

**An examination of some of the additional  
struggles a trainee teacher with disabilities  
must overcome**

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**Abstract**

This paper describes my journey to become a teacher, despite seemingly overwhelming odds of autism, a stammer and other physical disabilities. I begin by explaining my methodology which is based on interpretivism and explains how I interpreted my recorded behaviours to give a detailed representation of what it is like to be student teacher with a disability from my own perspective. I then set out my literature review before presenting the conclusions of my research. I have concluded that there is a lack of clear guidance and understanding when it comes to trainee teachers with disabilities. By highlighting this knowledge gap, I hope it will pave the way for more in depth research to be undertaken in the future.

**Introduction**

The journey taken as a trainee teacher is one of the most challenging both physically and mentally that I have ever embarked upon. However, it is also one of the most rewarding and worthwhile too.

I did not enter the process blind, I knew that everyone who embarks on the process of teacher training challenges themselves and are put under masses amount of stress and pressure. However, my journey is fairly unique. With no previous teaching experience, autism, a stammer and other physical disabilities I knew at the beginning that the teacher training process was probably going to be harder for me than most.

Taking the decision to enter the teaching profession was a risk, the disabilities (quirks) that make me who I am have not always been viewed positively. I attended a grammar school and to be seen to have a disability was not the 'grammar' way. I was often held back and advised of what I could not achieve. This meant my abilities were often overlooked. Just because I stammer does not mean I have no voice. Taking this decision to give insight into my personal journey and growth as a trainee teacher is of great importance to me. This will hopefully inform others of the challenges, to potentially inspire and to break open the stigma attached to disability and to open the minds of those who believe teachers should be 'perfect'. I say this due to the lack of evidence found by me, for the specific invitation and inclusion of students with disabilities on the DfE (Department for Education), NCTL (National College for Teaching and Leadership) and OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) websites. Despite increased time researching this, the only reference to disability found was of general reference to the Equality Act 2010 (Great Britain, 2010), predominantly used for teachers already in employment. With Pritchard (2010), equally highlighting that there is a distinct lack of disabled teachers due to the lack of explicit policy for the employment of disabled teachers.

This piece will not be written in a traditional format. My methodology will be presented first followed by my data and data analysis. Finally will be my literature review whereby there will be an in depth comparison of the more 'conventional' training experience with that of my own unique version.

**Citation**

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### **Methodology**

The journey and written extracts presented throughout this piece are completely unique and individual to me. I am therefore using the interpretivist paradigm within my work. I will look to interpret my recorded behaviours to give a detailed representation of what it is like to be student teacher with a disability from my own perspective, as opposed to predicting a cause and effect, looking at the personal experience behind what is written (Neuman, 2000). This will act as a guide throughout the piece. I appreciate that others may view my thoughts and personal interpretations differently.

The methods I am using are autobiographical as the origins of what I write about come from my personal experiences. By writing autobiographically there is allowance for the unspoken knowledge to be portrayed and given meaning (Day, 1993). This gives me the ability to share what I consider to be important and to make sense of those particular experiences by giving them meaning (Merrill and West, 2009). This unique insight will provide opportunity that, as suggested by Miriam David (2008), could potentially be missed via other more evidence-based research approaches. Through looking at my training journey autobiographically, it will help me to bring together aspects of my identity and encourage me to find a means to manage some of my struggles (Merrill, 1999). I will begin my analysis with a brief insight as to who I am and the 'quirks' that make me that person.

I conducted a qualitative study in an attempt to understand and compare my training experience with that of other trainees. To highlight the extra struggles I have had to overcome and the different ways in which I have done this, I have collected daily evidence in the form of a personal diary, kept over a period of time during my training. I decided that the narrative form of writing was the best qualitative data form for this study because it enables the focus of research to be on the experience, including thoughts and emotions (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). I will critically examine the diary excerpts to find common themes and identify the ways in which I have personally encountered and felt about a variety of situations. I will also be looking at the recorded observations from lessons observed during the period of my personal diary.

