has been really supportive with it [dyslexia]. [UBM] keeps an eye on me and she gets me.*

> *She just checked I was doing okay and when I went on my placement and started to struggle [UBM] was like 'I'll come in and do this, we can do this, I'll talk to your mentor' all that sort of thing but I had a really good mentor as well which really helped anyway. So yes, between them the support was really good. (*Emily, 23, secondary).

Emily explained how she was grateful for her university-based mentor's support; she valued their reassurance and guidance. Emily cited her UBM's support as integral to the success of her course as they understood her needs as a trainee with dyslexia. Emily was thankful for the open line of communication she had with her UBM. When she started to struggle with her training on placement, Emily went to her university-based mentor before approaching her school-based mentor for support. The UBM was key to unlocking the in-school support for her when she felt she could not address these issues with her placement school directly. Similarly, Chloe explained the importance of having successful role models with dyslexia in her primary school and how her training was best supported when all her mentors worked together. Chloe claimed that working with a fully qualified teacher and a UBM who both had dyslexia gave her "confidence to celebrate it more because I saw people in similar positions to where I wanted to be."

Adapting to learning environments and professional demands

This theme explores participants' experiences of adapting to both their university learning environment and the professional demands of being a teacher.

Participants found the lecture format a barrier to learning. Harley explained how she would "feel physically sick sometimes if there was a lot of information at once." Students would attempt to use assistive technology in the lectures to type notes. However, as a result of other students misusing their laptops to access social media, lecturers would ask all students to stop using their assistive technology. This meant that dyslexic students were unable to utilise assistive technology to aid their learning.

The structure of the primary PGCE also posed challenges. Harley was given one evening to prepare a presentation on content she had learned in a lecture that day. She described the experience as “overwhelming” as she was expected to present and answer questions on subject material she had little time to learn. She did, however, defy her lecturer’s instructions, opting to use cue cards to aid her presentation. The structural challenges of the PGCE went beyond the sequencing of tasks and lectures. Some participants claimed the secondary PGCE structure made it extremely difficult to access university-based learning support when they were only on campus one day a week:

> *Extract 8 - I can't come in and book an appointment with learning support because I'm teaching from half eight in the morning till four and support services close at five. I finish my lectures at half three and I’ve got to compete with all the 120 other people and all the undergrads that want to get an appointment. It doesn’t work..* (Kevin, 24, secondary).

Kevin’s frustration comes from the fact that the structure of the PGCE course meant he was unable to access appointments with learning support services that could help them both on placement and with academic assignments. On the one day each week he is on the university campus, he had to contend with the undergraduates who can easily access support. On his four days in school, he could not reach the university campus before support services close.

In adapting to the school as a learning environment, secondary school trainees expressed difficulty in the delivery of written feedback or ‘marking.’ They received little support or guidance on how to provide written feedback to pupils and were often expected to mark whole class sets of books very early on in their placement. Participants were often criticised for grammatical errors and the speed with which they were expected to have completed the feedback itself. Kevin explained how he was often spoken to about “handwriting inaccuracies.” Marie felt a sense of “dread” when faced with the prospect of marking books and believed it to be a significant barrier to her professional development. This feeling is particularly strong when she marked the books of high-achieving GCSE groups as “it takes me such a long time to read through blocks of texts.” The amount of time marking takes has caused her to take shortcuts and “put a tick” instead of writing feedback. Similarly, for Emily, written feedback was a negative placement experience:

> *Extract 9 – I'm looking at words and I'm thinking ‘this felt wrong’ but I don't know how to spell it’ [...] I’d sit there and think this is how I would spell it but I know it’s wrong. I honestly used to sit there with my laptop like typing to check that it's spelt right and I think that was overwhelming when I had 33 books to do and I just couldn't get my head around seeing if things like words are in the wrong places [...] It was fine and I did get used to it but that was when I really started to question if I could really do it because everyone was like ‘quick turnaround’ with marking and I was thinking I can't do it.* (Emily, 23, secondary).

Emily initially found writing feedback on children’s work difficult. She acknowledged that she “did get used to it” but had to do so without support, having to find ways to adapt herself. Whilst Emily was resilient, we do not know how quickly she could have adapted with additional support. Emily experienced unnecessary pressure from her teacher colleagues and claimed that “everyone was like ‘quick turnaround’ with marking.” This led to anxiety about her ability to manage the workload expected when she became a fully qualified teacher. Furthermore, the number of books she had to write feedback on was daunting. This, coupled with a self-consciousness about any grammatical mistakes she may make, made the whole process stressful. This had such an impact on her self-efficacy, that it made her question her professional competence and whether she could be a teacher; at one point, she felt as if she was unable to succeed.

