

An Opportunity or a Problem? The Perceptions of a Sample of UK Student Teachers of SEN and Disability at the Start of Their Training

Sue Pearson
University of Leeds, U.K.

Abstract

Successful inclusive practices are partly dependent on the skills, knowledge and attitudes of the staff involved. This paper will report of the views of students training to be teachers at the start of their course with a view to highlighting the implications for training institutions and schools. In England, Leeds University is one of the largest providers of the one-year Post Graduate Certificate of Education which is a route into teaching. The cohort of students training for work in the secondary sector is around 500 with a diverse range of subject specialisations. This academic year, all students were asked, near the start of their course, to write down words that they associate with the terms '*Special Educational Needs*' and '*Disability*'. The responses were analysed to reveal information about students' initial views. The results raise issues, for trainers and schools, about the models of special educational needs and disability that the students are operating.

'Ensuring the newly qualified teachers have a basic understanding of inclusive teaching and inclusive schools is the best long-term investment that can be made.'

(Mittler, 2000, page 137)

This powerful statement prompted an interest in the current provision of training for inclusive education, with particular reference to those preparing to teach in secondary schools. The study was also influenced by earlier work by the author that explored the experiences and opportunities available to secondary subject teachers in their first year of teaching.

The overall aim of the study was to explore current understandings of professional development for inclusive education of initial teacher training (ITT) students and newly qualified teachers (NQTs). The focus was on students training to teach in the secondary sector (11 years to 18 years).¹ More specifically, I set out to:

- analyse the activities that NQTs engage with, their views of the adequacy of the training during their PGCE course and the support that is made available to them by their school or other providers;

¹ All these students will have a first degree and are studying on a one-year fulltime Post Graduate Certificate in Education. This is a traditional route into teaching although other routes do exist.

- analyse the views of ITT students about special educational needs (SEN) and disability at the start and end of the course and their views about the factors that have influenced these during their PGCE year;
- identify innovative practice in relation to the preparation of teachers for inclusive education, in England and elsewhere;
- formulate recommendations based on the findings for future development.

However, this paper reports on only one aspect, their initial views of SEN and disability, though reference will be made to findings from other aspects.

Background

In the seventies, the training of teachers in the UK was much influenced by the dominant medical model (Clough, 1998), resulting in a focus on remediation. The Warnock Report (DES, 1980) moved away from this model and stressed the notion of a continuum of need and, linked to this, a continuum of provision. It promoted the development of integration and recognised the importance of professional development to support this shift in culture, although it was somewhat pessimistic about how this would be operationalised (para. 19.32). In fact, there was a gradual shift towards training that emphasised ‘special educational needs’ and reflected growing understanding of their relative and interactional nature. Significantly, Tomlinson (1982) raised concerns that, at least, in the early stages the changes to courses were somewhat superficial, with the words ‘special needs’ being incorporated in the titles but the content largely unaltered.

Since 1988, the introduction of the National Curriculum has also influenced the content and structure of ITT, with some authors characterising this as a shift towards technical rationalism that emphasises competence. In the early nineties, there was also an adjustment to the required proportion of time for school placements resulting in a significant reduction in the time spent in the Higher Education Institution (HEI).

Given the complexity of the changes happening in this period, it is perhaps unsurprising that provision was patchy and idiosyncratic, as reflected by Clough (1998) who commented that

‘In England and Wales, teacher education in the area of Special Educational Needs is in confusion, if not crisis. At its simplest, there is no effective staff development policy at national or local level in either initial or in-service education’ (p.64).

A number of individuals and groupings expressed concerns and made recommendations about professional development for working with pupils with special educational (e.g. Garner, 1992; Garner, 1996; SENTC, 1996; NASEN, 1993). Despite this and the existence of some models of good practice (Robertson, 1999), this aspect of ITT did not become a focus for policy makers. An underlying concern was related to the extent and nature of professional development in relation to SEN in ITT, in overcrowded course a large proportion of which was school-based. Hastings et al. (1996) found that courses were predominantly concerned with imparting information despite a consensus that it should relate to knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Worldwide, in recent years, there has been a shift away from integration towards inclusion, although this has been complicated by the range of conceptualisations of inclusion and the absence of an agreed definition. What does appear to be clear, however, is that inclusion has implications for professional development, with the Government taking the view that 'All teachers are teachers of special educational needs' (DfEE, 1997) and NASEN (2001) urges that:

'The importance of both initial training and continual professional development to promote good practice in this area should be recognised.'

