Chapter 8

I feel confident about teaching, but ‘SEN’ scares me

Moving from anxiety to confidence

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Introduction

At the end of the third year I was confident about teaching, but SEN scared me.

These words, spoken by a student teacher nearing the end of her course, reflect the concerns of many new teachers. Indeed, they may also reflect the views of more experienced teachers as they respond to national developments and the challenges of inclusive education. As mainstream schools increasingly include numbers of pupils identified as having special educational needs, what is being done to increase teachers’ confidence and skills?

Initial teacher education (ITE) programmes follow a national curriculum linked to regulated standards for the award of qualified teacher status. These standards have increasingly been influenced by the national strategy ‘Removing Barriers to Achievement’ (DfES 2004), which held the expectation that all teachers would teach children identified as having special educational needs. ITE programmes are now expected to cover ‘inclusion of pupils with SEN, behaviour management, assessment for learning and specialist support, all within the core knowledge and understanding of teaching’ (ibid.: 57). So, does this make a difference?

Evidence, including that from government agencies, seems to imply that more still needs to be done. The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) report How Well New Teachers are Prepared to Teach Pupils with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities (Ofsted 2008: 5) identified variable experience within ITE programmes, a heavy reliance on schools to provide most of the training on special educational needs, and a weakness in monitoring this. As a result, many new teachers have completed their programmes lacking confidence and feeling unprepared for teaching children seen as having ‘additional’ or ‘special’ learning needs. Similar evidence can be found in the Training and Development Agency for Schools’ Newly Qualified Teacher Survey (TDA 2007) and Moran’s (2007) research with head teachers, suggesting the need for a different approach to this part of the ITE curriculum so that all new teachers can approach their classes confidently.
What are special educational needs?

The concept of special educational needs came from the Warnock Report (DES 1978), replacing categories from the 1944 Education Act previously used to classify children with labels such as 'maladjusted', 'delicate' and 'educationally subnormal'. With this new concept came the role of the special educational needs coordinator – the SENCO – who became the lead teacher in supporting children identified with special educational needs though the formal 'statementing' process. From this, a team of professionals grew to support this work; educational psychologists were required for assessing special educational needs, teaching assistants to support identified pupils and trainers started to offer focused staff development courses – arguably creating a 'special needs industry'.

Subsequent legislation, policy and initiatives embedded the concept of special educational needs and focused on developing teachers' practice (Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA); DES 2004; House of Commons 2006). Over time, government agencies' terminology changed variously to include special needs and disabilities, disabled children, learning difficulties and disabilities, but the group of children given these labels remained those originally highlighted by Warnock and set out in the 1996 Education Act – those who have a learning difficulty that calls for some kind of special educational provision to be made (Education Act 1996, Section 312). This deceptively simple definition may be the cornerstone of conflicting perspectives about pupils seen as 'special' and subsequent expectations of teachers.

When one group of learners is perceived as special, it implies that they are different from other 'ordinary' pupils. This can translate into teachers expecting special provision to be made through additional resources and special skills needed to deliver these, a view further compounded by other terminology commonly heard in schools, which describes such pupils as having 'additional' needs. The danger of this is clear: if 'special' children are conceptualised as needing a specialised education, how then will 'ordinary' teachers see their duty towards them? Dividing pupils in this way may lead teachers to question whether they feel competent enough to meet some children's needs, and whether someone else, such as a teaching assistant, or somewhere else, such as a special school, could do this better. Even more confident teachers may balk at what they see as extra demands being made on them.

So, 'special educational needs', a label that was originally intended to move away from negative categorisation in the past, now raises further issues for teachers to consider. Hall's (1997) challenging perspective of a 'Special Land' to which pupils with special educational needs can be consigned after rejection from mainstream activities draws attention to some of the complexities found within school provision. He asks us to reflect on the actual words 'special' and 'needs' and the effect of the concepts implicit within them. He reminds us that 'special' is something usually wanted by society, for example, special offers or special events, but within the educational context, a special need is not one to which pupils generally aspire; instead it is often seen by teachers as a euphemism for 'problem'. Similarly, he contests the word 'need', suggesting that this implies neediness and a want, rather than a learning requirement, which implies a right to schools providing for this.

