



INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR NEURODIVERSE STUDENT POLICE OFFICERS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Abstract:

A modern society requires a dynamic police institution and workforce who are knowledgeable, skilled and experienced in contemporary policing principles, practice and policies. These attributes are gained through learning, and they often vary from one person to the next. Some student police officers might be neurodiverse, which refers to specific learning difficulties (SpLD) such as dyspraxia, dyslexia, hyperactive disorder, dyscalculia, autism and Tourette syndrome. Therefore, it is important to develop an understanding of the most effective learning style that is applicable to student police officers who are neurodiverse. This study used a qualitative approach consisting of 20 open-ended interviews with neurodiverse participants. The results suggested that there was a need for pedagogical change because learners have different learning styles. The results further suggested that universities that provided police education used a “one size fits all” approach, which was counterproductive for individual learning needs. It was highlighted that police educational providers needed to incorporate kinesthetic activities and social media learning activities alongside the other learning methods to accommodate the learning needs of neurodiverse student police officers.

Keywords: policing, education, neurodiversity, inclusive education

1. Introduction

Learning involves a process in the mind which indicates that learners have improved their cognitive abilities. Such abilities are more likely to develop change in the learners' attitude, behavioural patterns, beliefs and personal knowledge over a period of time (Ambrose *et al.*, 2010). However, such change should have a long-term impact on the principles of thinking, such as decision-making and actions (Ambrose *et al.*, 2010; Chan, 2016). Learning is a method whereby learners interpret, think and react based on their

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past and present conscious and unconscious experiences of activities that occurred in their lives or environment (Ambrose *et al.*, 2010; Chan, 2016).

Neurodiversity is a terminology used to describe Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) such as dyspraxia, dyslexia, hyperactive disorder, dyscalculia, autism and Tourette syndrome (Clouder *et al.*, 2020: 757; Sewell, 2022). According to Sewell (2022), within recent years, there has been a growing demand to understand these cognitive challenges and, more importantly, how to support learners who experience SpLD (Grigorenko *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, there is often an oversight in understanding the strengths that learners who experience SpLD possess, but equally important, the challenges they experience and the support that is required to be successful (Clouder *et al.*, 2020; Sewell, 2022).

Modern policing requires a dynamic workforce of police officers who are knowledgeable about modern problems and solutions (Belur *et al.*, 2022; Mathura, 2022). According to Lee & Punch (2004) police officers with good education were more likely to think critically and collectively before making a decision and often have successful outcomes. Police officers are members of the same communities they serve (Wallace, 2011) and might have specific learning difficulties like any other citizen. Therefore, it is important to identify methods and opportunities to support student police officers throughout their learning journey to ensure that they acquire the best knowledge and skills to serve their communities effectively and efficiently.

According to Thompson (2011: 115), people's disabilities could become a social division, whereby one group is divided from the mainstream, which could lead to the development of a minority group. As a result, the minority group could experience discrimination at three interrelated levels, Prejudice, Cultural and Structural (PCS). Firstly, prejudice manifests into rejection and marginalisation. Then, cultural expectations such as norms, stereotypes, and representations could prevent acceptance and integration. Finally, the structural distribution of power, authority, inequality, discrimination and disadvantage could support oppressive factors at various levels. The PCS framework could be used to understand police culture and discriminatory experiences of neurodivergent student police officers.

The culture of policing has been historically discriminatory, which involves institutional racism, homophobic, misogynistic (McPherson, 1991; Casey, 2023), stereotyping and bullying (McLaughlin, 2007; Hill, 2013). Discrimination within police institutions could become overt or covert, especially when the discriminator occupies a powerful position, and this could develop a negative and unequal environment for neurodiverse officers (Thompson, 2011; Hill, 2013). Whilst police institutions are service providers, they are also employers to their employees and are required to comply with the Equality Act 2010 (Macdonald & Cosgrove, 2020).

The aim of this study was to evaluate the Visual, Auditory, Read & Write and Kinesthetic (VARK) learning model to assess its applicability towards assisting student police officers with SpLD. It was important to conduct this evaluation because the conclusion could become important for learners to achieve the best educational experience and simultaneously overcome their learning challenges (Flemming, 2005;

Gravells, 2014). As a result, the following research questions were used to achieve this aim:

- 1) Was the teaching style/s used in lectures inclusive to facilitate your learning needs?
- 2) What learning style would be most suitable for your learning needs in future lectures?

