

“What should I say to my employer... if anything?”- My disability disclosure dilemma

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“What should I say to my employer... if anything?”- My disability disclosure dilemma

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Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	disability disclosure, labelling theory, ableism, further education, teachers

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3 “*What should I say to my employer... if anything?*”-
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6 **My disability disclosure dilemma**

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10
11 **Purpose:** The aim of this paper is to explore the key issues surrounding
12 teacher/staff disability disclosures in the UK’s Further Education (FE) sector.

13
14 **Design/methodology/approach:** Fifteen semi-structured interviews were
15 conducted in a medium sized FE college (case-study) setting in the South East
16 of England. To compare the experiences, views and perceptions of leaders,
17 managers and teachers, interviews were carried out with leaders and managers
18 who are accountable for ensuring disability legislation is adhered to, and with
19 teachers who are responsible for complying with equality and disability
20 legislation. The fifteen interviewees who volunteered to take part in this
21 research represent the various layers of the organisational structure and
22 different academic departments in the College.

23
24 **Findings:** Two major themes discussed include: (a) the desire for teaching
25 staff to ‘*come out*’ and make a disability disclosure, also; (b) the perception of
26 disability as a ‘*deficit*’. A number of staff who disclosed their hidden
27 disabilities stated they wouldn’t do so again. In order to avoid the negative
28 side effects, developing a ‘*culture of disability disclosure*’ and providing long
29 term employer support is required.

30
31 **Research limitations/implications:** This is an exploratory qualitative case
32 study that highlights some of the key issues from a teacher/staff perspective. It
33 is not meant to be generalisable research, but the ideas therein should help to
34 develop a wider (empirical) research agenda.

35
36 **Originality/value:** There is an abundance of critical and sociological research
37 concerning disability disclosure in general; there are also a number of scholarly
38 studies that focus on disability issues from the student perspective. However,
39 this is the first scholarly study that explores key issues involving FE staff.

40
41 **Keywords:** *disability disclosure; labelling theory; ableism; further education;*
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57 *teachers.*

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59 **Paper type:** Case Study
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Introduction

This study explores the issue of teacher ‘*disability disclosure*’ – in a UK Further Education (FE) case-based setting. Whilst there is an abundance of literature about how disabilities might impact upon the rights and inclusion prospects of FE students (see Harris and Oppenheim, 2003; Armstrong and Humphrey, 2009; Nelson and Liebel, 2017), much less has been written about how disability issues are affecting (UK) teaching staff (Nalavany *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, while there have been some studies involving the experiences of trainee teachers with learning disabilities, insufficient research has been conducted around the experiences of teachers with disabilities once they qualify, or have been contractually employed (O’Dwyer and Thorpe, 2013). For example, Riddick (2003) suggests that previous scholarly research hasn’t sufficiently explored the issue of dyslexia; neither the contributions of qualified teachers who have dyslexia, nor the nature of employer-employee relationships as a result of disclosing their learning difficulties.

Following the research conducted by O’Dwyer and Thorpe (2013), this article investigates how disclosing a visible or invisible disability might affect teachers in a typical UK (FE) organisational case study setting. The central research question (RQ) asks:

(RQ) what are the key issues associated with disability disclosure from an FE teacher/staff perspective?

As part of addressing the RQ, this article will necessarily analyse the views of both FE teachers and managers, concerning how disability disclosure might affect working relationships, as well opportunities for career advancement.

Literature Review

'Labelling theory' – a negative perspective

The lack of disclosure by teaching staff indicates they often feel the need to hide their disability(s) during the recruitment process and throughout the rest of their employment (Riddick, 2003). Throughout history, society has largely viewed having disability as a 'problem' (Proctor, 1995). Valle et al. (2004) describe being labelled 'learning disabled' as being publicly revealed; thus, different from the norm and standing out in a negative way from others. The way a person perceives, or internalises a label can be influenced by how society interprets that label (Oliver, 1990; Thomas, 2004). When applied to FE teachers, Becker's (1963) 'labelling theory' suggests that many teachers will be afraid to disclose their disability, in case it negatively affects their work relationships and career prospects. Needels and Schmitz (2006) allude to an underlying employer belief that staff with a disability are less productive than those without a disability. This form of discrimination and social prejudice is often referred to as 'ableism' (see Valle *et al.*, 2004). Valle et al. (2004), Delpit (2001) and Sedgwick (1990) also refer to disability non-disclosure as 'the closet', in that some employees will feel the need to hide their disability in order to remain safe, and feel unashamed in the workplace.