Other concerns about labelling are identified in the House of Commons Special Educational Needs report (House of Commons 2006: 16). This describes the separation of learners with and without special educational needs as fundamentally flawed, arguing that children do not fit into neat categories, but exist on a broad continuum of needs which are often influenced by social disadvantage. It suggests that, as many conditions that pupils may have may be syndromes with different characteristics or linked with other impairments and issues, 'diagnosis' becomes complex. Within this context, the report suggests that the use of simplistic categories can lead to false classifications and intervention strategies that do not address individuals' unique learning requirements. Further concerns are highlighted through past studies showing that teachers' expectations of pupils can differ in relation to the labels allocated to them (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968; Norwich 1999). These concerns are also raised by more current writers (for example, Rix et al. 2004; Thomas and Vaughan 2004; Ainscow 2007; Wearmouth 2009), who reflect on the power of labels in creating teachers' perceptions and subsequent behaviour towards children. Linked to this are issues of professionals' use of power that enables them to impose particular identities (and labels) upon pupils and make subjective decisions on definitions of 'normal' or 'ordinary' (Frederickson and Cline 2009), thereby separating groups of learners within schools.

Although this consideration of language and labels may seem overstated, the impact on teachers' thinking cannot be underestimated. School staffroom discussions about pupils described as 'the SENs', and SENCOs being seen as totally responsible for 'SEN pupils', are not uncommon, and serve to distance teachers from some children. The special educational needs label also identifies the problem as being located within the child – that they have the learning difficulty and so own the problem. This does not encourage consideration of other contextual issues, such as teaching styles, classroom structures and access to appropriate resources. All this can reinforce an uncritical acceptance that special children need to go to special places for a special education.

Moving beyond a label

So, if we look beyond special educational needs towards an inclusive education system that values diversity, where does that leave us? Clearly, there are pupils who have conditions and impairments that affect the way they learn, so teachers need to become familiar with these to ensure their teaching is effective. However, from my experience, while there are benefits in attending courses
and reading about specific conditions, a focus on individual children and how they learn in your classroom is much more helpful.

Often it is argued that a label is needed to ensure the right teaching strategies and resources are provided (Lauchlan and Boyle 2007). We might like to consider why this is thought to be the case. If we reflect upon the Audit Commission's view that the statutory assessment and statementing procedure, which identifies learners' special educational needs and creates such labels, is 'a costly, bureaucratic and unresponsive process ... which may add little value in helping meet a child's needs' (Audit Commission 2002: 14-17), we might question the validity of this view. Similarly, Ofsted (2006: 17) states that statements of special educational needs were overly cumbersome and bureaucratic and did not ensure quality of provision; and the British Psychological Society (2005: 4) suggests that a statement of SEN can become a barrier to inclusion that creates dependency on 'specialist' resources. So, how can we move beyond a reliance on labels? How do we create a situation where teachers' judgements are valued and access is routinely provided to required resources? How can teachers feel confident in their own ability to design learning activities from which all pupils can benefit?

I would like to suggest that, although there will always be children whose learning requirements are outside our experience, and for whom we will need to seek advice from others, maintaining a focus on the process of learning is particularly helpful. Accepting that all pupils' participation in tasks is affected by the demands of different classroom activities, rather than solely by some perceived innate ability, could further clarify the teacher's role. If we return to the expectation from Removing Barriers to Achievement (DfES 2004) that all teachers are teachers of pupils with special educational needs, then a focus on what and how pupils need to learn becomes more important than a label. This isn't to argue that all pupils should be taught without regard for any specified learning requirements, but that designing activities for the diversity found within any classroom becomes integral to teachers' planning. This can help teachers view their class as a community of learners, rather than as separated into those with and without special educational needs - or any other perceived difference - for which one activity is organised for most of the class and something separate provided for those seen as 'special'.

The Disability Discrimination Act 2005 requires schools to increase access to the curriculum and make adjustments to physical features, eliminate discrimination and promote equality for disabled children. Many were slow to respond to this statutory requirement, and the early focus was on physical changes to buildings rather than accessibility related to attitudes and classroom management. This could be considered an interesting response by schools, for changes to buildings can be financially costly, whereas changes to behaviour may involve a more personal 'cost'. Perhaps this reflects some underlying concerns. Could it be that, despite a growing acceptance of barriers to learning not being located 'within the child', and some external (physical) barriers therefore being recognised, acceptance of the role of individual teachers in creating and breaking down barriers is more challenging to address?

So, what is being done to prepare new teachers for the diversity they face within their classrooms, and what can be done to increase their confidence and professional skills further?

