

**Professional development for our teacher workforce:****Are we up to it...and are we up for it?**

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The recurrent theme throughout this collection of Think-pieces is the complex nature of the school populations we now serve. Each discussion paper has raised yet another focus for us to consider when rising to the challenge of meeting the multi-faceted needs of these learners with complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD).

As we face this challenge we must question whether realistically, we are adequately prepared as a professional body to meet the needs of our learners in the most responsive, appropriate and effective ways? Do we have the necessary solid foundation upon which we as professionals can develop and deliver the necessary pedagogy for truly person-centred learning and teaching? Most of us (however long in the tooth) will say that we are still on that journey; the more you know, the more you know you have still to learn! And, with no intentions to appear arrogant, this is our professional position today.

Purely from a space and word-length point of view, this Think-piece will solely discuss the position of professional development for our teachers. In no way does this detract or reflect on the extreme value and necessity of the whole school workforce involved in our practice, or of their training needs.

**Early days**

Ours is still a relatively new field of special or inclusive education, when compared to the education field as a whole, having joined the school system only at the start of the 1970s (Handicapped Children Act 1970). Our profession began here with two- and three-year, specialist certificate and diploma teacher training programmes (delivering 'teachers of the mentally handicapped') or one-year postgraduate certificates. Specialist degree programmes superseded these. Student teachers on these programmes tended to study alongside their mainstream student teacher peers for common aspects of their training – child development, philosophy of education and the psychology of how children learn, for example. In addition were the very specialist components of the field – some still in embryonic form and very much 'under development' (eg AAC) as we discovered more about these non-typical learners. Much centred on comprehensive, functional and evidence-based assessment of the whole learner, and their relationships with people and their environment. This was seen as essential to all teaching and learning which, at this time, took place within the context of a mainly developmental curriculum. School experience placements (we truthfully referred to them as *teaching practice* in those days) included both special and mainstream settings. Students undertook regular teaching sessions with visiting pupils and also sessions of '*micro-teaching*' – both where students would observe the practice of a peer teaching (often in a 1:1 context), and reflect back to this student teacher who would then be expected to take feedback on board with a repeated but improved

session. Gruelling but effective in instilling reflection on personal practice as key to improvement...although arguably not ethical for the pupils involved by our standards today!

Many of these specialist courses enabled student teachers to learn about the differing and more specialist approaches that were emerging (eg experiential, behaviourist, multi-sensory 'stimulation', schema-based, heuristic, play-based, interactive – to name a few). Some approaches were explored with pupils, following work by pioneers of the day – for example, Veronica Sherbourne's interactive and relationship approach to movement; Dorothy Heathcote's ideas on drama for children with special needs; Eddie Anderson's responsive work on the trampoline which later evolved into Rebound Therapy. All aspects of training placed the young learner at the heart – the obvious starting point within this understanding of the uniqueness of individuals – of what to prioritise as an appropriate next step, followed by reflection of what factors enabled learning to take place...or not. Pedagogy was still evolving, as was the corresponding training to support it.

This specialist form of pre-service training for teachers was phased out by the end of the 1980s. Quick calculations will tell you that teachers who followed this route are fast approaching retirement! After this point all teachers joining the profession were required to complete the mainstream training route to gain qualification. Any specialism or experience in the field took place post-qualification as in-service training or further qualification. In 1990 government funding identified certain specialist areas for post-service qualifications and training for teachers. Separate mandatory qualified teacher status (MQTS) programmes were established for teachers of the Hearing Impaired, the Visually Impaired and of those with Multi-sensory Impairment. Pupils with severe learning difficulties were considered a 'low incidence' group and did not qualify for professional development opportunities with this mandatory status. Post-qualification courses however were established, many following the mandatory route by including teaching placements as part of their requirement, in the hope that MQTS would follow.

### **Current influences**

Of significant note is that, at this very time, alongside the demise of specialist initial teacher training and the creation of these new professional development opportunities, the National Curriculum had 'arrived' in schools in England. From this point, much energy in the field moved its focus from often cutting edge researching and debate as part of the ongoing development of specialist pedagogy, curricular and professional expertise, towards making this newly introduced national curriculum both accessible and meaningful for those learners with special educational needs and other diverse barriers to learning.