In both the primary and secondary classroom, participants developed compensatory strategies to overcome challenges whilst teaching. In secondary schools, Emily took the approach of preparing her lessons intricately to head off any problems associated with her dyslexia. She "tended to type more of my lessons and I didn't like writing on the board because I used to panic and be like 'oh my god, what if I can't spell the word?'" Similarly, Andromache explained how they effectively concealed their dyslexia and enhanced the pupils' learning by getting "the kids to do the things that I'm going to be really bad at like writing notes on the board." They added that they "would never do a massive […] live spider diagram on the board […] unless I was recruiting the students to do it for me." Marie explained compensatory strategies she utilised when teaching:

> *Extract 10 - I do make mistakes and my handwriting is appalling so when I write on the whiteboard I purposely make it so they can't read it because I'll be writing something and then I'll pause and to them it looks just like I'm thinking but it's that I don't know how to spell a word so I'll make it so they can't read it and then they'll go 'oh, miss, what's that word?' and I'll say 'Oh, it's this word.' And they'll go 'oh, ok', then write it down in their books because they know how to spell it.* (Marie, 24, secondary).

Marie obscured her own handwriting to avoid spelling publicly. Marie would rather be perceived as someone who cannot write neatly, as opposed to an English teacher who struggles to spell some words correctly. Potentially, she views being unable to spell some words correctly as a threat to her own professional identity, a view perpetuated by her mentor who was unable to reconcile the fact that Marie was both training to be an English teacher and someone who was dyslexic. Indeed, this perception could stem from a wider societal discourse that incorrectly dictates that being an English teacher and having dyslexia are simply incompatible.

Positively, participants recognised that they did bring strengths to the classroom. These included greater resilience in the face of adversity, greater organisational skills, more meticulous detail in lesson planning and more creativity in their teaching. Andromache explained how they did not “teach like others do.” They adopted more creativity into their lesson delivery. In primary schools, not only did Harley find these opportunities to teach rewarding, she also found they gave a lasting impression on the pupils. When asked how dyslexia benefitted her teaching, Harley said:

> *Extract 11 - I felt like I came up with really inventive imaginative ideas in the EYFS [early years foundation stage]. My mentor said ‘you know the children have really stuck with this’ [...] I made this little octopus and I created this story about this octopus who was under the water and had been robbed and the suspect was a seven legged octopus or a nine legged octopus it was given the one less one more scenario and the whole time I was there this one little girl absolutely fell in love with this Ollie the octopus that I'd made and she asked every day for ollie the octopus.* (Harley, 28, primary).

Harley enjoyed being creative with her teaching. This personal enjoyment allowed her teaching strategies to be more effective and resonate with her pupils. This is a strength she relates directly to having dyslexia. Her success with this creativity was also recognised by her mentor, highlighting the benefits that Harley’s dyslexia had brought to the profession.

Discussion

This study aimed to bridge the gap in knowledge between the experiences of dyslexic primary and secondary school trainees and explore their experiences as learners within an HEI. We explored participants’ experiences in their placement schools and in their HEIs. This provided a novel insight into this area of research which has focussed predominantly on primary school trainees in placement settings only. We have found similarities in experience between the primary and secondary sector, such as inefficient mentoring, the process of managing disclosure and managing the demands of lecture-based learning in HEIs. We have also shown how there were unique experiences for those in secondary ITE. For instance, participants had particularly negative experiences when they were training to teach English and in providing feedback to exam groups. IPA methodology allowed us to explore the nuanced and unique perspectives of trainee teachers whose voices may have otherwise gone unheard. Using this approach allowed participants to speak freely about issues that were pertinent to them which, in turn, led to unexpected and valuable insights. However, due to the small sample size, these findings cannot be generalised to all trainee teachers with dyslexia or to other ITE providers. We also acknowledge that most of our participants were female. Future research may look to address this imbalance by recruiting dyslexic male trainee teachers, specifically.

Placement Experiences in Primary and Secondary Settings

The personal narratives of all trainees enrolled on both the primary and secondary PGCEs implied that having ownership over how and when to disclose their dyslexia was an integral part of their experience on the course and in building their professional identity. However, each participant did this of their own volition, with little discussion from the university support services as to how this could be achieved. Even though the participants in this study were happy to disclose their dyslexia to placement schools, others may prefer to have had their placement school already informed by the ITE university. This finding highlights the need for greater discussion between the ITE university and the trainee with dyslexia about how their disclosure to the placement school can be managed (Griffiths, 2012). A trainee might want to make the disclosure themselves; they might prefer the ITE university to do it before they arrive at their placement school or they may not want to disclose their dyslexia at all.