Preparing for a community of learners

Over the past 30 years, there have been many developments in special and inclusive education. The concept of integration as introduced by Warnock (DES 1978) intimated that pupils should be assimilated into mainstream classrooms. Later, this view was challenged by the 'social model of disability', inspired by disabled people who argued that it was schools and teachers who should change to accommodate the true diversity of learners. The focus then became centred on the barriers to learning constructed by school environments, rather than a child's individual condition or impairment and whether s/he could fit into a mainstream school environment. Alongside this, national policy and legislation developed, producing key initiatives such as the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001, Removing Barriers to Achievement (DfES 2004), the Disability Discrimination Act and the Inclusion Development Programme.

During this time, ITE struggled to keep pace with these developments, despite recommendations for all programmes to contain a core element of 'SEN curriculum' (House of Commons 2006). Student teachers received information of variable quality (Winter 2006; Hodkinson 2009), leading many to feel that they lacked confidence and were unprepared for teaching children with special educational needs (Ofsted 2008). New teachers also reported that although they were mainly satisfied with the theoretical knowledge they had received, they would have benefited from more practical experience (DRC 2006). Concern was also expressed by tutors, who suggested that the increasing focus on meeting specific standards to achieve Qualified Teacher Status encouraged student teachers and ITE providers to adopt a 'technician approach' (Pearson 2007), concentrating on auditable skills rather than underpinning pedagogical issues (Hodkinson 2009). This concern had previously been acknowledged by the Audit Commission (2002: 51), who had observed that the 'standards fall short in their failure to reflect the wider policy context of inclusion'.

Changes occurred as the TDA started to work with ITE providers to develop and pilot new initiatives arising from Removing Barriers to Achievement (DfES 2004). These included the design of new resource materials for tutors and their students on ITE programmes and 'specialised placements' in special schools or units. After evaluation, the TDA provided ITE tutors with an SEN and/or Disabilities Training Toolkit for Primary teaching programmes, followed by another version in 2009 for Secondary programmes. These toolkits
contained off-the-shelf teaching sessions with supplementary resources, primarily for tutors with only a 'general knowledge and understanding of SEN and disability issues' (TDA 2009: Introduction). Additional professional development opportunities for student teachers included 'specialised placements' in special schools or additionally resourced units; resources on autism, dyslexia, language and communication needs; and web-based training materials. Funding was made available for ITE tutors to pilot these initiatives and conduct small-scale research projects so that feedback could be used to further inform teacher education programmes.

Feedback on student teachers' experiences of these pilot initiatives has been positive. My own university was involved with a research project focusing on specialised placement. Although the TDA originally intended this placement to be in special schools, we received agreement to offer an alternative setting. Two cohorts were provided with different experiences to compare the impact on their professional development. Both cohorts undertook the placement in addition to their ITE programme, so it was voluntary and not assessed. The first cohort was given a two-week placement in a special school, followed by a two-week placement in a mainstream school that was recognised as having excellent practice in inclusive education. The intention of this pilot was for student teachers to reflect on transferability of knowledge and skills from special school to mainstream settings. The second cohort was given a two-week placement in either a special or a mainstream school, and provided with additional resources about inclusive practice. Both cohorts were set the same activities to complete, including a focus on children's own voices about their experiences and social inclusion. Student teachers were asked to reflect on their learning from the experience and how they had applied this to their professional practice.

The students from both cohorts universally commended the opportunity to take part in a specialised placement. They stated that it had significantly increased their skills and confidence, with one commenting that:

Knowing what I do now, and feeling as confident as I do now, will undoubtedly make me a much more informed and inclusive teacher. People I know on the BA course have the same 'awkwardness' as I felt before about special needs, but because they haven't done these placements, they will probably still feel like that when they begin teaching their own class.

Some spoke of their initial anxieties, for example:

It was a very new experience for me and at the start I was anxious and thought 'I can't do it'. But my confidence grew and I saw how to make adaptations and that it only had to be small things.

It's about confidence – I could talk and communicate better.... Now if I see a child struggling I have the confidence to adapt the teaching or change the resource, looking at what they were doing instead of just working with the better ones to push them on.

When describing the effect the placement had on their professional development, students from both cohorts identified similar key learning experiences from working with teachers skilled in inclusive education:

Before I did the placements I didn't think about it; some [teachers] kept children separate from other children with a teaching assistant, but they have got so much to share – to give everyone else.

You can't identify children with SEN by looks or behaviour. You have to get to know children.

I really enjoyed my placement. Very positive outlook on the part of the staff, they didn't make a 'big deal' out of a child's learning difficulty. They didn't tend to label children. All the children benefited from the strategies put in place for SEN.