Our national curriculum continues to be 'a driver' of many developments in the field (both positive and not so); not least impacting upon our professional development and our teacher qualifications. Qualified teacher status (QTS) is now measured against professional standards relating in part to national curriculum subject competencies. When initial teacher training courses (ITT) are so pressured for time, the focus sadly, has been on meeting these competences at the expense of what was previously viewed as essential – for example, those key elements of child development and psychology. The minimal requirements specific to input on special educational need (SEN) related content, at best, can be considered scant! Some universities offer input that is well over and above the minimum requirement – offering a block or

week of activities based around 'inclusive practice'; they build in school experience placements in special schools and other opportunities to work with pupils with a range of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). However, this is not an easy task from a number of perspectives, requiring experienced personnel able to deliver this specialist input. Some universities offer SEN as a stand-alone module, creating dilemmas for student teachers about what will make them look most employable on a CV – ICT or SEN? What a choice! Our incoming government has already headlined the idea of introducing fast track teacher training in just 6 months... So, what will be left out then? Or, as importantly, what will be left in?

In former years, the focus of teacher meetings was almost entirely about individuals, learning and pedagogy. Schools today constantly have to juggle competing priorities. National curriculum and other priorities have meant a much wider agenda to be addressed, often requiring rolling programmes of professional development (eg regular updates for moving and handling, physical restraint procedure, etc). Our challenge is to redress this balance.

The current requirements for schools to collect and submit data on pupil progress continues to be another 'driver' that impacts on our professional confidence and continuing learning. Assessment has always been an essential part of the teaching and learning process for teachers. The spotlight on 'accountability' has sadly shifted the focus away from key issues such as how assessment influences pedagogy (at an individual and whole school level), and, in doing that, we often now miss valuable opportunities to engage in professional dialogue around what assessment is telling us about our own practice, as well as about the learners themselves. In more conducive contexts, where the focus was on acknowledging and celebrating achievement, Local Authority (LA) and schools cluster moderation events have demonstrated some really exciting and successful professional development. For example, mainstream and special school staff worked together within the common focus of P scales to explore and interpret 'what progress looks like' for individuals who do not uniformly move up through the P levels. Teachers explored progress for learners who present with 'spikey' profiles – real peaks of achievement within narrow areas of interest, or, where there are glaring gaps in learning across many areas. They collaboratively shared knowledge of support strategies and teaching approaches and generally extended each other's understanding – for example, how to assess reading in a learner who does not speak or what creative writing might look like for someone who does not access writing nor text to convey their ideas. (What might be everyday teaching for one practitioner is new ground for another.) Here the professional dialogue was the valuable key – not just to making reliable judgements of pupil progress, but also to colleagues jointly continuing their professional learning. Ultimately, both aspects of this process will contribute to promoting appropriate and more inclusive practice.

Headteachers, academics and other stakeholders in the field have argued long and hard to get recognition of the need to establish specialist training at every career stage and level of school personnel to meet the complex learning needs of our pupils – at pre-service, initial training and post-qualification stages; as induction and as more advanced level of study, with and without options of accreditation. Very recently, we saw a glimmer of hope following the publication of the Salt Review (Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) 2010a), with recommendations not only echoing this, but expanding on these ideas further. This review was commissioned to consider recruitment and retention of teachers, ITT and continuing professional development (CPD). Not surprisingly it identified and recommended the urgent

need for this specialist training to be available and promoted to all teachers. In April this year, the Secretary of State responded with identified funding and an Implementation Plan to start later this year (DCSF 2010b) <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/saltreview/downloads/implementation-plan.pdf>). A change of government has altered the course of this plan, at present, indefinitely. So we need to continue to take action ourselves.

### **What, when and where next?**

Experience of collaborative work between my university and both LAs and schools has demonstrated that even the most experienced teachers from mainstream and LA advisory/support services need a great deal of support and quite specific professional development to enable them to work effectively with the group of complex learners we are considering. These LAs and schools view the potentially great outlay (finance and resources) necessary to enable this very much as an investment. One school leader, who builds this CPD into the school plan year on year, comments that experience has shown that in reality it may take two years for a teacher 'new to this field' to become competent in delivering appropriate teaching and learning; the outcomes of this CPD for the school are 'sound' teachers, who feel valued and who aspire to much more than competence!