To interpret the data that I have collected, I will be using content analysis. Through the use of content analysis I will have the ability to identify common themes. In particular the common themes identified will show what has made my training experience the same and/or different to those of other student teachers. The choice of using content analysis will enable me to not only perform an analysis of my data but will also go to some lengths in the interpretation of its meaning (Schreiber, 2012).

To avoid a biased analysis of the data, I asked an impartial party to analyse the data by highlighting common themes to be explored further throughout the piece. The act of asking another person to analyse the data alongside myself enables the data to be analysed more comprehensively and provide a more in-depth and accurate analysis of the data (Burla et al., 2008).

The ethical considerations were fully considered and adhered to throughout all stages of this assignment. This is particularly important within the education sector and extra care has been taken to ensure no student names have been used at all in my diaries to maintain anonymity at all times. This is in line with the British Educational Research Associations guidelines (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012) and equally conforms to my schools safeguarding policy (School, A, 2017). Throughout this piece pseudonyms will be used to protect any individual identities and will be used to reference any direct quotes discussed in accordance with the Data Protection Act (Great Britain, 1998).

### **My quirks and Me**

I had always thought about becoming a teacher but it was not until a near fatal car accident in February 2015 that I decided to take the step. I was full of confidence, I knew that I could rise to the challenge.

## GOSTLING: AN EXAMINATION OF SOME OF THE ADDITIONAL STRUGGLES A TRAINEE TEACHER WITH DISABILITIES MUST OVERCOME

After learning to walk again, as a consequence of breaking and damaging numerous parts of my body and undergoing multiple surgeries, I felt no challenge was too tough and no mountain too high.

I live in constant physical pain and discomfort not only from my injuries but made worse by having Ehlers-Danlos syndrome – an inherited condition that weakens connective tissue including joints. I have autism – something that I have always tried to hide due to previous negative labelling, prior to this experience. I stammer and tic, things that tend to come out in times of stress or when I feel that I have no control over situations. I knew I could not allow my disabilities, 'my quirks' to hold me back, instead for the first time I decided to embrace them. Be proud of what I have been through. I felt that I could inspire students in ways maybe those without my disabilities could not. I could bring so much more than my subject knowledge to the role.

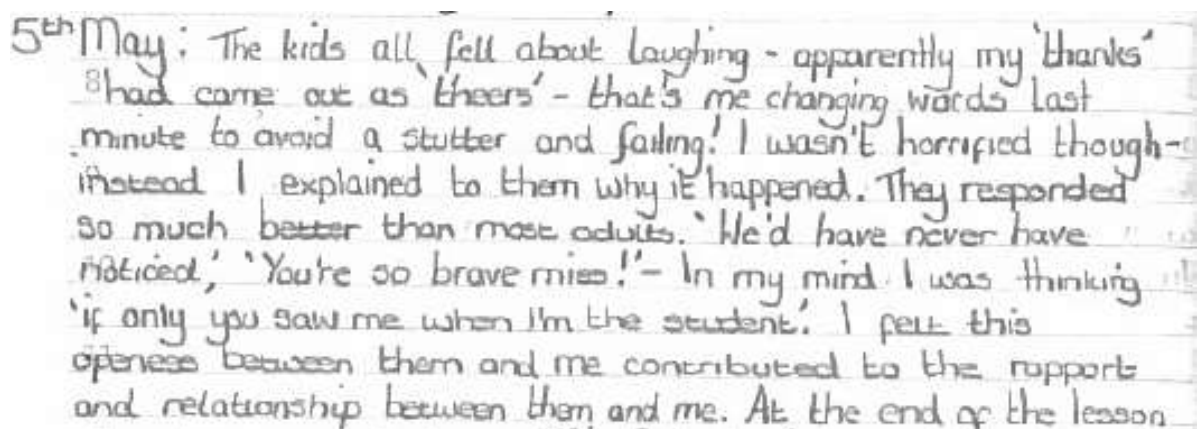
I decided that I needed to have contact with students as soon as possible. After some research, I decided that the School Direct route was the route most suited to me and my needs. I went through the conventional interview process but remained high on confidence; the feeling that I was invincible. I was offered the job, told my resilience would be an asset and so started my journey of training to become a teacher in August 2016.