One student teacher powerfully described how the placement had changed her:

The placement has really changed me as a teacher. It has afforded me the confidence to work, teach and plan with children who have complex needs, alongside giving me more confidence when teaching all children. I am now more imaginative with my planning and willing to take risks with both my planning and teaching.... it has prepared me for a life of teaching, where anything could happen.

Where the two cohorts did differ was in relation to the way that they spoke about the children. While the language of both groups of student teachers suggested that the concept of special educational needs as a specific group was already deeply ingrained, those who had experienced 'excellent' practice of including children with this label indicated a growing awareness of issues of labelling and separating some learners from their peers. This led them to question the need for special schools, why teaching assistants withdrew children from classes, and why ability grouping was so popular, when they had seen alternatives work so successfully. They started to think about their own practice and the impact this had on pupils' learning, although from their comments it was clear that this was just the start of a change of mindset, and that more consolidation would be needed. In comparison, student teachers who had only experienced a special school placement did not question the impact of labels or whether pupils could have been alternatively accommodated in a mainstream school.

Whatever the length or setting of the placement, both cohorts concluded that all student teachers should have this experience. To return to the student teacher's comment at the start of this chapter, the reason for this is clear:
At the end of the third year I was confident about teaching, but SEN scared me. Without the experience of the placement I would have been thinking, 'How will I cope with my own class and SEN? Now I am more confident and think why should a child suffer while a teacher learns what to do ... I can now see that SEN is an integral part of teaching.

Some also argued strongly that the placement should not be assessed because this allowed them to experiment without any feeling of 'failure'. As one student stated:

On a voluntary placement, I felt that I could make mistakes and ask questions when I wasn't feeling confident, without people judging me. It was like being in the first year again and that was good.

These experiences raise some important questions for tutors and student teachers. Clearly, the new TDA initiatives have a place in preparing new teachers for the diversity they will face in their classrooms. However, the success, or otherwise, for individual new teachers may well depend on the quality of delivery of this part of the ITE curriculum. The reality for many ITE programmes is that there may not be large enough numbers of schools with the diversity they will face in their classrooms. The success, or otherwise, for individual new teachers may well depend on the quality of the delivery of this part of the ITE curriculum. The reality for many ITE programmes is that there may not be large enough numbers of schools with excellent inclusive practice in which to place all student teachers: if their only placement is in special schools, or they do not have access to excellent inclusive role models, this may reinforce the whole notion of pupils identified as having special educational needs needing special education. In addition, there may not be enough tutors experienced in, and committed to, inclusion available to deliver the taught component. This may create an overdependence on off-the-shelf resources such as the SEN and/or Disabilities Training Toolkit, raising the issue of tutor confidence in dealing with more challenging considerations such as those of personal values and attitudes, and teachers' roles in affecting the inclusion and exclusion of children.

So, despite the apparent advantages of these pilot developments within ITE, the route to making them available to all student teachers in the future is far less clear. This leaves new teachers still in a situation where many feel anxious about working with children identified as having special educational needs, seeing them as a separate group of learners. Moving from this perspective to a confident acceptance of individual learners bringing valued diversity into the classroom is a key challenge for teachers' development.

**Professional responsibilities for all learners**

In this final section, I would like to return to my suggestion of classrooms having a community of learners. In such a community, individuality is recognised and teaching is planned to take account of this as a core part of planning, rather than an add-on for different groups of (labelled) children. The Audit Commission (2002) made several observations concerning special educational needs that may still provide a useful starting point for teachers as they consider a community of learners approach.

- Despite duties set out in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 to increase accessibility (in its widest sense) and not to treat disabled children less favourably than their peers, there is great variability of practice in schools (p. 11). Factors such as gender, ethnicity, family and locality circumstances can affect how learners' needs are identified and supported; barriers to learning are created through inaccessible environments, unwelcoming attitudes and shortfalls in specialist support (p. 51).
- When a child is identified as having special educational needs, the processes that follow can induce 'separateness', despite providing the advantages of additional resources. This can mean, for example, that a teacher will spend less time with a child because of the presence of a teaching assistant, or that the interests of children with SEN may remain peripheral in mainstream policymaking' (p. 51).
- Diversity should become an embedded concept, moving teachers from separating learners into groups identified by labels such as 'SEN', 'gifted', 'EAL' and 'working-class boys' to focusing on individuals' learning and how they can be helped to progress (p. 52).
- An attitudinal shift is required. This, linked with sustained investment in school facilities and staff development, will enable children to be genuinely included (p. 52).