Previous studies have predominantly focused on adult learning experiences and dyslexia (Macdonald, 2009, Skinner & MacGill, 2015; Moody, 2014), and only a few were focused on the impact of dyslexia and its influence on police officers who operated in stressful and complex situations (Hill, 2013; Kirby, 2016). A desk-based search showed that there was a nascent body of research which specifically attempted to examine neurodiversity amongst student police officers. As a result, this study will add to the emerging scholarship on the topic of police education in a UK context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is widely considered to be a major concern because learners often have varied experiences, some of which could challenge or obstruct learning achievements (Mara, 2014). Whilst inclusivity within education is often focused on learners with physical or learning difficulties and providing equal opportunities to realise and achieve learning potentials like other learners, this is not a comprehensive aim (Mag, Sinfield & Burns, 2017). Gravells (2014) argued that inclusive education is providing all learners with the same opportunity and simultaneously ensuring that no learner is excluded. To provide inclusive educational opportunities, there is a need for change in pedagogical approaches, content and structure, delivery strategy, and didactical style (Mag, Sinfield & Burns, 2017).

According to Jones (2009), inclusive education was constructed on a foundation that fostered and promoted equality, improving social positioning and personal development (Mag, Sinfield & Burns, 2017). A fundamental aspect of inclusive education is the removal of discrimination amongst learners, especially those with learning difficulties (Lindsay, 2003; Mag, Sinfield & Burns, 2017). It was suggested by Mag, Sinfield & Burns (2017) that the teaching quality and support provided to learners played a pivotal role towards their success and achievements. As a result, it is important for educational providers to conduct a strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat (SWOT) analysis, which could identify specific interventions (Mag, Sinfield and Burns, 2017).

2.2 Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity challenges are often referred to as intellectual impairments that vary from one individual to the next (Clouder *et al.*, 2020). However, impairment is often responsible for preventing learners from conceptualising and acquiring education in a single manner compared to those without such impairment (Singer, 1999; Clouder *et al.*, 2020). According to Armstrong (2012), learners with intellectual impairment have different interpretation styles but are in no way wrong or less able to develop outcomes

and results. Whilst Armstrong (2012) suggested that some learners with intellectual impairment might experience cognitive processing challenges and deficits, Robertson (2008) previously highlighted that these learners were easily able to develop a good understanding of their social environment, structures, consistencies and sophistication (Clouder *et al.*, 2020).

2.3 Police Officers' Wellbeing

Within recent years, police institutions have been experiencing significant budget cuts, which have consequently placed officers under pressure to operate with limited resources while expecting to achieve the institution's aims, objectives, vision, and mission (Police Foundation, 2019). Since the inception of policing, officers have been required to work under stressful conditions to resolve dangerous situations (Police Foundation, 2019; Mathura, 2022). These conditions often had an impact on officers whereby they experienced elevated levels of anxiety, depression, fatigue, burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Police Foundation, 2019:5). Such impact is not unique to a specific officer or group but often affects an entire police institution including student officers.

Police officer initial training has traditionally taken place in a police academy, whereby a variety of practical skills and some lectures were delivered (Mathura, 2022). However, officers' learning needs were not considered a major influence on their learning outcomes, and officers with intellectual impairment often struggled to learn from a specific style of teaching since a variety of learning styles were not provided (Neyroud, 2011).

2.4 VARK Learning Model

According to Flemming (2005), people learn in four different styles. These are visual, auditory, read/write, and kinesthetic (VARK) and not all learners are unique to a specific style but sometimes occupy a multi-modal style, which is a mixture of two or more styles (Gravells, 2014). When a learner adopts a multi-modal style, it is often possible that such a learner possesses the ability to excel faster and comprehend a larger amount of data when compared to a learner who is restricted to a single style (Flemming, 2005; Gravells, 2014).

The *visual* style refers to learners who are most comfortable with learning patterns associated with pictures, observations and the use of videos. These learners are less likely to learn from verbal instructions, large volumes of written instructions or oral instructions. The *auditory* style refers to learners with a preference for listening or talking. These learners enjoy conversations with others and verbal communication, such as singing, asking questions, and listening to others who relay information. However, these learners are less likely to learn via written instructions. They get distracted easily and often prefer quiet areas. The *read/ write* style relates to learners who are more likely to learn through a process of written instructions such as notes, they are good at spelling, research, reading books, and often have good handwriting. The final style is *kinesthetic*. These learners prefer to acquire knowledge and skills via practical activities, discussions

and worksheets. They are less likely to learn through reading and writing (Flemming, 2005; Gravells, 2014).

