

## **Initial Teacher Education and Pupils With Special Educational Needs.**

**In recent years, more and more pupils with special educational needs have gained access to the mainstream curriculum in their local schools. Authorities in Northern Ireland have begun to address the implications for teacher education of such developments.**

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There is a growing range of demands upon initial teacher education (ITE) in preparing teachers for special educational needs. In the context of continuing change, the author questions traditional assumptions that teaching competences appropriate to the teaching of pupils with disabilities are additional to those demanded of all teachers and argues that programmes of ITE are continuing to experience a range of pressures to provide more than core or optional special needs modules and to integrate a wider range of special needs content within the school experience programmes of B.Ed and PGCE courses.

### **SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION**

The UK Teacher Training Agency Internet Service offers standard: "If you would like to teach children with special educational needs (SEN), you must first obtain qualified teacher status and gain experience as a teacher in a mainstream school. You will then be expected to undertake specialist training usually through in-service education and training (INSET)." The policy could be said to encourage the view that special needs training is properly an "add on" to basic training, that teachers in special schools require a kind of expertise which mainstream teachers lack or do not require or that the study of learning difficulties is not entirely the concern of mainstream teachers. Without a great deal of clarification, this advice could be said to foster the segregation of pupils with special educational needs and limit the expectations of initial teacher educators.

The Education Reform Order (Northern Ireland) 1989 requires schools to teach a

broad and balanced curriculum and provide access to all pupils unless formally excluded. Currently, all students in initial training are required to prepare schemes for whole classes including children with learning difficulties. Despite the introduction this year of competence-based assessment and career-entry profiling for all newly qualified teachers (DENI, 1996) and a significant increase in the number of appointments to special schools and units (Education and Library Board, Induction Liaison Committee Report, 1997), there have been no official requirements that they demonstrate competence in the assessment or teaching of pupils with learning difficulties. They are however required to maintain assessments of the progress of all pupils when they begin teaching. What does ITE provide? Povey and Abbotts (1989), reviewing the special needs content of ITE courses in England and Wales reported a varying scene in which 61% of PGCE courses could expect to offer no more than 9 hours input and just over 50% of B.Ed courses tended to provide between 25 and 50 hours. The great majority of courses reviewed provided optional courses only.

### **WARNOCK REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Warnock Report (1978) has for many years provided the standard which providers appear to adopt as an ideal. The report recommended a core element and options which would promote the following:

- **awareness of potential areas of difficulty within subjects**
- **appreciation of the importance of early assessment**
- **recognition of signs of special need and the variety of learning and behavioural problems which may be met**
- **the ability to organise different learning activities whereby the disparate educational needs of individual children may be met within the unity of the ordinary class**
- **awareness of common disabilities and other factors which influence development**
- **knowledge of what special education involves, together with knowledge of the range of various forms of special educational provision and of specialist advisory services**
- **some acquaintance with special schools, classes and units**
- **awareness of the importance of appreciating parents' anxieties and encouraging their continued involvement**
- **understanding of how to communicate effectively with parents regarding their child's progress**
- **knowledge in general terms of when and where to refer for special help.**

These were suggested as recommended outcomes for core or optional modules within ITE courses. There was no suggested minimal competence requirement of student teachers in respect of these pupils. Reluctance to make such requirements is revealed in the Cockroft Report (1982):

Some teachers commented that their initial training courses had failed to provide adequate preparation for the teaching of mathematics to very slow learners. In our view it should not be the task of initial training courses to provide preparation for such teaching; nor do we believe it to be practicable, though students should be made aware of the variety of special needs which they may meet in their pupils. In order to be able to appreciate the special difficulties of very slow learners, and also of children with other special needs, it is necessary first of all to gain experience of teaching mathematics to pupils who do not have problems of this kind. We therefore consider that training to teach pupils with special needs should be provided by means of inservice courses undertaken after teachers have had opportunity to gain classroom experience. In our view new entrants to teaching should not be required to teach mathematics to classes of such pupils.

### **INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION NEEDS**

How are students made aware of “the variety of needs they may meet” if they are not given the opportunity “to teach mathematics to classes of such pupils?” Teaching mathematics to such groups or classes in special schools and units could be said to be less demanding of student teachers than attempting it in mainstream classes where similar pupils are present and resources may be lacking. Student placement in special schools and units has not been widely practised in Northern Ireland such that the schools’ experience of providing training could be said to be limited, which is unsatisfactory given the recommendation of Warnock that they be exploited as training resources. It has been well argued (Cox, 1971) that an understanding of the development of mathematical abilities is promoted through the study of the learning difficulties.