These observations suggest that pupils have different experiences, based on a range of external factors. While teachers may not be able to do anything about some of these, they can certainly affect change in relation to inaccessible environments and unwelcoming attitudes. From my experience, people often focus only on expensive adaptations such as ramps and lifts when inaccessible environments are discussed, when often really small things can make a significant difference. This is where a can-do, flexible attitude is important, linked to a willingness to learn from others. Seeking support from colleagues should be seen as a strength; effective teams are built on interdependence, where skills and knowledge are shared. Parents with whom I work particularly mention that it is the welcome their child receives and the teacher's willingness to learn about him/her as an individual that is the most important factor for successful inclusion. This is something that all teachers can achieve.

Teachers can also ensure that pupils who have been identified as having special educational needs still receive equitable amounts of their time, rather than expecting a teaching assistant to provide this. This would help to avoid situations where learners become separated from their peers through well intended support structures, leaving them socially and educationally isolated.
A further way to support school-wide development includes teachers examining how policies and practices contribute to the inclusion or otherwise of particular learners. Many schools, for example, have a Special Needs Policy, but how are these learners accounted for within other school policies? Teachers may increase their confidence through taking up staff development opportunities. While this may involve useful strategies and tips for teaching, these alone may not bring about the attitudinal shift that comes from reflecting on personal values and challenging ideological positions.

Understanding differing perspectives, particularly those of people who have experienced living with labels imposed upon them, can provide teachers with a strong professional foundation for the way in which they view and respond to all learners. Listening to a range of people's views helps teachers to make balanced judgements about how they work with learners. It can be tempting to listen only to those seen as experts, rather than others such as parents and the children themselves, but all have a valuable contribution to make so that you receive the whole picture. Clearly, there is much to be gained from the experience of your SENCO and external advisers, but an overdependence on specialists can make you feel deskilled (Goodley 2009). Much advice that is offered relies on good teaching and learning techniques, which can be practised by all teachers.

Within this wider picture of teaching and learning lie more specific strategies for new teachers to engage with. Mixed-ability groupings, balanced groups, cooperative groups and differentiation are all strategies that work successfully (Gillies 2003; Boaler 2007; Cole 2008). Teachers can also benefit from observing each other's practice, team teaching, and national initiatives such as the Inclusion Development Programme. Key to all of these is the belief in all children’s ability to learn and progress. Cole (2008) and others (Hart et al. 2004) refer to this as 'learning without limits'; their challenge to any group being seen as ‘fixed ability’ or placed within a 'no-hope' category centres on the belief that teachers are fundamental in transforming pupils' learning capacity.

Conclusion

The Lamb Inquiry Report on Inspection, Accountability and School Improvement (DCSF 2009) focused on securing accountability within schools for the quality of the learning experience provided to pupils identified as having special educational needs. Teachers' responsibility within this is clear: they will be expected to have high aspirations for pupils with special educational needs, just as they have for all other pupils. Support to achieve these aspirations must be organised in a way that enables every pupil to have a high-quality learning experience. For teachers committed to inclusive education, this will involve a shared learning experience, rather than one where different groups identified by one of their characteristics spend significant time away from the rest of the class.

Teachers' attitudes towards diversity within their classrooms will be a key component in setting the context for the quality of pupils' learning experiences. How they think about individual learners, and the way they engage with them, will be important. Teachers are role models: children observe closely how their teachers treat other children and note the language they use. References to the 'SEN group' and problematising changes needed to facilitate particular children can be picked up and replicated by pupils. A welcoming attitude and commitment to solving difficulties encountered can become a positive class ethos.

Many of us become anxious when faced with new situations for which we feel unskilled, but if we focus on how these link to situations in which we do feel confident, then solutions are more easily identified. This does not mean that we ignore individual differences, just that we do not get sidetracked by the many labels children are given within our education system. If we focus on teaching and learning, this is what teachers are trained for, and should continue to develop skills in, throughout their career. New teachers will take time to learn the skills that will enable them to work confidently with all learners in their classrooms. Removing labels from the context in which they work will enable them to focus on what is important – the learners themselves.

Reflection on values and practice

Think about the children who you know have been identified as having special educational needs.

- What has been written and said about them by others? How much of this presents a positive perspective, and how much seems negative? What impact has this had on your own views?
- What is their classroom experience? Do they receive a similar amount of time with teachers to other pupils? Do they routinely work with their peers, or does their support system replace this?
- How can you explicitly demonstrate a commitment to valuing diversity in your classroom? What welcome do you give to learners?

Resources

TTRB (Teacher Training Resource Bank) Special Educational Needs: www.sen.ttrb.ac.uk

References