### Data and Analysis

Through the writing of a personal diary during a period of my training I was able to identify some common themes that shone through. Some are unique to my journey however some are experienced by the majority of trainee teachers and therefore are not exclusive to me but rather inclusive of my peers, colleagues and myself.

One of the stronger themes that was exposed as a result of the analysis of my personal diary as well as lesson observations is the importance of the relationships between myself and others. This can be further broken down to relationships with different groups of people. Those between my students, peers, colleagues, tutors and myself.

The diary extract below is an example of the relationship built with my students:

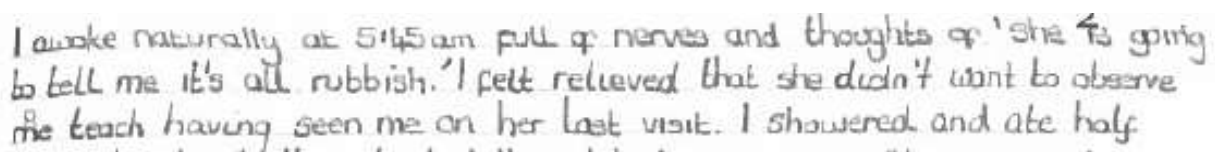


5<sup>th</sup> May: The kids all fell about laughing - apparently my 'thanks' had come out as 'theers' - that's me changing words last minute to avoid a stutter and failing! I wasn't horrified though - instead I explained to them why it happened. They responded so much better than most adults. 'We'd have never have noticed', 'You're so brave miss!' - In my mind I was thinking 'if only you saw me when I'm the student'. I felt this openness between them and me contributed to the rapport and relationship between them and me. At the end of the lesson.

The students are at the heart of my teaching. I have spent the majority of my training in class with them, learning about them, listening to their stories and building a rapport with them. This falls in line with that of Ellis and Tod (2015) who suggest that at the heart of an established learning environment are the positive professional relationships built between the students and their teacher. However, Decker et al (2007) speak about how certain groups of students such as those from minorities or from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely build negative relationships with their teachers. This is not something that I have personally experienced, possibly due to the extra understanding I have as I am a minority and I equally come from a poor working-class family. As seen in the diary extract

above, the students do not respond negatively to my explanation of why some words are not always spoken how they should be. Having explained my need to exchange words at short notice in an attempt to not stammer, the students responded positively. My ability to share my experience with them showed them that I was human, possibly building further on the relationship already built. In all interactions with my students, I consider the ethical implications and consequences of the engagement, ensuring professional boundaries are not breached, in line with the safeguarding policy of my school (School A, 2017). Teachers need to use their judgement when interacting with students. It has been said that new teachers in particular have a need to build and be aware of the professional boundaries, to avoid ambiguity or blurring where common interests and similar age groupings apply (Australasian teacher regulatory authority, 2015).

As a trainee teacher I not only take on the role of a teacher but equally take on the role of student. This has been the hardest part for me on numerous levels. Like many other autistic individuals certain situations can increase my anxiety. These can be based on as little as a 'flippant' comment said by someone – but can have a devastating and lasting effect on me. One such comment was that at the beginning of my training, made by a tutor, who I felt would be more understanding of what I was saying. It severely lowered my confidence. It made me think that the challenge was too big and that I should not have ever started. After, explaining why I was finding some of the university aspects of the journey a struggle I was asked *'Why have you put yourself in this position? Are you sure you have made the right career choice?'* (Person X, 2016). I am in no doubt that these type of comments are unique to me and my journey. This particular comment has had a profound effect, as shown in the following extract:

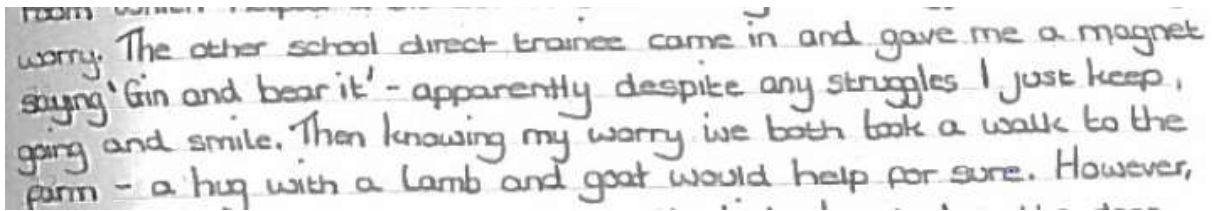


I awake naturally at 5:45am full of nerves and thoughts of 'she is going to tell me it's all rubbish.' I felt relieved that she didn't want to observe me teach having seen me on her last visit. I showered and ate half

Here, the confidence in myself is the opposite to when I am stood in front of my students. The resulting confidence in that particular tutor was far lower than that of the majority of other tutors and mentors.