3. Material and Methods

Due to the nascent body of research on neurodiversity and student police officers in the UK, the aim of this study was focused on identifying learning styles that would be most suitable for student officers' learning needs and developing inclusive opportunities for student learning needs. This study adopted a qualitative approach that used open-ended questions to obtain participants' personal experiences (Clark *et al.*, 2021). Qualitative data was best obtained from face-to-face, in-depth interviews where participants were able to fully express their opinions, views and experiences. According to Bryman (2016), qualitative data is crucial when conducting ethnographic studies because it provides opportunities for evaluation and knowledge development about the characteristics and social intricacies of participants' lives.

The United Kingdom (UK) is an island located on the European continent and consists of four countries namely England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The country of France is the closest link to the UK and mainland continental Europe. The country is home to approximately 68 million people who represent different nationalities and cultural backgrounds (Office for National Statistics, 2024).

Present student police officers and those who attended a training academy within the past two years were considered most suitable due to their recent learning experiences, which could be valuable to this study. A pool of 25 participants was initially selected for interviews. However, only 20 completed the final interviews and formed the final sample size. The one-to-one interview was conducted (approximately 45 minutes each), and the process was completed in three months. Semi-structured open-ended questionnaires were used to conduct the interviews.

Face-to-face interviews were considered most effective because participants were able to express feelings and experiences in a safe space without fear. Participants were selected based on various characteristics (see Table 1) to maintain a balanced view of the topic. Samples were taken from various police forces within England; however, student officers were from England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The snowball sampling technique was used when recruiting participants for this study due to the large geographic location to be covered. Because this study was self-funded, the researcher did not have adequate resources to cover wider geographic locations and recruit more participants or conduct more interviews. The researcher conducted a desk-based search and contacted acquaintances in the identified areas who contacted other potential participants. Snowball sampling had various advantages, for example, connecting people who might be interested in the topic and the study, the propensity to develop a large audience from which the final participants can be chosen and the ability to provide diversity, which was likely to provide a spectrum of responses (Parker *et al.*, 2019; Clark *et al.*, 2021). Financial rewards were not offered to participants because their participation was voluntary, and they could discontinue the study at any

time without explanation. The researcher explained to participants that their personal information was not recorded, so their identity was protected, and responses were anonymous. Participants were assured that the data collected would be destroyed after analysis and publication of the results.

Table 1: Participants Demographics

Sexual Orientation	Quantity
Male	8
Female	8
LGBT+	4
Other	0
Race/ Ethnicity	Quantity
White	18
Black	0
Asian	2
Mixed	0
Other	0
Age Group	Quantity
18-30	16
31-50	4
50+	0
Marital Status	Quantity
Single	12
Married	2
In a Relationship	6
Other	0
Education	Quantity
No Formal	0
GCSE	12
A 'Level	6
Degree	2

This study used a thematic narrative analysis approach to analyse the data collected to answer the research questions. Narrative analysis is concerned with the search and identification of patterns from the stories that participants shared about their lives and the society that they live in (Bryman, 2016). According to Roberts (2002), the concept of narrative analysis specifically places a significant level of emphasis on examining the stories told by participants who recount their experiences of important events that occurred during their lives. A fundamental aspect of any participant's story is to reconnect with the past, present and predict the future based on events which are associated with places, times and events and how these might impact their lives or that of others within a specific society (Roberts, 2002; Bryman, 2016).

This study used the narrative stories provided by participants and then employed the thematic analysis (TA) approach from Braun & Clarke (2022). It was highlighted by Maguire & Delahunt (2017) that thematic analysis uses qualitative data and provides opportunities for patterns to be developed and grouped with the formation of themes.

Analysis of the narrative data from this study was done using a six-stage process, for example, familiarisation with the data, development of codes, grouping of the codes, development of the themes, review and refinement of themes and writing up the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis was considered most suitable for this study because it allowed participants to share their stories and simultaneously allowed themes to be extracted from them.

Financial rewards were not provided to participants, all participation was fully voluntary based on an interest in the study, personal identifying data was not collected, and this promoted a high level of anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were provided with a participant information sheet and a consent form, which gave full details of this study. They were also informed that the data provided would be destroyed after analysis and publication of the results in line with section 9 of the General Data Protection Regulation (2018) of the UK, which outlined the lawfulness, fairness, storage limitations, integrity and confidentiality and accountability when handling data involving human participants.