The situation is such that opportunities for practitioners to be able to gain the appropriate knowledge and skills base or to access appropriate CPD is very ad hoc. Added to this we have a skew in the age demographic of our professional field, having more teachers, school leaders and academics aged 50 and above than other sectors of the school system (DCSF 2008, 2010a,b). We need to recruit and hopefully retain a significant number of new teachers to our workforce – many of whom will be without the necessary expertise.

### **It takes more than differentiation**

Previous Think-pieces have described in detail the basis of what is needed for our teachers to be able to meet the complex needs of our learners. Before we can move forward in breaking new ground, we need to ensure our practitioners have some 'essentials' to draw on. A sound grasp of early child development and child psychology will enable a greater understanding about what makes these learners unique in a broad sense, and the sort of learning opportunities that will enable them to make progress. This raised awareness is necessary when considering the strengths, needs, interests and contextual influences we need to clarify when developing individual learner profiles. Accurate, appropriate and holistic assessment, involving people who know the learner well, will be key.

Practitioners need to be clear about learners' likely spikey profiles, and their potentially differing stages of learning and development across contexts or subjects, before they can plan appropriately. For example, one learner may well be meaningfully accessing science at or above expectations, but if they are at an earlier stage in their study skills or personal and social development (affecting the length of attention span, for example), then they will need their lesson structured and supported in a very different way to enable them to succeed. Plans to address why another learner is not successful when expected to communicate choices, demand an understanding that intentional action needs to be established before intentional communication can develop. Learning opportunities to enable that learner to develop

intentionality will precede these expectations of their functional communication. For teaching to be effective from the learner's perspective, we need to examine the learner's holistic experience.

We know there is no one model of learning, nor a given 'core' of proven techniques, to meet the needs of learners with CLDD. Whilst there will be some commonalities, by their nature, each learner's needs are unique and will differ between contexts. Practitioners therefore need an ever expanding repertoire to draw on in order to be responsive to learner needs, contexts and foci of learning. Teachers need more than just a grasp of the many approaches and strategies needed in their repertoire. Skills and critiques are necessary to enable *informed* decisions to be made about what is most appropriate; to consider and take responsibility for judging what is the most effective way of teaching. Rob Ashdown gave an example of our need to challenge practice or advice (in his response to an earlier Think-piece) when highlighting the suggestion that many learners with CLDD are likely to learn best via visually based teaching, yet we currently have predominantly oral methods of teaching being advocated. Teachers need to know about the alternatives; they also need to know their (unique) learners. They need support to ensure choices are made for the right reasons, instead of perhaps being based on what is known about or already being used in the class. They need to be able to consider a range of options (which may be largely unknown to this teacher) before selecting the most appropriate.

Consistency for learners with CLDD is a critical factor in their successful learning, and teamwork adds strength to this. It is really important that teachers have the skills to deploy staff effectively, and to acknowledge that roles within these contexts may differ from mainstream experience. In some instances, there may be as many adults as learners in the classroom to plan for! They need to be able to build on the strengths of their teams and actively involve them in the planning and review process. This is crucial when teachers are reliant on support staff to give feedback on learner responses. Accurate assessment and responsive teaching is hard to manage when undertaken 'second-hand' and through a number of adults. As teacher, they need: to have a constant 'overview' of all aspects of the classroom as the 'room manager'; to judge the pace of the session, deciding when the activity needs to change; as role models they facilitate and respond to both learners and the staff team. As an 'extended professional' they need to develop working relationships with other adults and the wider school community. And that is just for starters!

### **Creating a culture of dialogue and reflection to promote professional development**

What we *CAN* do...

As a first step we should endeavour to capture and share the expertise and talents that we already have – in our schools, from our families, our LAs, local universities and beyond (and do this now before some of the most experienced and knowledgeable teachers retire off into the sunset!).

*Where* is it, *what* is it, *who* holds this expertise...?

We may need to look beyond the classroom – to our heads and deputies perhaps; to those working in advisory, LA or training roles. As a resourceful profession, we are used to capitalising

on the strengths, interests and talents of our staff groups. People with passion or flair can inspire others when they share their skills and insights to success.

Once we have identified those individuals and their particular expertise, we need to find ways to spread this knowledge with best effect. To state the obvious, we begin by looking at what we do already with a view to developing our professional expertise further.