Cunningham et al. (2004), Taylor et al. (2010) and Fevre et al. (2013) suggest it is now part of a much wider problem, in that many organisations appear to treat long term sickness (for example) like a disciplinary matter. Fevre et al. (2013) go on to suggest that employees with a disability feel particularly vulnerable regarding their post-disclosure treatment in the workplace. For example, in a recent survey of employees with a disability, nearly a quarter had experienced long-term adverse repercussions as a consequence of their disclosure (von Schrader *et al.*, 2014). De Beer et al. (2014) found that following the disclosure of dyslexia, the attitudes of others were not always positive. In addition,

1
2
3 Singleton's Report (1999) into dyslexia in higher education (HE) in England and Wales
4
5 estimated that as many as half of teacher training applicants with dyslexia didn't declare their
6
7 disability during their application process, due to fears of not being accepted.
8
9

10 Therefore, based on the above research, we developed an initial interlinked
11
12 proposition:
13

14 ***(P1a) disability disclosure is unlikely in many cases, and; (P1b) fear of negative***
15
16 ***work-place consequences tend to remain following disability disclosure.***
17
18
19
20

21 ***Counteracting labelling – affirming a ‘culture of disability disclosure’***

22 The alternative view (in theory) suggests that formal disability disclosure is a positive move.
23
24 It should be an effective long term personal strategy for teachers – *i.e. if managed properly*.
25
26 Disclosure could properly address staff needs, and allow teachers to gain sufficient access to
27
28 resources, reasonable adjustments and organisational support. Ideally of course, it is
29
30 important for FE employers to be aware of staff fears regarding work-place discrimination
31
32 after disability disclosure. School/college managers should also be sensitive to common
33
34 issues such as: (a) employee anxieties around disclosure and confidentiality arrangements; (b)
35
36 potential for stigmatisation at work, and fear of negative reaction among colleagues; (c)
37
38 threatened job-identity or work-place status; (d) potential loss of future opportunities for
39
40 career advancement (Wilton, 2006; Moloney *et al.*, 2019).
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47 It is vital for staff with disabilities to feel confident and comfortable enough to be
48
49 open about their disability in the workplace, and to have their needs addressed properly by
50
51 the human resources (HR) department and line managers alike (Wilton, 2006; Sanderson,
52
53 2011). For example, Smith (2002) suggests that all employers should consult with employees
54
55 who have a disability to determine how best to support them. Kirby and Gibbon (2018)
56
57 advocate disclosure as a first step in a proper process of dialogue; disclosure also
58
59
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1
2
3 acknowledges that the needs of employees with disabilities should be respected and reviewed
4
5 regularly. In many cases, effective work-place accommodations and/or reasonable
6
7 adjustments can be made relatively quickly. However, disability disclosure also requires an
8
9 effective employer communications strategy (von Schrader *et al.*, 2014). This helps to create
10
11 an inclusive and safe environment for all staff; proffering supportive arrangements and
12
13 communicating disability friendly work-practices over the longer term. For a proactive
14
15 employer, this should involve clear signposting, and encouraging a culture of disability
16
17 disclosure, as well as nurturing staff collegiality in the aftermath (Wilton, 2006; Prince,
18
19 2017).
20
21
22

23
24 In practice however, staff disability disclosure is often a complex affair. It requires
25
26 strong HR leadership and sustained action on the part of senior management (Beyer and
27
28 Kilsby, 1997; Wilton, 2006; von Schrader *et al.*, 2014). Some employees for example, will
29
30 openly disclose visible disabilities upfront during the application and recruitment stages; or
31
32 formally disclose after something happens during their contractual employment, such as a
33
34 physical injury or acquired physical disability (e.g. sight or hearing loss). In other cases,
35
36 invisible disabilities, or illnesses can go undetected for months (even years) without
37
38 employers or colleagues realising that disability support interventions are required (Wilton,
39
40 2006; von Schrader *et al.*, 2014). This highlights a need for great awareness training and
41
42 affirmative action on the part of employers (Fevre *et al.*, 2013). It is also important to
43
44 recognise and develop an open disability disclosure culture, and thus disavow a climate of
45
46 personal fear and uncertainty that afflicts so many teaching staff (Fevre *et al.*, 2013; Prince,
47
48 2017).
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54 As a relevant example, in her article '*Shedding Light on a Hidden Disability*',
55
56 Sanderson (2011) refers to dyslexia as a '*hidden*' disability and advocates dyslexia-awareness
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58 training for all employees. She suggests it is important that teaching colleagues, as well as
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1
2
3 leaders and managers have a proper understanding of dyslexia, to ensure that sufficient
4
5 collegial support can be provided. Sanderson (2011) suggests that many organisations are
6
7 unaware of the impact dyslexia can have on employees' ability to accomplish their
8
9 responsibilities and work to their full potential. Sanderson (2011) also proposes that line
10
11 managers could, for example, attend dyslexia-awareness seminars and receive coaching in
12
13 how to work with dyslexic individuals to ensure that they gain an awareness of the tools that
14
15 can level the playing field and equip employees with dyslexia to perform at their best.
16
17