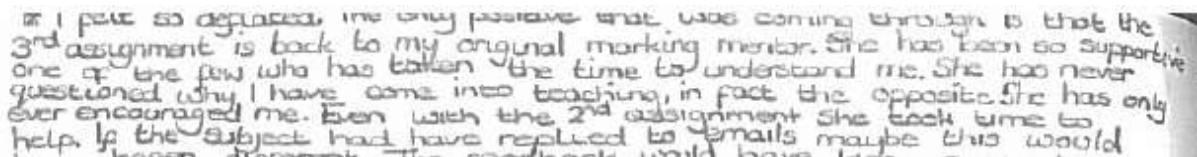
I previously explained in my introduction, in regards to my non-conforming with the 'grammar' way. The comment made reminded me of those times, the times when I was told that I could not achieve, that my aspirations should be lower than those of my peers. In effect, a lid was put on my jar of achievement back then and the comment made at the beginning of my training meant that I felt at risk of the same happening again.

There is a stark contrast between the responses of my students compared to those of this tutor. This is potentially due to the generation difference. The Shriver report (2015) is indicative of the difference between the younger and older generations. It shows the younger generations, those born between 1981 and 2001 (the Millennials), to be more accepting of disabilities. The Shriver report is further supported by the work of Lowe, Levitt and Wilson (2008), who report that the younger generations have higher levels of respect and tolerance for diversity compared to the older generations. This is in part due to the inclusion within schools that the Millennials have experienced, by attending schools with children from a variety of different backgrounds, with the majority of schools nowadays being advocates in equal treatment for all (Ng and Weisner, 2007). This is further backed by the following extract showing the importance of my peers, who are all Millennials. They do not judge or question as to why I am training alongside them. Instead they offer support and acceptance. Often recognising when I need extra time to take in situations or just time away from them.



worry. The other school direct trainee came in and gave me a magnet saying 'Gin and bear it' - apparently despite any struggles I just keep going and smile. Then knowing my worry we both took a walk to the farm - a hug with a lamb and goat would help for sure. However,

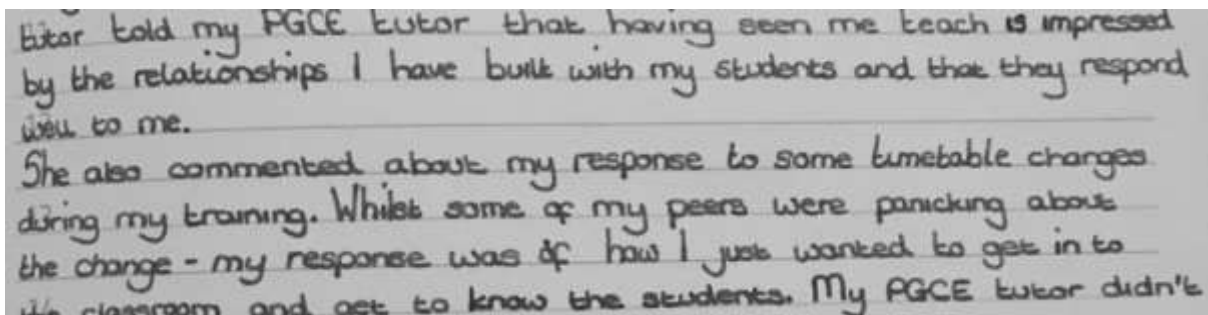
Not all interactions within the university setting were negative with one tutor (Person Y), going beyond the call of duty to help me along in my journey.