Mentoring and other procedures will be well established for supporting new teachers in school, but what about more experienced colleagues who suddenly are faced with learners who are completely outside of their experience? We have all been there...you have maybe had lots of very successful experience in managing students on the autism spectrum or a very active, highly charged group of teens with behaviours that challenge, but now you are responsible for a class of learners who, all bar one, are working at very early levels and present with the most complex range of physical, sensory and medical needs and difficulties... Where do you start? Such challenges can make the best of us feel de-skilled.

Schools are already good at valuing and investing in their workforce, but we may be able to develop this further. By developing a professional climate that is positive, open and supportive in responding to current challenges – one in which we view each other as equals in the professional learning process – we can not only share and build on existing good practice, but also contribute to the new practices we need to develop to meet the needs of our more complex learner populations. It is valuable to introduce or extend a means for a more systematic review and reflection on our practice.

As a profession, we rarely have the luxury of opportunities to share and compare practice – to spend time really looking at our own or our colleagues' practice, and discussing and reflecting on it. The use of focused classroom observations or video, particularly of more experienced colleagues, is an excellent vehicle to establish this mode and to stimulate discussion. Reviewing even a very a short piece of videoed teaching can give enormous insight and raise awareness further – for us all. When you are teaching a group of learners, it is all too easy to overlook or even be unaware of the significant responses of someone you are not interacting with directly, or to consider whether the pace of your teaching matches the learner's needs on that day. There are occasions when joint-teaching may be a possibility – another great context for professional development, when shared reflection is part of this model. Watching another colleague teach your class is enlightening, especially if you are observing or in a support role. Similarly, visits to other schools or working with colleagues from other disciplines can offer new ideas, skills and understanding – and, as importantly, reassurance when considering and examining practice.

We need to create time for peer mentoring to take place and for it to continue over time so that supportive and inspiring relationships can be fostered. Regular sessions with such systematic review will in themselves present opportunities that will raise awareness through their focus on both learner responses and on adult roles. Discussions quickly become framed in a positive light giving colleagues confidence to ask questions, challenge, and practice with a view to improving understanding and practice. The development of a structure or framework, through which to review practice, is a first stage. Drawing from coaching and mentoring principles may add to this, providing practitioners with a language through which to engage in professional

debate and clarify plans for action. Engendering an ethos of critical friendship supports this context for professional learning, enabling teachers to make the bridge, for example, between the formal curriculum and what is relevant and most appropriate to individuals. It not only gives them the ability to make these links, but the confidence to do this. It offers teachers their own resources from which to draw and make decisions, rather than the reliance, for example, on checklists which then become viewed as a curriculum of 'next steps'. The aim ultimately is for improved practices to be applied and embedded.

Having an external colleague to facilitate the mentoring process can be beneficial. Viewed in a 'neutral' role, they may encourage a greater depth of reflection without fear of treading on toes or worries about challenging current ways of working. Universities often facilitate such roles with colleagues in schools. Building bridges and partnerships with academic institutions offer further opportunities to develop and disseminate the new pedagogy.

This focused aspect of whole school development will strengthen the foundation from which teachers make more sound judgements of teaching, learning and progress. It can enable them to justify and evidence even the smallest steps of lateral progress, with a clear picture of what factors and contexts influence and enable this learning to take place – and importantly, to plan the most relevant and motivating next steps. This is what Ofsted are looking for, but also, most importantly, what we need – a return to our true profession.

However effective and successful a school is, it will never hold all the knowledge – and things change. Networking is a crucial factor in broadening our ideas and knowledge base; schools working alone will develop (often unknowingly) insular views. By looking creatively we can identify and exploit the potential opportunities for professional development at a number of levels in our established working patterns. Some universities and other organisations already offer facilities to enable, and even facilitate, special interest groups and specialist support networks. There is much scope to develop these networks in a more cohesive way. We may even wish to consider moving forward together, in some way, on some of the recommendations of the Salt Review.

We should explore this joint working further with university and other training providers, and extend this to include colleagues in our wider professional networks. The benefits would be reciprocal. As previously stated, collaborative working can positively strengthen understanding, skills and perspectives on practice, for all – whether it is through specific professional development events or through shared, outreach working by any of these stakeholders. Such working partnerships could be both necessary and advantageous in preparing and enabling us to drive forward research and development of the understanding and the pedagogy we need for our learners – and, for our teaching profession.

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