In England, there has also been a shift in the understanding of disability, leading to new legislation related to education in the form of the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act* (DfEE, 2001). This placed new duties on schools to anticipate disability-related needs and to avoid discrimination. Schools and individuals are having to become more familiar with concepts of disability and their own values and attitudes, as well as meeting the legal requirement. The interface between disability and special educational needs is also a topic that is currently attracting attention. ITT therefore needs to address with the students not just matters related to special educational needs but also those related to disability.

Unfortunately, there continues to be some evidence that this element of their training may be very limited, pass unrecognised or be unmemorable. For example, the report of a meeting of the General Teaching Council discussion of 'How ITT prepares teachers for their first year of teaching and what would benefit from a stronger focus?' recorded that:

'The delegates focused on the skills needed to teach SEN pupils. Both NQTs and experienced teachers felt that current ITT does not prepare new teachers for the diverse demands of inclusive schools. An experienced primary teacher commented, "I know, from talking to NQTs, that they haven't felt properly prepared for working with pupils with SEN". A primary teacher in his/her fourth year of teaching agreed: "We had one afternoon lecture on SEN".' (<http://www.gtce.org.uk/news/blackpool.asp>)

This level of provision, whether real or perceived, does little to address the needs of the students about to enter a profession where inclusion is increasingly seen as the norm. Fortunately it is not the whole picture, and there are encouraging reports of innovative practice in preparing students for diversity (e.g. Bishop & Jones, 2002; Mullen, 2001). These move beyond the technical aspects of teaching, with Mullen justifying this on the basis that a key barrier obstructing the full participation in life of people with disabilities is the social attitudes of the non-disabled (Gold & Auslander, 1999). She asserts that many of these students will have had only have had experience of segregation and will have absorbed the cultural images, predominantly negative, of disability. These two themes, evolving understandings of and attitudes towards diversity and changing in the provision of ITT, create an intriguing situation to explore.

Context

Leeds University is one of the largest providers of a year-long PGCE course preparing students to work in the secondary phase. Like many similar courses, there is a focus on the students' subject specialism and on core educational issue through a compulsory element, Educational Professional Studies (EPS). Both these are addressed in the university and school-based parts of the course with efforts made to ensure a coherence across the settings. During the year, all students have experience in two schools (or one school and a Further Education College).

The SEN aspect of the course should be present in their subject specialism, EPS and in their placements. Early in the course there is a one-hour EPS lecture on '*SEN and Disability: the legislative framework*'. Despite the title, this session does invite students to reflect on their own attitudes and values. Later in the first semester, they also have lectures of *Teaching pupils with special educational needs* and *Managing additional adults*.²

The prior experiences of the cohort are more heterogeneous than Mullen suggested. A significant number of the students have had experiences, either voluntary or paid, of working with children/young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Other will have family-based experience including siblings or their own children. Given the variation in educational practice, they may themselves have attended schools that had integrated provision or were inclusive. Some will themselves have disabilities or special educational needs. This is not to deny that for many, their experience is of segregation.

Method

At the start of the session on '*SEN and Disability: the legislative framework*', students were asked to write the phrase *Special Educational Needs* on one side of a sheet of paper and then note down three words or phrases that they associated with the term. They were then asked to write *Disability* on the reverse and note down three words or phrases that they associated with that term. The responses were anonymous and collected in prior to the lecture.

It was explained to the students that for the university the information would help clarify their starting points and provide a baseline. It was also suggested that they note down their responses and reflect on them at the end of the lecture, during the year and at the end of the course. The last of these was reinforced by asking them to undertake the same exercise just before they completed the course.³ The assumptions were made that the students' choice of words would be influenced by and provide insights into the attitudes and values they held. Whilst this very open-ended approach to collecting the data made the analysis challenging, it did avoid the pitfall of suggesting words, categories or particular positions to the students. The time-efficient activity was treated as an integral part of the lecture with an educational worth.

² Additional adults are increasingly present in classrooms in England and part of the rationale for this is to facilitate inclusion.

³ This activity also involved them in reflecting on whether their views had changed during the course and what had been influential. This will be reported separately.