In line with Griffiths (2012) and Glazzard and Dale (2013), participants in both primary and secondary settings acknowledged that they brought strengths to the profession. For example, they often turned compensatory strategies in to positive or creative learning experiences for their classes. They also had a greater degree of empathy with pupils with dyslexia. Trainees stressed how they were aware of their status as a role model for pupils with dyslexia and wanted to use it to motivate and support them. Given that trainee teachers with disabilities are sometimes viewed as a threat to high standards (Riddick, 2001; Griffiths, 2012), this finding points towards celebrating the positives trainees with dyslexia bring to the classroom.

Across both sectors, participants highlighted mentors as fundamental to the success of their PGCE experience. Trainees expressed how they found it rewarding when mentors stressed their strengths. Glazzard (2018) and Griffiths (2012) found that mentors tended to fixate on trainees' weaknesses, and it was detrimental to their confidence. This suggests that if mentors stress a trainee's strengths, it is likely to develop their confidence and give them a platform on which to succeed.

Despite these positives, in some instances, experiences of mentoring in primary and secondary settings were sub-standard. Participants often valued and were receptive to genuinely constructive feedback. However, the way some feedback was phrased was often judgmental and critical, without being supportive. At times, mentors made trainees feel as if they were unsuitable to be teachers. This reflects the findings of Glazzard (2018) that found mentors in primary settings often emphasised trainees' weaknesses and suggests that this may also be applicable to some secondary mentors. It demonstrates how mentors understood dyslexia from a deficit perspective, underpinned by a medical model of disability. Some mentors appeared to be someone 'ill-suited to the role of supervisor/mentor' (Murray-Harvey, et al., 2000, p.33) and our participants' experiences raise questions about how the quality of mentors can be assured. Our findings suggest that there is lack of professional knowledge and training for mentors in supporting a trainee with dyslexia. Training should look to re-define and re-frame the language used in relation to disability, to language that values functional diversity (Campoy-Cubillo, 2019). Indeed, this is particularly important when we consider that effective mentoring is pivotal to an inexperienced teacher's professional development (Glazzard and Coverdale, 2018).

As a result of The Carter Review of initial teacher education, the UK's Teaching Schools Council developed non-statutory standards against which to judge ITE mentors (UK Government, 2016). These standards focus on mentors' personal qualities, high standards of practice, their professionalism and their own self-development. However, as it stands, these standards are advisory and are not officially assessed. Certainly, as with previous literature (Griffiths, 2012; Glazzard, 2018; Glazzard and Coverdale, 2018), our study highlights a great discrepancy in the quality of mentoring. Potentially, the further development of guidelines of how to support a trainee with dyslexia would mitigate some of the inconsistent mentoring experienced by our participants. Furthermore, in line with the findings of Griffiths (2012) and Glazzard and Dale (2015), there appears to be a discrepancy between the quality of mentoring offered by school-based mentors and university-based mentors. Perhaps UBMs could offer school-based mentors training sessions and opportunities to learn about dyslexia and neurodiversity and equip them with the strategies needed to support a trainee with a special educational need. This would go some way to ensuring a parity of mentoring quality between the university and the school.

Primary and Secondary HEI PGCE Experiences

The university-based portion of the PGCE also posed challenges for our participants. Some explained how they found the lecture format challenging. Others cited how they were unable to access reasonable adjustments in the lecture; the conduct of other trainees led to the whole cohort being asked to stop using technology. This became problematic for dyslexic students who used technology to aid their learning. Whilst there is no indication that dyslexic trainees were being targeted deliberately, this finding shows how the needs of dyslexic trainees were overlooked. This finding draws comparisons with Ryder and Norwich (2019), who found that some academic staff lacked enough knowledge to differentiate for dyslexic students. This suggests that there needs to be an increased awareness and understanding of dyslexia amongst the higher education community to ensure that technological accommodations are not removed. Initiatives such as awareness days and seminars for all students and staff could be one potential solution. Furthermore, the PGCE structure also posed practical challenges, preventing some participants from accessing university-based learning support services. As trainees spent one day a week on campus and four days a week in school, they were unable to make appointments with university support services. A potential solution to this problem is to offer telephone or video call appointments. Additionally, HEIs could offer induction packages to postgraduate students to support the transition between undergraduate and postgraduate level. At the end of the initial training year, HEIs could offer similar guidance on managing the transition between postgraduate study and the workplace, where support might be minimal.