4. Results

Most student police officers ($n = 18$) who participated in this study felt motivated to continue with their studies despite experiencing specific learning difficulties (SpLD) challenges. These participants highlighted that there was a need for change in the pedagogical approach used by external educational providers (universities) because a “one size fits all” approach was not adequate for meeting the diverse needs of learners, especially those with challenges. According to participants in this study, there was a need for a blended teaching approach that should include kinesthetic activities and social media learning because these are interactive, contemporary, and inclusive.

4.1 Narratives on Kinesthetic Learning

All participants stated that the university learning was mainly based on PowerPoint presentations, which were delivered by lecturers. It was highlighted that the police academy's learning was a blended approach, which consisted of PowerPoint presentations and kinesthetic activities, and this was beneficial to the learning needs of neurodiverse learners. Participants indicated that university lecturers were important and informative, but neurodiverse students found it very intense and unable to link the theoretical principles to operational policing. As a result, neurodiverse learners achieved minimal learning. According to participants in this study, university education for student police officers needs to adopt a blended approach to meet the needs of different learners, especially those with neurodiversity learning needs.

“I have been diagnosed with dyslexia, so lots of slides with literature are difficult for me to read and interpret in a short time. It takes me longer compared to non-neurodiverse students to read and interpret lots of material and get its meaning. So, I usually need more time because it is just too much for me. I spoke to other neurodiverse student officers, and

they have the same problem. I personally think that the material is extremely important for developing my knowledge, but the university needs to incorporate some practical activities alongside the literature. If the university used literate and practical activities in their teaching, students (neurodiverse and non-neurodiverse) could gain a deeper understanding from the practical side, which would be additional learning and reinforce the theory that was taught on the slides. I think it is called blended learning.” (P3)

“Because of my dyslexia, I find large amounts of written material very challenging to read and understand in a short time and in a fast-paced environment. During the university classes, I struggled to keep up because I could not process the information at the pace it was taught, and it did not make sense to me. I am a hands-on person and tend to learn this way much faster. I would appreciate it if the university classes incorporated an element of practical hands-on activities, which would allow me to learn better. I think having the theory alongside the hands-on activities will make a big difference because students with neurodiversity could learn better in this way.” (P10)

4.2 Narratives on Social Media Learning

All participants highlighted that university education should adopt an element of learning via social media. According to participants, most student officers were younger than 35 years of age and highly interactive with social media. Therefore, a learning environment which incorporates a social media platform such as TikTok would be entertaining, user-friendly, captivating, and modern, with the capability of meeting the learning needs of a wider variety of learners especially those with neurodiversity. Participants stated that many social media platforms were able to facilitate literature content, videos, and hands-on activities and this was productive for the learning needs of neurodiverse student officers.

“I have dyslexia and mild dyspraxia for some years now, so learning has often been a challenge for me. I can do normal things, but it takes me longer because my brain just needs a little more time to comprehend things and then give me the correct answer. University lectures are quite intense for me because it’s a lot of PowerPoint slides which have a standard university background and this could be challenging for someone with neurodiversity. The other downside is the lecturer speaking and flipping through the slides. Whilst this is done at a normal pace, remember it takes me longer to process things. What I found very interesting and useful were TikTok and YouTube videos because they have writing, animations, graphics, some speaking and changing backgrounds. I tend to learn from these much better because they have a combination of reading, listening and visual so I can learn one way or the other. If university lectures could use this combination, I will be able to learn much better and I think other neurodiverse and non-neurodiverse students will also.” (P6)

“Because I am neurodiverse, everything takes me a bit longer to understand. I receive the information, but my brain is slow in processing it, and then my reaction or response

becomes slower because of the delay. I often get confused with large amounts of material, so reading and trying to understand large assignments is difficult for me. It is not impossible to do it, I just need to break it down into smaller pieces and need more time. I found the police side of the training easier to understand because we did a bit more of the legislation and then some practice sessions. However, the university side is very overwhelming for me because I am constantly sitting in a classroom and listening while the PowerPoint slides are being discussed. That's very difficult for me and my neurodiverse colleagues. If these lectures could have been less intense slides and included some social media things like TikTok on YouTube, I think it would have been better. During my private studies, I used a lot of these things and I learned better. These videos have several things like charts, funny people, different graphics and speaking. Some even have rhymes and songs, so people can learn according to their personal strengths and abilities." (P7)