or I felt so dejected, the only positive that was coming through is that the 3rd assignment is back to my original marking mentor. She has been so supportive one of the few who has taken the time to understand me. She has never questioned why I have come into teaching, in fact the opposite. She has only ever encouraged me. Even with the 2nd assignment she took time to help. If the subject had have replied to emails maybe this would

Clearly showing again the effect that one statement can have on me, this extract shows the effect of the opposite reaction to my story. I feel totally at ease with this particular tutor. Maybe because like me they value the relationship that they build with their students or possibly it is because they believe in the value that my story can bring to education – or both. Alternatively it could be a combination of the two factors. Phillips (1994) identifies there to be 3 features of a tutor. These being to act as teacher, counsellor and support role to an individual student. Person Y has certainly in my opinion embraced these responsibilities and has managed to build upon the qualities of trust, acceptance, genuineness and empathic understanding which are highlighted by Rogers (1990) to be beneficial to the relationship between tutor and student. Essentially, the relationship built between Person Y and myself has been unique for me, in the sense they did not judge they simply built the relationship of trust therefore reducing anxiety, releasing the pressure and further enabling me to progress.

The overarching theme throughout my data, is without doubt, the emphasis and importance that I place on relationships. The following diary extract sums up the approach that I take to my teaching and what I believe to be one of the most important aspects to my practice.



Tutor told my PGCE tutor that having seen me teach is impressed by the relationships I have built with my students and that they respond well to me. She also commented about my response to some timetable changes during my training. Whilst some of my peers were panicking about the change - my response was of how I just wanted to get in to the classroom and get to know the students. My PGCE tutor didn't

### Literature Review

I have already identified that I did not undertake the journey into becoming a teacher without serious thought and consideration, I am sure I do not differ from my peers in this. As set out by Day et al (2007), the teaching profession is an intense career choice, where every day produces its own unique challenges and demands. I do not differ from any of my colleagues and peers in the struggles and pressures of teaching in relation to workload. The workload can be an overwhelming and surprising aspect of the training year for student teachers (Fasching-Varner et al, 2013). Autism can have a dramatic effect on the way an individual approaches their work. There is a link between autism and the necessity for tasks to be completed 'mistake free', without the feeling that even a small error can lead to possible failure (Obsessive Compulsive Cognitions Working Group, 1997). Hewitt et al (2002) suggest that lack of perfection in the work of someone with autism can lead to increased anxiety.

Demetriou and Wilson (2012) suggest that the majority of trainee teachers at first strive for perfection but through support from their mentors soon realise that perfection is not possible in teaching. I suspect due to my need for increased perfection particularly in my planning and written work, my workload is often higher than that of my colleagues. To help overcome some of my perfection problems the relationship between my mentor and me has been of particular importance.

Embarking upon my journey to become a teacher, initially I was unsure of the form that the relationship between my personal tutor and I should take. It has been suggested by Richardson (1998) that this is a common theme between tutors and tutees. However, Gidman (2001) defines three main aspects to the role of a mentor, academic, clinical and pastoral. Undoubtedly I suspect that the academic and clinical expectations of my mentor overlaps with those of my peers. My pastoral expectations of my mentor are unique to me personally due to my individual needs, therefore the relationship needs to be adapted to facilitate this. In conjunction with the National Autistic Society's recommendations (2016), my mentor and I should collaborate, openly working alongside each other. The line of communication should remain clear and concise to reduce the possibility of misunderstanding or confusion. As discussed previously within this piece, some comments can have a profound and lasting effect upon me. Demetriou, Wilson and Winterbottom (2009), suggest that this is not unique to me and that all comments have the potential to be damaging to trainee teachers. However, I feel that trainees with disabilities have an added vulnerability when exposed to these comments, as shown through my own experience, referenced earlier in this piece.

It has been suggested that planning lessons collaboratively across the subject division would dramatically reduce the individual workload of teachers and would assist in the transfer of skills and knowledge between mentor and mentee (Busby, 2016). I would also suggest that this would equally reinforce the working relationship between trainees and their mentors.