18
19 Based on this view, we develop a second, more positively oriented proposition that
20
21 affirms a '*culture of disability disclosure*' in the work-place, namely:
22
23

24
25
26 *(P2a) proper disability disclosure will help employees feel better about their work-*
27
28 *place relationships, and; (P2b) proper disability disclosure helps employers to offer*
29
30 *and provide much needed employee support.*
31
32

33 34 35 **Research Design and Methodology** 36

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38 A qualitative case study approach was adopted as this is a relatively innovative area of
39
40 research. Kyburz-Graber (2004) suggests that case studies are increasingly used in
41
42 educational research intended to describe context specific educational situations and to draw
43
44 conclusions by generalising from findings. A case study method permits participants to
45
46 discuss their views within a shared organisational context giving a multi-perspectival
47
48 analysis. This method allows us to consider not only the perspective and voice of actors, but
49
50 additionally the pertinent group of actors and the communication among them (Tellis, 1997).
51
52 Tellis (1997) proposes that a case study is a triangulated research strategy that confirms the
53
54 validity of the process and gives a voice to the powerless and voiceless. Eisenhardt (1989)
55
56 and Denscombe (2007) suggest that case studies can draw on interpretations, reveal the
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1
2
3 dynamics of complex states and aid with the process of conceptualisation. According to
4
5 Collis and Hussey (2009) case studies are useful for understanding phenomena within a
6
7 specific context.
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9

10 Semi-structured interviews of fifteen individuals in a single organisation were carried
11
12 out over a six week period from May 2019 – June 2019 to draw out individual experiences,
13
14 outlooks and perceptions. According to Reid et al. (2005) in one unit of case study analysis,
15
16 fifteen interviews are sufficient to examine and reflect upon key dynamics. In a larger
17
18 sample, insight and reflections could become too intricate to develop significant
19
20 understandings. The use of semi-structured interviews was advocated by Denscombe (2007)
21
22 because semi-structured interviews permit the participant to speak openly on the issues with
23
24 the intention to discover their lived experiences and views. According to Bowden et al.
25
26 (2015), interviews permit the researcher to reach inferences that are recognisable and explicit
27
28 within a research context and sampling frame. Eisenhardt (1989) proposes that the method of
29
30 interviewing should be iterative, with better understanding developing as every interview
31
32 advances and is reflected upon. The iterative nature of the methodology permits a deep,
33
34 thoughtful analysis of the participant discourse. It is important to note that interviewing
35
36 within a single longitudinal case study setting, such as a FE provider, is not intended to
37
38 support theoretical generalisations. Instead, the purpose is to categorise thoughts, reflect upon
39
40 key propositions (P1ab) & (P2ab) and recognise potential areas for future research.
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47 The site and context for the study is a medium sized FE training provider based in the
48
49 South East of England. To compare the experiences, views and perceptions of leaders,
50
51 managers and teachers, interviews were carried out with leaders and managers who are
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53 accountable for ensuring equality legislation is adhered to, and with teachers who are
54
55 responsible for complying with equality legislation. The fifteen interviewees who
56
57 volunteered to take part in this research represent the various layers of the organisational
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1
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3 structure and different academic departments. In advance of the interviews, every participant
4
5 was given a written description of the purpose of the research. One to six employees from
6
7 each level of the organisation were interviewed. Teaching experience of the participants
8
9 varied significantly and ranged from less than two years of experience to more than twenty
10
11 years of experience in FE. It was decided to attain as wide a participant outlook as possible;
12
13 however, the sample was restricted to fifteen participants to ensure meaningful interpretation.
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15