There were a number of limitations to the study. These were as follows:

- The number of responses was not equal to the number of students on the course. This could be because they actively choose not to be involved or, for whatever reasons, they were not present in the session.
- In a very limited number of instances, it was difficult to determine what had been written.
- The response from two students was either a cause for concern or indicated that they had not taken the activity seriously.
- Because the responses were anonymous it was impossible to clarify meanings or seek elaborations.
- All the students are at the same university and this might make them unrepresentative of the wider cohort of students training to teach in the secondary sector.

Those reservations aside, the data provide an interesting insight into the association made by students at this stage in their course.

Findings.

A total of 354 responses were received. These are summarised, as follows:

In terms of the concept ‘**Special Educational Needs**’, although they had been asked to write three words, individual responses varied between 0 and 7 words/terms. In total, 1063 items were analysed. There were significant differences between the responses of individual students. The examples below illustrate this point.

Table 1 Examples of students’ responses to the term ‘Special Educational Needs’

| Student | | | |
|---------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | ‘Spacker’ (Derogatory slang term) | Low attention span | Dyslexia |
| 2 | Difficult | Unmotivated | Disruptive |
| 3 | Bad behaviour | Dyslexia | Social problems |
| 4 | Needs that differ from the average student | Need special teacher attention for their education | Not necessarily disabled |
| 5 | SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator) | IEP (Individual Education Plan) | Large workload |
| 6 | Dyslexia | Behaviour problems | Language barriers |
| 7 | Behavioural and emotional needs | Language needs | Learning needs |
| 8 | Learning challenges | Help | Understanding |
| 9 | Require support and extra time in exams | One to one teaching | Gifted children |
| 10 | Challenge | Differentiation | Culture |

The individual word most commonly was dyslexia (118), which is 11% of all responses and was associated with SEN by 33.3% of students.⁴

However, for the two next most commonly cited words, behaviour problems (93) and learning difficulties (89), there were a number of related terms. For behaviour problems, these included behaviour difficulties, behaviour, behaviour and emotion needs, behaviourally challenged and bad behaviour. If these terms are combined, then the total response in this area is 143 (13.4%) suggesting students associate behavioural difficulties closely with SEN. Other terms related to learning difficulties included learning challenges, learning problems, learning disabilities, problems with learning. If all of the terms are aggregated, the total is 116 (10.9%) suggesting that they make a strong association between special educational needs and learning.

A total of 208 (19.5%)⁵ responses named a specific condition.⁶ Those cited are included in the table below.

Table 2: Specific conditions associated by students with the term ‘Special Educational Needs’.

| | | | |
|-----------------|----|--------------------|-----|
| ADD | 2 | Downs Syndrome | 8 |
| ADH | 2 | Dyscalculia | 1 |
| ADHD | 7 | Dyslexia | 118 |
| Aphasia | 1 | Dyspraxia | 16 |
| Asperger | 5 | Hyperactivity | 6 |
| Autism | 28 | Muscular dystrophy | 1 |
| Cystic fibrosis | 1 | Tourettes | 2 |

30 (2.8%) comments referred to sensory impairment with more comments hearing (16) and vision (13) almost equally represented. One response referred generally to sensory impairment.

Whilst the majority of the responses locate the difficulty within the child, other referred to responses to diversity or the established systems. For example, 43 (4%) made reference to support/ additional help. 23 references were made to aspects of the educational system (e.g. IEPs, SENCOs, Educational Welfare Officers, Statement). 31 (2.9%) associated special educational needs with gifted and talented pupils/high ability.

Interestingly, the terms ‘inclusion’ and ‘inclusivity’ were only mentioned 11 times (1%). The implications for teachers (patience, enthusiasm) and factors outside the school (family or society) accounted for 18 responses (1.6%).

In summary, then, it can be noted that in terms of the concept special educational needs:

- This cohort was far from homogeneous (c.f. Mullen 2001) but rather illustrate the diversity of views.

⁴ There is a future study to be written on the variety of ways in which ‘dyslexia’ was spelt!

⁶ The students’ terminology is used.

- There were significant variations in the groups of pupils that students associated with this term. For example, some saw it as related to both ends of the ability range whilst others related it to only one end.
- There is evidence that the medical model, which locates SEN within the child, played a part in the thinking of many of the students.
- This was not universal, however, since some students considered environmental factors, including the role of schools, teachers and society.

Responses from students regarding disability included 290 words or phrases, with the total number of responses equalling 940. Again there were significant differences between the students.