Teachers’ perceptions that there are distinct skills and resources which they lack are said to be critical in the decisions they make about accepting or rejecting proposals to include children with special needs in their classrooms. Traditional perceptions of special needs training as esoteric, specialist and optional may need to be contested if growing demands for inclusion are to be accommodated safely. Minke, Bear, Deemer and Griffin (1996), in an American survey of basic attitudes

to inclusion, report that “special education teachers held the most positive attitudes to inclusion as well as the highest perceptions of self-efficacy, competency and satisfaction.” Minke records that regular classroom teachers in traditional classrooms held the least positive perceptions of inclusion and viewed classroom adaptations as less feasible than teachers in classrooms where a protected resource was provided for pupils with special needs. Student experience of such resources during ITE would appear to be an urgent prerequisite if the integration of these pupils is to be advanced.

## REVIEW OF INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION

The recent review of initial teacher education in Northern Ireland (DENI, March 1993) outlines an official Northern Ireland view. Expectations of ITE in respect of special educational needs can be inferred from the extracts below. It is worthy of note that item 2.2.7 (the need to recognise pupils' special needs and provide appropriately for these) is one which is anticipated will be addressed primarily during induction and will decline in importance thereafter. Item 2.1.5 is not something that is expected to be developed through INSET. How competences are acquired as outcomes of student learning programmes is not the subject of the review although it is anticipated that spending longer in schools will facilitate this.

### INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION COMPETENCES

	COMPETENCES	SCHOOL EXP.	PHASE
2.1.5	Shows awareness of potential areas of learning difficulty within the subject(s).	4	Ab
2.2.7	Is able to recognise pupils' special needs and provides appropriately for these.	4	aBc
2.5.3	Liases, when appropriate, with members of other professions concerned with the welfare of pupils.	5	abC

Selected competences extracted from “The Review of Initial Teacher Education in Northern Ireland” (DENI, 1993).

For each competence descriptor the relative contribution to be made by school-based work is specified with the score 1-5 (1 = requiring little or no school experience, 5 = developed wholly in school) and the stages a, initial; b, induction; and c, early inservice. Capital letters denote the stage at which most attention will be given to the development of specific competences. The difference in expectations of each phase as denoted by “a” and “A” is not defined.

### **DEVELOPING TEACHERS’ AWARENESS OF THEIR OWN NEEDS**

Are teachers ready for special needs training during the initial phase of training? Student teachers’ understanding of their own training needs may be said to depend upon (a) the demands made upon them by their tutors, (b) the demands made upon them in practice classrooms or (c) the demands they impose upon themselves. Ideally these three demands might be synchronised. Koetsier and Wubbels (1995) describe the “Individual and Independent Final Teaching Period” (IFTP), a final block of school experience which attempts to simulate actual classroom teaching by providing a continuous (14 week) student teaching period in which the student functions as a “regular teacher under regular constraints and pressures” and is responsible for a full teaching load. More commonly, ITE courses impose their own requirements for progression, beginning with the requirement to teach individual lessons, progressing to the teaching of schemes or more extended units of work and proceeding to devise flexible planning and management strategies for meeting more individual needs. It is anticipated that student teachers will develop, under guidance, curriculum planning and classroom management strategies which adapt to pupil strengths and weaknesses and take advantage of actual opportunities. What is not always clear is that ITE tutors succeed in placing students at different phases of their initial training in classrooms of varying degrees of challenge or that partner schools are always aware of the intended outcomes of the different stages of training. Assessed school experience has only recently been introduced to the fourth year of the B.Ed. degree. Is it to be more of the same or is more to be attempted? Special needs training is clearly a contender for this additional time but closer partnerships with schools are essential if students are to be appropriately challenged and supported at this level.

Does the reality shock of a full teaching load and experience of the full range of pupil difficulties create needs which are not anticipated before career entry? If this is so then there may be need for school experience in the final year of the B.Ed degree which is more realistic and closer in experience to induction training with school-based induction tutors and college tutors co-operating in formative com-

petence-based assessment. Their co-operative working is currently the hard-sought objective of much DENI effort to integrate the three phases of training. Greater involvement in induction would bring ITE closer to issues affecting all teachers. Support and assessment of students upon school placements in the later stages of ITE courses may need to focus more particularly upon the actual work of individual pupils in a class and the management of their learning in target curriculum areas over an extended teaching period rather than upon a series of student teaching performances across a wide range of classes and subjects. It is increasingly important for student teachers to achieve the competences of differentiated teaching before the reality shock of full-time classroom employment.