16
17 Participants included one member of the Senior Leadership Team (referred to as
18
19 Manager/Teacher in this study to assure anonymity) with responsibility for strategic
20
21 leadership, five Team Leaders (referred to as Manager/Teacher in this study) responsible for
22
23 operational management, three Programme Leaders (referred to as Programme Leader
24
25 /Teacher in this study) responsible for leading the delivery of course programmes and six
26
27 teachers responsible for teaching and assessing students. All Manager/Teachers have teaching
28
29 experience and Programme Leader/Teacher participant responsibilities include teaching.
30
31

32
33 Semi-structured interviews were selected to enable the research participants to express
34
35 their reality (Robson, 2002) and, as social actors, describe how they believed disability
36
37 affects equality for teachers within FE sector more generally. The interview questions were
38
39 designed to explore and understand how disability affects FE teachers in the widest possible
40
41 sense. Sample interview questions included:
42
43

- 44 1) What are the key disability and equality issues for the provider and the FE sector?
- 45 2) What is your own experience in relation to.... disability?
- 46 3) How do disabilities affect equality for teachers within the provider and in FE?
- 47 4) How do specific learning disabilities affect teachers working for the provider and in
48 FE?
- 49 5) How might leadership and management, within the provider and in FE, advance
50 equality of opportunity for teachers with disabilities?
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- 3 6) How might the provider demonstrate best practice in making reasonable adjustments
- 4 for teachers, trainee teachers and teacher applicants?
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- 6
- 7
- 8 7) What are the lessons that can be learned for the provider and for the FE sector?
- 9
- 10 8) Is there anything that you would like to add which I've not asked you, in relation to
- 11 how disability may affect equality for teachers?
- 12
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17 To gain a clearer understanding of disability disclosure issues, specific questions were also
18 asked, such as: *Do you think teachers within the organisation who have a disability would*
19 *disclose it?* Questions one and three were designed to provide a rich insight into how
20 disability may affect equality for teachers in Further Education by drawing out the lived
21 experiences of participants. Question four, on specific learning disabilities, was designed to
22 build on the research carried out by several authors (see Riddick, 2003; Valle *et al.*, 2004;
23 Riddick and English, 2006; Sanderson, 2011; McCusker, 2013; Kirby and Gibbon, 2018;
24 O'Dwyer and Thorpe, 2013). Question five was designed to explore compliance with the
25 'Equality Duty' requirement, i.e. to advance equality of opportunity in the workplace
26 (Equality Act, 2010). Question six was designed to gain insight into how the case
27 organisation and other FE providers can demonstrate best practice in making '*reasonable*
28 *adjustments*'. Additionally, question six was designed to build on the work of Melling *et al.*
29 (2011), Sanderson (2011), Kirby and Gibbon (2018) and Dibben *et al.* (2018).
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46 It should be noted that the participant responses provided during interviews may have
47 been influenced by the lead author's role as a senior leader within the case study organisation.
48 To mitigate this risk, participants were promised anonymity and confidentiality. Information
49 about the study was provided prior to the interview and a consent form was signed by all
50 participants. This confirmed that participation was voluntary, and that interviewees could
51 withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason. Interviews were held in a
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3 private room in a discrete location to safeguard anonymity. Although a specific set of
4 questions were asked to each participant, questions were used as a brief to encourage a
5 conversation and were not strictly asked in the order listed. Participants were provided with a
6 printed version of the questions to allow them to refer back to a previous question if they
7 wanted to. Interviewees were reassured that each question was open to their interpretation
8 and that their responses should be based on their lived experiences, views or observations.
9
10 Out of respect for the richness of their contributions, all participants were awarded as much
11 time as they wanted to spend on each question; the lead author was also careful to ensure that
12 she followed their train of thought and they had nothing further to add, prior to moving on to
13 the next question. It was particularly important for to listen intently, with empathy and
14 respect for participants who spoke of their adverse experiences in relation to their own
15 disability. Supplementary questions were asked to draw out information to gain deeper
16 insight and understanding.
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33 To ensure that data could be thoroughly analysed, each interview was audio-recorded,
34 transcribed verbatim and stored securely. Data from the audio-recordings and transcripts
35 were analysed using an open coding system to identify key themes and thematically selected
36 codes and subheadings. Key themes and subthemes were then cross referenced and compared
37 to the literature. Overarching themes in relation to disability disclosure are discussed as
38 subheadings in the findings section of this article. The overarching themes and ideas
39 discussed are supported by a selection of participant quotations, and through an assimilated
40 discussion of findings centred on the literature. For the data analysis, we drew upon
41 Fairclough's (1989) description of critical discourse analysis, examining the ways in which
42 participants spoke about other peoples' presuppositions about disability within their
43 narratives. For example, we scrutinised the way in which participants spoke of others' beliefs
44 about disability. In particular, we paid close attention to commonly used words, emphasis
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placed on words, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language as a means of understanding perceptions of disability and equality. Words such as *'fear'*, *'fearful'*, *'frightened'*, *'scared'*, *'scary'*, *'hiding'* and *'come out'* were frequently used in relation to disclosure. *'Stigma'* and *'taboo'* were used to explain why there is a need to raise awareness of disabilities and how to support them. *'Problem'*, *'issue'* and *'wrong'* were often used to describe disabilities, particularly learning disabilities. As the fieldwork and subsequent data analysis progressed, we also reflected upon the insights generated and the possible implications for further research.