Experiences Unique to Secondary School Trainees

Whilst a portion of our findings have been in line with the work undertaken in primary schools, we did have findings specific to training in secondary schools. Firstly, there was a perceived incongruency between training to teach English and having dyslexia. Our two participants training to be a secondary school English teacher perceived a discourse of negativity towards being both an English teacher and a person with dyslexia. Potentially this discourse is perpetuated by a misconception that because dyslexia results in inefficiencies in spelling, reading and decoding (Lyon, Shawaywitz, & Shawaywitz, 2003), dyslexic people are perceived as somehow less capable of teaching English. Whilst we cannot draw anything conclusive from this finding, it warrants further exploration in the future.

Another key finding was related to the emphasis placed on written feedback, particularly with GCSE groups. The UK's Independent Teacher Workload Review Group stresses how providing written feedback on pupils' work has become disproportionately valued by schools. They argue that teachers often conflate the amount of feedback, with the quality of feedback (Independent Teacher Workload Review Group, 2016). In the schools in which our participants were placed, pressure was placed on the trainees to perform a "quick turnaround" of written feedback. One school even gave the trainee full class-sets of books to mark, without a staggered build up. This led to them feeling overworked and overwhelmed. The concept of a "quick turnaround" lies in contrast to advice supported by the UK's Department for Education. The current advice is not for teachers to deliver extensive, regular written feedback but for teachers to feedback in ways that are effective and time-efficient (Independent Teacher Workload Review Group, 2016). In reaction to the unreasonable marking expectations placed upon them, our participants began building their professional identity around the fact that they found marking difficult. Providing written feedback resulted in unnecessary stress; this appeared to stem from an incongruence between best practice in marking work and school culture. This could potentially drive teachers away from the profession as some schools promote unsustainable workload in contrast to government advice. With an increased emphasis in schools on supporting children with their 'cognitive load' (Sweller, Ayres & Kalyuga, 2011), this finding suggests that schools should also consider the cognitive load placed upon trainees and how tasks undertaken by them should be relevant and manageable in order to help them develop.

Conclusion

This study builds on a small body of literature that examines the experiences of primary school trainees with dyslexia. We have explored the experiences of primary and secondary trainees as learners in an HEI. This study also makes inroads in to understanding the unique experiences of dyslexic secondary trainees.

In response to RQ1, we found that there were similarities in placement-based experiences across both primary and secondary trainees. Our study also suggests that some of the literature that explores primary trainees may be applicable to a secondary setting. For instance, there were inconsistencies in SBM quality and inconsistencies between the quality of UBMs and SBMs. Future research may want to consider how mentors can be trained to support trainees with dyslexia and value the unique experiences they bring to the profession. Additionally, trainees in both sectors had similar experiences and anxieties about managing the disclosure of their dyslexia to their placement schools.

In answering RQ2, we found that the structure of the PGCE posed challenges for some of our participants enrolled on both primary and secondary courses. They were expected to have completed a substantial amount of work in a short space of time, without adequate accommodations put in place. The course structure also meant that accessing on-campus support was difficult as participants were only able to meet with learning support services on one day a week and had to compete with undergraduates in accessing this service.

Whilst there was similarity of experience in being a dyslexic trainee across both primary and secondary settings, as outlined in response to RQ1, our findings in relation to RQ3 suggest that there are experiences unique to the secondary sector. Participants training to teach in a secondary school felt pressurised by a conflict between best practice and school culture in the provision of written feedback. Additionally, those training to teach English were perceived as unable to be adequate teachers, perhaps because of the literacy demands of English as a core subject. Given the unique experiences of secondary trainees, future research may wish to focus specifically on trainees with dyslexia in a secondary school setting.

In light of difficulties with the quality of mentoring, in disclosure and in the structure of the PGCE course itself, both university and school policies for supporting trainee teachers could be re-examined through a functional diversity perspective, so that they promote diversity in their language and in practice.

Whilst these findings relate to a small group of trainee teachers, we hope they will be useful for ITE providers in considering how they help trainees manage their disclosure and support school-based mentors. These steps are important to ensure that trainees with dyslexia have a positive experience on their PGCE course and allow them to progress successfully on to their career as a fully qualified teacher.

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