### **ARE YOUNG STUDENTS ABLE FOR THESE INCREASED DEMANDS?**

Significant differences in the quality of ITE students are evident from a comparison of the entry qualifications to teacher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, reported in the Council for Industry and Higher Education Report "Trends in Higher Education" (Nov. 1996) and in the 1996 Selection Report of Stranmillis College, Belfast a typical regional provider of teacher education. The mean A level points of entrants to ITE in Northern Ireland (20.8) are 43 per cent higher than those in England and Wales (14.2). It is arguable therefore that the expectations of teacher education expressed by Cockcroft reflect the vocational values of a society unlike that in Northern Ireland. Can more able students be expected to achieve more in their initial training? Variation in readiness for teaching pupils with special needs may be affected by factors not unrelated to ability. The work of Gupta and Vanithamani (1995) reinforces the view that student teachers prior beliefs about teaching, emanating from their own school experiences, are hard to overcome. Knowles and Holt-Richards (1991) suggest that students who consider their own school experience as adequate are less likely to see problems in it. Those with negative experiences of being taught are predicted to be more open to change and therefore, perhaps, more sensitive to pupil needs than those with very positive memories. It would appear therefore that highly able entrants to teaching need to be appropriately challenged and encouraged to reflect upon the lot of pupils whose experience of school is less positive than their own.

### **THE NEEDS OF NEWLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS**

Newly appointed teachers, routinely surveyed by their original training institutions or by Education Board personnel at Induction Conferences, continue to express a range of training needs. Some, many of them secondary teachers, record needs in teaching pupils with basic skill deficiencies in literacy and numeracy, in

coping with disruptive pupils, in planning work appropriate to underachieving or disaffected pupils and in managing such groups and individuals in mainstream classes (NIELB, 1997). Area Board advisory staff are unanimous in their view that teachers have greater needs in the management of learning difficulties, in teaching basic skills and in differentiated teaching than can be met within their existing resources. Attendance at inservice courses in Northern Ireland reveals very considerable enthusiasm for additional training among serving teachers who are fully aware of the nature and consequences of underfunctioning in their pupils. Growing demand is everywhere in evidence: In 1997, The National Association for Special Educational Needs (NASEN) announced the establishment of three new local area groups in Northern Ireland. Twenty per cent of the Northern Ireland Education and Library Boards' 1997 summer school courses for teachers are on special needs issues.

### **SPECIAL NEEDS TRAINING: CHANGES IN PROVISION AND DEMAND**

Can we afford to leave special needs training until later? Inservice training is increasingly in doubt as DENI withdraws all funding for teachers completing award-bearing INSET courses and cuts the budgets of Curriculum Advisory and Support Services. The Government's obligations to teacher education are currently assumed to have been met after initial training and 8/9 days of induction training. Teacher needs may be set to grow as the Draft Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs is anticipated to become law early in 1998. The reforms are expected to speed up the process of formal assessment of pupils with special needs, give pupils with disabilities greater access to mainstream schools and hold school provision for special educational needs to account. The abolition in 1986 of the special training for teachers of pupils with severe learning difficulties (the "Special Care" teachers) has not resulted in an appropriate body of training being made available for mainstream teachers transferring to special schools.

The DENI "Raising School Standards Initiative" (RSSI) has pointed up the need for curriculum managers in secondary schools with responsibility for the total programme for underachieving pupils. The Staff Development and Performance Review (SDPR) is introducing the observation and evaluation of classroom teaching for all teachers. Such initiatives are maintaining the pace of development in teaching quality in Northern Ireland schools. Following the huge increase in formal statements written for pupils in Northern Ireland since the 1986 N.I. Order and the consequent growth in special unit provision for these pupils following Education Reform, current preparations for the introduction of the Code of

Practice appear set to bring special needs issues back into the mainstream arena. Much is happening and ITE will not be excluded in the drive to ensure curriculum quality and a more integrated training. If schools are to contain ever more special needs provision within mainstream classes and all teachers are to be accepted as teachers of pupils with special educational needs, then teacher education in general must continue to rethink its policy for progression within training.

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