Findings

'Coming out' – the need for disclosure

All participants believed that there was a need for disability disclosure in order for the needs of an individual to be fully met; fourteen out of the fifteen participants suggested that teachers with a disability should be encouraged to disclose. Despite the perception that the case organisation was more supportive than other FE providers, the majority of participants didn't think a teacher would disclose a disability; no participants believed a teacher would disclose a mental health disability. Notwithstanding, several participants (approximately half) interviewed for this study said they have a disability. Table 1 shows the number and percentage of participants with each disability type. Three participants disclosed more than one type of disability.

Table 1. Disabilities disclosed by participants

Participants	No.	%
Total number of participants	15	100%
Participants who disclosed a disability	7	47%
Participants who disclosed more than one type of disability	3	20%
Participants who disclosed a physical disability	4	27%
Participants who disclosed a 'hidden' physical disability	3	20%
Participants who disclosed a 'hidden' learning disability	4	27%
Participants who disclosed more than one learning disability	1	7%
Participants who disclosed a 'hidden' mental health disability	2	13%

Despite these findings, some participants said they were not aware of any teachers in the organisation with a disability. The most common type of disability disclosed by participants was the specific learning disability, dyslexia. Four participants disclosed dyslexia, yet none of the fifteen participants knew of more than one or two teachers at the case organisation who have disclosed a learning disability and some participants were not aware of any teachers within the case organisation with a learning disability. Three of the four teachers with a learning disability were not aware of any other teachers within the case organisation with a learning disability.

Teachers with a learning disability describe disclosure as a '*big step*' and it is clear from participant responses that disclosure is an extremely difficult, emotional decision that teachers contemplate carefully and view as perilous. Participants frequently used the words '*come out*' when referring to disclosure of learning disabilities and mental health disabilities. Rodis et al. (2001) and Delpit (2001) propose that individuals with learning disabilities compare their experience of disclosure to that of '*coming out*' for a person who is gay. Valle et al. (2004) describes '*coming out*' as learning disabled as an act of trust. They used the

1
2
3 metaphor of *'the closet'* to draw links between the experiences of individuals categorised as
4
5 learning disabled and the experiences of those who are gay, i.e. in relation to weighing up the
6
7 dangers and potential benefits of *'coming out'* (ibid). Interestingly, in the current study, the
8
9 term *'come out'* was primarily used by Manager/Teachers and Programme Leader/Teachers
10
11 to describe disclosure for teachers with learning disabilities. The recurrent use of the term
12
13 *'come out'* signifies that disclosing a learning disability may be similar to disclosing a
14
15 difference in sexuality, or a change in gender:
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22 *"This is the first time I've been able to 'come out'..."* (Teacher B);
23
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25

26 *"But I think other teachers will ... 'come out' if...."* (Programme Leader C);
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29

30 *"One or two people have 'come out' to say..."* (Manager/Teacher C);
31
32
33

34 *"So if teachers could 'come out'...."* (Manager/Teacher F)
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40 Despite significant differences in age, teaching experience and length of service at the
41
42 case organisation, all teachers with a learning disability demonstrated discomfort, anxiety and
43
44 distress when speaking about their own personal and professional experiences:
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49 *"When I was at secondary school it - they made you feel like you was thick or you*
50
51 *were stupid. And I just thought, well, I'm just thick. I'm not bright."* (Teacher B);
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3 *"It's [my own experience has] been pretty poor. God, I feel quite upset now. I think*
4
5 *it's because well...I was just thinking of school, it just felt really emotional then."*

6
7
8 (Teacher D);
9

10
11
12 *"I've lost a couple of jobs in the past and that's been very, very distressing."*