5. Discussion

Police officers in a democratic society are a symbolic representation of the state's law enforcement apparatus towards promoting socially acceptable norms and laws, minimising fear of crime and victimisation and simultaneously promoting safe and sustainable communities (Sani *et al.*, 2022; Mathura, 2023). For police officers to be successful in effectively carrying out their duties and the service they provide to citizens and communities, they must be educated and knowledgeable on problem-solving, procedures, decision-making, laws and legislations, theoretical framework and environmental awareness, amongst other key skills necessary to prevent and investigate crimes (Lee & Punch, 2004; Mathura, 2022). As a result, police education occupies a fundamental role in developing student officer's knowledge and shaping their wealth of experience (Chan, 2013). It is imperative to acknowledge that some officers might experience specific learning difficulties (SpLD) and require interventions to support them through their learning journey (Clouder *et al.*, 2020; Sewell, 2022).

The results of this study highlighted that participants found that the university education adopted a "one size fits all" approach and did not acknowledge the spectrum of learners with contrasting learning needs, a variation in learning support and the dynamics in cognitive abilities. The results obtained represented participants who all experienced some form of special learning difficulties (SpLD), and two major findings were kinesthetic activities and social media learning.

Most participants highlighted that the university education provided to student police officers had a generic emphasis on PowerPoint presentations which were delivered by lecturers. Whilst participants acknowledged that this was important, they indicated that it was not inclusive to their specific learning needs due to their SpLD. As a result, these participants suggested that alongside the lectures, there was a need for kinesthetic activities which could provide inclusive learning opportunities based on individual learning needs. These participants stated that due to their learning challenges, they were unable to read and interpret the quantity of information shared within a short timeframe.

However, if kinesthetic activities were included, they would be able to combine theory and practical knowledge, thereby developing a better understanding of what was taught.

These results could be compared with research conducted by Mara (2009) and Mag, Sinfield & Burns (2017), who suggested that providing an inclusive environment and opportunities for all learners was paramount. According to these authors, when learners are all given equal opportunities and not excluded or discriminated against, they are more likely to succeed and develop their cognitive abilities. The results could also be aligned to the Visual, Auditory, Read/Write and Kinesthetic (VARK) framework from Flemming (2005). According to Flemming (2005) and Gravells (2014), the VARK framework is a multi-modal system that provided learning opportunities to meet the learning needs of all learners regardless of learning challenges and cognitive abilities.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the visual, auditory, read/write and kinesthetic (VARK) model and assess its effectiveness towards assisting student police officers with SpLD in achieving the best educational experience and simultaneously overcoming their learning challenges. The following research questions were used to achieve this aim:

- 1) Was the teaching style used in lectures inclusive to facilitate your learning needs?
- 2) What learning styles would be most suitable for your learning needs in future lectures?

The results obtained from this study demonstrated that there was a need for pedagogical change in university lectures. It was suggested that the approach used by universities was a “*one size fits all*” strategy, which did not consider the cognitive abilities of student officers with SpLD. The results suggested that universities needed to implement a blended learning approach which could implement a spectrum of teaching and learning styles. It was suggested that university lectures should become more inclusive, whereby all elements of the VARK model are used, thereby meeting the needs of all learners, especially those with SpLD. The results further suggested that interactive social media learning would be useful for student officers with SpLD, and kinesthetic learning activities would be beneficial since student officers often found it challenging to comprehend and process large amounts of data in a short time.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

When studying and researching inclusive education for neurodiverse students’ police officers, it is important to consider the VARK model and its implications and benefits towards the cognitive process of student officers. People all learn in different ways because of their personal abilities; therefore, it is paramount to develop an inclusive learning environment and platform for learning. An important implication of this study was it was focused specifically on student police officers. As a result, it would be beneficial for this study to be used as a foundation for future research involving

experienced police officers and non-police officers, especially learners from further and higher educational institutions.

6.3 Future Research

This study used a qualitative research design with only 20 participants who were student police officers and were identified as neurodiverse. It would be beneficial for future research to use a quantitative research design, which would have the capability of gathering data from a wider audience with the potential of forming more generalised conclusions on the topic. It will also be beneficial for future research to be carried out in other societies outside of the UK. Such research could develop global awareness and impact change in practice and policies.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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