Table 3: Examples of students' responses to the term 'Disability'

| Student | | | |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | Aural | Visual | Mobility |
| 2 | Wheelchair bound | | |
| 3 | Coping with difference | Access | Inclusion |
| 4 | Helping | Same | Allowances |
| 5 | Visually impaired | Physically impaired | Mentally retarded |
| 6 | Physical/mental | Equipment | Learning |
| 7 | ? can mean so many things | | |
| 8 | Genetic/accidental condition which causes disability | Not able to do the same as 'normal' person | |

The most frequently used single terms were physical, 90 (9.5%), mental, 50 (5.3%), and wheelchair, 42 (4.4%) However, where related terms were aggregated together a clearer picture emerged. 296 (31.4%) of responses associated disability with physical disabilities, 193 (20.5%) referred to sensory disabilities and 123 (13%) to mental factors.

Students used a wide variety of related terminology. A minority but noticeable number used words such as: retarded, inability, and deficient. In contrast, others used terms such as: different ability, unseen, and excluded. A range of specific conditions were also named.⁷

Table 4: Specific conditions associated by students with the term 'Special Educational Needs'

| | | | |
|-----------------|---|---------------------|---|
| ADHD | 1 | Dyslexia | 1 |
| Autism | 6 | Dyspraxia | 2 |
| Cerebral Palsy | 5 | Freidrichs aspraxia | 1 |
| Cystic Fibrosis | 1 | Muscular dystrophy | 1 |
| Diabetes | 1 | Spastic | 1 |
| Downs Syndrome | 1 | Spina bifida | 1 |

⁷ The students' terminology is used.

7 responses associated inclusion with disability and 23 raised issues of access/accessibility. Amongst the responses were some exceptionally insightful ones, such as: stereotyped, abuse from other kids, and differently able. In summary, an analysis of the comments on disability leads to the following conclusions:

- The range of terms used by the students was less varied and the number of response was lower. (Only in recent times have all educationalists in England been required to engage with concepts of disability.)
- Some of the terms used by the students are inconsistent with an inclusive approach.
- Predominantly, responses locate the difficulty within the child suggesting that many of these students are operating a medical model.
- Other students recognised the significance of the educational context, the social context and the environment.
- There was some overlap with the terms used in relation to SEN.

Discussion

Given the changes that have been happening in society and in education, it is perhaps unsurprising that the students arriving on the course have diverse views about disability and special educational needs. These ranged from those openly embracing the challenge, to others who appear to see it as an addition, unsought and maybe even unwelcome challenge.

Given the shift towards inclusion, there is a real need to engage with the students and challenge views of SEN and disability that are over reliant on the medical model. There was evidence that at least some had identified the interactional nature of both and were also thinking about the educational implication. Associated with this may be shifts in language, since terms such as retarded and deficient are incompatible with current understandings.

Concern with disability is relatively new to some teachers in England. In common with the teaching profession, these students' responses indicated an ambiguity about the relationship between disability and SEN. Only one student associated SEN with disability and a different student associated disability with SEN. Yet many of the words were associated with both terms. The students' views of disability were generally biased towards a medical model but this was less evident in those students who had enlightened views about SEN. Views about SEN and disability appeared to be linked.

Conclusions

The values and concepts of these individuals have implications for them as members of society in general and, in particular, as educationalists. The diversity identified within this group provides a timely reminder that those involved with ITT need to avoid preconceptions about the initial knowledge and attitudes of the students. They need to plan for diversity – and thereby model inclusive practice.

There will be a difference in the behaviour of two teachers, one of whom associates special educational needs with learning, inclusion and extra support, whilst the other

associates it with problems, additional workload and behaviour problems. For ITT providers addressing that discrepancy and promoting positive interactions in all students is complicated by the fact that their attitudes may act as a barrier to inputs, experiences and opportunities during their training. Students who perceive SEN/disability negatively may be less likely to engage with activities that challenge that stance. If we are serious about developing inclusive practices in schools, then addressing knowledge, skill and **attitudes** during initial training seems crucial. Tomlinson identified, that at the time when the concept of special educational needs became established, the shifts in training were frequently superficial, perhaps justifying Warnock's pessimistic comment. Lessons should be learnt from that leading to a reform of ITT which is radical enough to model, facilitate and promote inclusive education.

At best, amongst these responses there are real grounds for optimism, with some students clearly starting the course with inclusive ways of thinking. Hopefully, evidence from the other phases of the research will give insights in the impact of the course for this cohort and identify some areas for potential development and on-going research since without the opportunities and strategies to influence attitudes, inclusion will be an unattainable goal.

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