Anxiety is a contributing factor to the extent in which my autism affects me. Lack of sleep is a fundamental factor in anxiety (Whitney et al, 2016). In a study conducted by Turner, Zanker and Braine (2012), it was found that the most prominent negative factor of teacher training was that of exhaustion. The numerous late night early morning combinations are not isolated to me as an individual. However, I feel it is fair to presume I receive less sleep than the majority of my peers and colleagues. An individual with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome predominantly suffers from chronic pain, this in turn often causes disturbances in sleep (Voermans and Knoop, 2011). In addition to the chronic pain from the previously mentioned Ehlers-Danlos, I also endure varying levels of pain as a result of the injuries I sustained in the car accident. This pain results in the minimal sleep I get often being disrupted and severely reduced further.

Ellis and Tod (2015) stress that the building of good relationships with students is one of the overriding principals in teaching and can make a positive impact both in and out of the classroom. The formation of positive teacher-student relationships allows a safe, comfortable and secure learning environment to be felt by students (Baker et al, 2008). The Department for Education Teaching standards (2011) encourage teachers to establish good relationships with students as well as establishing a safe learning environment. These standards are not isolated to qualified teachers, the expectation is that they are established during training and built upon by all trainee teachers as they progress. I suspect, like the majority of my peers, I value the relationships that I have built with my students. This has been identified as a strength of mine throughout my training and reflects in the feedback I receive from my lessons. I suspect, that the relationships that I build with my students are of greater importance to me due the need to feel comfortable and fully understand others as a result of autism (The National Autistic Society, 2016).

Although there is an increased amount of literature in regards to the positive teacher-student relationships, there is limited literature on some of the more negative effects these relationships can have. I believe it fair to say that due to the increased value that I put on the teacher-student relationship there have been times where this has made me feel like I have 'let down' and 'failed' my students. This is potentially unique to my journey in training to become a teacher as the main times I have felt this are when I have had to take time off due to my disabilities. Giles (2008) suggests that teachers put more emphasis and value on teacher-student relationships than the students themselves do. He also suggests those teachers that do not put as much consideration in to the relationships built have more resilience. Although Giles is backed up by Decker, Dona and Christenson (2007), they are both contradicted by Murray and Malmgren (2005) who suggest that students from low socio-economic backgrounds value and benefit the most from the positive relationships they build with their teachers. Working in a school based in a socially deprived area my personal experiences and interactions with my students have been extremely positive on both parts. I feel that Giles' conclusion would not apply in my current working circumstances and therefore cannot be applied to all student-teacher relationships.

### **Conclusion**

I have discovered much about myself over my journey so far as a teacher, my strengths and also my weaknesses and vulnerabilities. A key aim of this piece was to highlight aspects that I have learnt about myself throughout the journey and to compare them with those of the 'conventional' experience. In conjunction with this I have been able to expand upon those aspects to include my personal struggles and how they have been overcome in the hope to inspire and open minds.

One of the overarching themes that has been highlighted through the analysis of my journey is the importance of relationships to me as an individual. I have discussed the two main relationships that I have encountered throughout my journey, with differing positive and negative effects. To build a rapport with my students enables me to help them build a connection not only with myself but with the subject content that I am teaching. This is further backed by the work of Ellis and Tod (2015).

I surmise the relationships between my tutors and me have been more important to me as an individual compared to my peers. This is because of my unique needs and support requirements as shown through my diary extracts. It is my belief that all tutors should go beyond what is deemed as just upholding policy with regards to working with students, particularly those students with 'protected characteristics'. It should not be down to the students alone to have a need to rely on going to university 'student services' for support. It should be up to the tutors to take the time to get to know and understand their students. After all, it is the tutors that will have the most contact with their students throughout their courses.

Like myself, Pritchard (2010) believes that disabled teachers have a lot of unique knowledge and insight to bring to the profession. They can help inspire and raise the aspirations of not only disabled students but all students, to allow them to have the opposite experience to my own. My personal experiences and subsequent research has led me to conclude that there is a lack of clear guidance and understanding when it comes to trainee teachers with disabilities.

It is my hope that by highlighting this knowledge gap, it will pave the way for more in depth research to be undertaken in the future, with the trust that changes will be made. It is up to the policy makers to actively recruit teachers with minorities to not only inspire but to broaden the minds of students and make way for a more accepting future for all.

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