13
14
15 (Teacher F)
16

17
18
19 It is clear from the findings in the current study that regardless of the disability type,
20
21 disclosing a disability is emotionally difficult. For those with a disability, talking about it
22
23 was not easy, even if they had already disclosed:
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25

26
27
28 *"Although [the case organisation] know, it kind of makes me nervous. I do get*
29
30 *nervous about it. (Teacher B);*
31

32
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34
35 *"I'm very anxious to even say it... [that I have a learning disability]"*

36
37
38 (Teacher C);
39

40
41
42 *"When I did get the diagnosis, for two weeks I couldn't even talk about it."*

43
44
45 (Manager/Teacher E)
46

47
48
49 Participants with a physical disability, whether 'hidden' or not, spoke of disclosing shortly
50
51 after diagnosis, whereas, the time it took for teachers with a learning disability to disclose
52
53 varied significantly; it appeared unrelated to age and teaching experience.
54
55

1
2
3 Valle et al. (2004) suggest that dominant discourses of 'ableism' silence people with a
4 disability, helping to perpetuate a world in which they are marginalised. Due to the
5 perception of disability as deficit, to be 'out' as disabled is to be exposed, i.e. different from
6 the average person. Consequently, it is unsurprising that many teachers with a disability may
7 choose to remain silent. Paradoxically, this silence perpetuates a sense of shame and
8 stigmatisation:
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19 *"They don't want to be seen as – I can't manage my job or I'm incompetent to carry*
20 *out my role so they tend to just keep that [their disability] silent instead of seeking*
21 *help."* (Teacher E);
22
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26
27
28 *"For me, I believe that the issue is people themselves feeling ashamed...."*
29
30 (Programme Leader A)
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34

35 Most participants who disclosed a disability to their line-manager did so with
36 trepidation. 86% of participants with a 'hidden' disability expressed a desire to keep their
37 disability confidential. Regardless of their disability type, participants who had disclosed to
38 HR or their line-manager, felt that information about their disability should be shared strictly
39 on a 'need to know' basis. For this reason, disclosure to a line manager does not necessarily
40 unveil a disability to all colleagues:
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51 *"Some people, like myself, I'd rather keep that [my disability] confidential and I feel*
52 *that only those that need to know should know."* (Programme Leader/Teacher A)
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3 Whilst managers should keep all personal information confidential, some participants
4
5 recognised that over-confidentiality reduces the likelihood of other teachers disclosing; thus,
6
7 perpetuating the notion that having a disability is somehow embarrassing or shameful.
8
9

12 ***Disability is perceived as a 'deficit'***

14 With the 'deficit perception' psychological literature in mind, and discussed earlier (e.g.
15
16 Valle *et al.*, 2004; Holwerda *et al.*, 2012), it is unsurprising that many teachers perceived
17
18 their disability as a personal problem to be combatted, rather than a difference to be
19
20 accommodated and celebrated:
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22

26 *"I didn't know I had a problem [a disability]. I didn't tell them [the employer] that I*
27
28 *had the problem [the disability]."* (Teacher B)
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31 It is clear from the findings in the current study that having a learning disability can lead to
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33 low self-esteem and a lack of confidence, due to the deficit perception of disability:
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38 *"We always want to be the best at something. To have a learning disability you kind*
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40 *of feel inferior to other people."* (Teacher C)
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45 Through the words they used, emphasis placed on certain words, facial expressions and body
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47 language, all four teachers with a learning disability demonstrated discomfort, anxiety,
48
49 sadness and distress when asked about their own experiences in relation to disability and
50
51 equality. It was clear from the narratives of teachers with a disability that their decision to
52
53 disclose, or not, was closely linked to their past experiences and their perception of disability
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55 as a deficit. One teacher compared the way he/she had been treated to sexism and racism, and
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57 became tearful when asked about their own experience in relation to disability and equality:
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3 *“It’s like any ‘ism’ around. At the end of the day, it obviously does impact on lives.*

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5 *We can talk about sexism, we can talk about racism, it’s no different.”* (Teacher D)

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10 The word *‘hiding’* was used by many participants when discussing disability
11 disclosure and equality. The language used can sometimes suggest that teachers with a
12 *‘hidden’* disability are intentionally hiding their disability; possibly because they are worried
13 about how they will be perceived by others, if/when they eventually disclose. Sanderson
14 (2011) found that the disability dyslexia is frequently concealed by employees. Pelkey (2001)
15 suggests that individuals with a learning disability often hide their disability, simply because
16 they are ashamed. O’Dwyer and Thorpe (2013) also suggest that teachers may hide a
17 disability due to fear, shame or perceived negative consequences. These explanations are
18 also in keeping with the findings from our study.

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31 Another reason for non-disclosure may be that teachers think their condition is not
32 debilitating enough, i.e. to warrant mentioning. For example, having lived with a health
33 condition since early childhood, Manager/Teacher B didn’t initially regard his/her health
34 condition as a true disability:

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42 *“I don’t feel it [my disability] affects my work.”* (Manager/Teacher B)

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47 However, as the level of discomfort and pain slowly increased, Manager/Teacher B became
48 mentally distracted from normal daily work tasks. Only then, did he/she begin to realise this
49 health condition was genuinely debilitating:

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56 *“I find that I’m distracted mentally from anything that I’m doing because I’m so*
57 *focused on either the pain or the discomfort that I’m feeling.”* (Manager/Teacher B)

Discussion

Due to negative perceptions about disabilities and the fear of adverse consequences (i.e. P1a & P1b), we suggest it is very unlikely that most FE teachers will disclose a disability. In a survey of workers with disabilities, von Schrader et al. (2014) found that almost a quarter of those who disclosed a disability had experienced long-term negative repercussions. In the current study, the vast majority of participants indicated that it is likely that there are teachers who have a disability, yet have not disclosed, due to stigma and fear of possible repercussions. For example, some participants with a learning disability expressed concerns over how they would be perceived by others, due to: (a) the stigma attached to having learning disabilities; (b) discrimination at the recruitment stage; (c) failure to pass their probation; (d) lack of promotion, or worst of all; (e) fear of job loss.

In the current study, some teachers didn't declare their disability on job application forms; and if they did disclose later, it was after they passed their probationary period. There was a fear amongst teachers with a learning disability that if they declare their disability on their job application form, they will not be offered the role:

“When it gets that bit about disability, do I tick it? No, I'm not going to tick it because then I have to explain it or if I tick it I might not get the job.” (Teacher B)

Whilst all participants agree that disability disclosure is necessary in order for the individual needs of a teacher to be met, the question remains as to whether disclosure actually improves the general lot of teachers with a disability. There is a dearth of literature concerning teachers and trainees who didn't disclose their disability(s), due to fears of not being accepted or being marginalised (Macleod and Cebula, 2009; Singleton, 1999; Riddick, 2003). Findings from this study indicated that two out of four teachers who disclosed a

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2
3 learning disability later regretted their decision to disclose. One teacher said that if they left
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5 the current case organisation, he/she would not disclose their learning disability to a new
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7 employer, due to the experiences they had with the current case organisation:
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12 *“I don’t know if I was to ever leave [the case organisation] and go somewhere else,*
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14 *would I let them know that [I have a disability]? I don’t think I would. I think I’d*
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16 *keep it to myself to be quite honest. I don’t think I’d feel I could tell.”* (Teacher B)
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21 It is clear from the findings of this study that disclosure has not provided all teachers
22
23 with the support and resources they expected. Whilst participants with a physical disability
24
25 felt well supported with the resources and adjustments provided, two out of four teachers
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27 with a learning disability felt that they had to fight for their resources, and that support was
28
29 not forthcoming. Participants with a learning disability spoke of a heightened level of anxiety
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31 following disclosure due to how they believed other staff, leaders and managers would
32
33 perceive them, and due to not having received the adjustments and support they required.
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35 One participant stated he/she was aware of a teacher who had disclosed to HR, and that this
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37 same teacher was thinking of quitting, or reducing their hours because they couldn’t ‘cope’.
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45 *“The particular individual is thinking of either quitting or reducing the hours because*
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47 *they can’t cope.”* (Manager/Teacher F)
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52 In the current study, three out of four teachers with a learning disability expressed fear
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54 of not gaining contractual employment, and not passing their probation. Following disclosure
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56 to their line-manger, anxiety around job security and lack of promotion remained or increased
57
58 for these three teachers. Two out of four of teachers who disclosed a learning disability stated
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3 they couldn't progress because of disclosing; one said that if he/she left the organisation and
4 started to work elsewhere, there would be no further disclosure. Other reasons expressed by
5 participants for non-disclosure included the fear that they wouldn't be believed, and also a
6 concern that they would be viewed as incompetent.
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12 Whilst the data suggests that teachers fear disclosure due to perceptions held about
13 disabilities and lived experiences, participants feel that teachers with a 'hidden' disability are
14 unlikely to disclose because they are unaware of other teachers with hidden disabilities, and
15 as a result they choose not to disclose because they do not feel safe. The general consensus
16 of participants is, that if teachers with a disability would 'come out' and act as role models,
17 champions or ambassadors, other teachers with a disability would feel more confident to
18 disclose as well. Nonetheless, participants alluded to a lack of trust and indicated that
19 teachers may not feel safe to disclose because they are afraid of adverse consequences:
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33 *"Even when I was in university it was something that you were told - do not go to*
34 *your GP if you're struggling just in case it's on your record that you've been given*
35 *depression tablets."* (Teacher E)
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42 Participants with a learning disability who have already disclosed their disability continue to
43 feel anxiety in relation to how they believe they are perceived and in relation to job security.
44 Valle et al. (2004) suggest that teacher education programmes usually frame disability within
45 the traditional deficit-based medical model, thus reducing the overall likelihood of disclosure
46 for teachers with a disability.
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53 Kirby and Gibbon (2018) refer to 'positive' disclosure as a skill which they describe
54 as knowing when and to whom to disclose. Through this description, they acknowledge that
55 disclosure is a risk that requires careful consideration. Findings from the current study
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3 indicated that disclosure is not a one-off event, but rather an ongoing, never ending progress.
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5 Valle et al. (2004) also conclude that disclosing a learning disability is not a distinct occasion,
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7 but rather a personal journey that is influenced by a number of aspects, and rarely without
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9 completion.
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16 **Concluding Remarks**

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18 In terms of the *'what should I say to my employer... if anything?'* dilemma alluded to in the
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20 article title, it is clear from the findings that regardless of age, experience or duration of
21
22 employment, FE teachers are unlikely to disclose a disability; particularly those with a
23
24 learning disability, or mental health disability – *thus supporting the interlinked proposition(s)*
25
26 *P1a and P1b*. Whilst most teachers with a disability felt well supported by their line-manager
27
28 and believed that their organisation was doing more than other FE providers, there was also a
29
30 definite desire to raise awareness of disabilities and to celebrate the positive advantages that
31
32 teachers with a disability bring to the organisation. For those staff with learning disabilities,
33
34 contemplating disability disclosure is not an isolated event (Valle *et al.*, 2004); rather, a never
35
36 ending process that can generate significant fear, uneasiness and anxiety that may remain
37
38 indefinitely throughout one's employment term, or even career lifetime. Teachers within the
39
40 case organisation who disclosed their learning disability to their line-manager often felt
41
42 *'overwhelmed'*, *'anxious'* and *'tired'*, despite having disclosed in the proper way – *thus P2a*
43
44 *and P2b cannot realistically be supported at this time.*
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51 Work-place reactions to initial disclosure can also influence a teacher's decision to
52
53 disclose a disability again in the future. As long as disability disclosure is perceived in
54
55 *'deficit'* terms, then personal fears and employee anxieties are likely to remain. Another
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57 interesting finding was that none of the teachers who disclosed a learning disability had ever
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3 been promoted. It is also clear that teachers with a disability were less likely to apply for
4 promotion due to perceptions of disability being perceived as a deficit, and of course, the
5 potential adverse impact on the teacher's self-esteem and overall levels of confidence.
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10 For the FE sector as a whole, employers need to reflect on their current work culture
11 and levels of staff disability support in relation to: (a) teacher recruitment and promotion; (b)
12 observation of teaching, and; (c) student learning and assessment processes. Employers need
13 to critically evaluate whether their existing work processes, systems and targets discriminate
14 (albeit unintentionally) against teachers with a hidden disability. School/college leaders and
15 managers need to eliminate, or significantly reduce the disadvantages suffered by teachers
16 due to disability and encourage those teachers to apply for leadership and management roles.
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26 In terms of research limitations, this is only a single (organisational) case study, and
27 so the findings and propositions relating to (P1a, P1b) and (P2a, P2b) cannot be considered
28 generalisable at this time; certainly not without further mixed methods research (including
29 survey-work) in other regions of the UK. The research ideas discussed in this article could be
30 extended to the UK higher education (HE) sector, where there are arguably similar staff
31 concerns around sickness, disclosure and disability management. Future larger scale
32 (empirical) research could also explore how human resource practitioners, teaching assistants
33 and support staff, react to and regard teachers/lecturers with a learning disability. Finally,
34 further research could also investigate the potential benefits of employing teachers/lecturers
35 with a disability (Fullick, 2008). For example, participants in this study believed that
36 teachers with a disability were better able to identify and support those students with a
37 learning disability.
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