

Supporting teacher trainees with Special Educational Needs

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ABSTRACT

Teacher training often focuses on how to support learners with specific learning needs, but there is also a growing number of teacher trainees who need support during their Initial Teacher Training year and beyond to enable them to engage effectively with their learners. This study focuses on key methods used to support teacher trainees, and strategies developed to enable them to engage effectively with their learners to ensure both the teacher trainee and their pupils make effective progress. This is an area of development that requires more work, but it is important that thought should be given to teacher trainees and their needs in a similar way to that of the pupils they look after to ensure that they can continue to make the wonderful contributions they are able to.

KEYWORDS

TEACHER EDUCATION

TEACHER TRAINEES

SPECIAL EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Over the years there have been many debates concerning the recruitment and selection of teacher trainees, and questions have explored, in some cases to an alarmed response, whether teachers can have special needs or not and be effective teachers. These views and notions were strongly challenged by the Equality Act (2010), the Disability Act (2016) and of course, in the very early stages, the Warnock Report (Warnock 1978) as well as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994), which

advocates the importance of an inclusive education for all. However, when looking at important reviews on Initial Teacher Training, such as the Carter Review (Carter 2015), the emphasis is often on how teacher trainees are developed in relation to their understanding of the needs of their pupils. However, it can be argued that teacher training and teacher education providers also need to make allowances regarding the provision of their own trainees. Some consideration may be given in cases where provision is streamlined and more bespoke, but this might not always be the norm.

Of course we need to consider the importance of how we develop teacher trainees' understanding of how we meet learners' needs, but there also needs to be a focus on how programmes are developed to meet the needs of their trainees to enable them to cope, and develop resilience and strategies to address their own needs to ensure that they are effective in the classroom. In the moving landscape of education, it is reported that workload and teacher retention are of great concern (DfE 2016). However, it seems that we 'overlook' a vital group with regard to supporting their learning, and

addressing specific learning needs within programmes more specifically, when we should be looking at how we can refine our practice, and strengthen the learning of those in our care to help them become successful and able practitioners, coping with their own needs, and considering those of others effectively.

Throughout the years, it has come to light that more and more teacher trainees have their own needs when engaging in teacher training courses. After looking at six trainees at a local provider, we discovered that, out of fear of being stigmatised and judged, they had chosen not to disclose their disabilities or learning needs. Even though they ran the risk of being challenged by their provider for not being open about their needs, their fear was much stronger than the thought of being asked not to engage with the course. The trainees soon found that they needed support, which left the provider in a more challenging position, where needs had to be considered retrospectively rather than planning and embedding the support throughout the learning journey.

RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY

There is not a wide range of literature available exploring how to meet the needs of teacher trainees with specific learning needs. The study certainly did not assume that one size fits all, but in an attempt to explore what strategies can be used and identified, to support teacher trainees, a wide range of literature was explored to consider how learners, rather than a selective group, can be supported in their learning. For the purpose of this study it was also thought that it would be sensible to consider looking at a specific group of learners, with similar needs, to outline what strategies and support was put in place to enable them to move their learning needs forward.

The study focused on six teacher trainees, stated as dyslexic learners, who have started their Initial Teacher Training in a school-based context. Three learners

identified their needs at the start of the learning year, two disclosed their needs midway through the first term, and one was stated during his Initial Teacher Training year. The trainee experiences varied in relation to the challenges they had to face throughout their training year, but one challenge they all needed to cope with was managing time and workload. These key aspects are explored in more detail further below.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is ironic that when looking at the provision for teacher trainees, where we train them to meet Teachers' Standard 5 (DfE 2014), it is often not part of the practice to consider how to support them to move forward in their own learning too. Assumptions might often be made that since they are adults they need to understand how they learn, or how they need to support their own learning. Very often, like learners in a school context, teacher trainees still need to find ways to explore key strategies to help them progress in their own learning and to understand how they can support their own practice more effectively. It is often forgotten, when looking at the Dreyfus Model (2003), that teacher trainees need to find their feet in a new context, are complete novices within that context and will need to discover strategies to cope. It



Trainee DT teachers working on their subject knowledge at UEL.

is at best a challenge for teacher trainees without specific needs, and even more so for trainees for whom there are specific needs, which must be accommodated.

When looking at dyslexia as a specific learning need, the Latin root of the word, suggests dys-'difficulty' and lexia 'language'. So, difficulty with language. However, dyslexia is far more complex and it cannot be assumed that learners only have difficulties with language (Reid 2011). This might be only one aspect of their specific learning need that needs to be considered. Some learners also have issues with sequencing, processing information, reading speed, balance and coordination (Buttriss & Callander 2008). What is challenging for most learners is how their learning needs are labelled. Labelling is challenging in many ways as it provides an umbrella term for something which might be far more complex than commonly agreed definitions can capture (Norwich 1999; Lauchlan & Boyle 2007; Bell 2010;). It is therefore important to look at the label as a broad outline of what needs to be considered rather than a clear definition of what the learning needs and individual differences are. It is not set in stone. It is therefore more important to look at each individual's needs and personalise their learning (DfE 2014). Studies have shown that labelling often provides learners with an outline of possible ways forward and opportunities to look at how to address key issues. However, this can cause some learners to fall back on the label as an excuse for not engaging effectively in their own learning. When looking at individuals in a range of contexts, both learners in school and teacher trainees, it is perhaps fair to say that these groups and attitudes are represented in equal measure. It is therefore important that those supporting these adult learners in their learning have an understanding of these behaviours too. It is a curious balance to strike, where you work towards independence but also ensure that you are supportive in your approach to help learners with specific needs to move forward.

Apart from being aware of possible responses to labels, the key is also to understand individual differences and individual needs of learners. Each learner, like most learners we work with in a classroom contexts in schools as teachers, is uniquely different (Cigman 2010; SEND Code of Practice, 2015). This is true of teacher trainees with specific needs too, so it is important to understand that strategies that might work well for one might not work at all for another. It is a case of exploring and working matters through carefully. Reflecting with learners on what works well and how to refine the practice is also key (Bell 2010–).

When looking at dyslexia as a specific learning need, for the purpose of this study, the focus was mainly on strategies to help students engage more effectively with their learning, in relation to their assignments and essays, lesson planning, and also managing their workload in relation to coping with the balance between their academic work, planning, teaching and marking pupils' work. Again, a broad range of literature was explored looking at general practice rather than assuming that one strategy might work. Reid (2010) outlines the importance of being mindful of the processing speed of learners and how they are able to digest information. Providing learners with scaffolds and chunks of learning might be more effective, and enable them to explore and discuss more, making clearer links to key concepts and aspects. In addition, scaffolded frames to map out key concepts were used (Buttriss & Callander, 2008).

KEY STRATEGIES IN PRACTICE

Each teacher trainee was allocated an academic tutor with specific special education experience in dyslexia. They were each provided with key support slots where they had to work with their tutors on their assignments, planning and reading. In addition, strategies, as identified in the key literature and mapped according to trainees' needs were used in

every session delivered during the core provision on a weekly basis. All phase- and subject-specific tutors were expected to personalise their practice effectively to ensure that candidates were able to cope with their learning, in a similar way to the expectations outlined in the Teachers' Standards where teachers need to make provision for all their learners' needs.

During the delivery of sessions, lecture-style delivery was avoided and regular chunking of learning was embedded. In addition, tasks were scaffolded, and a step-by-step layering approach was used to support learners in how they digest and conceptualise their learning more effectively (DfE 2006; Buttriss & Callander 2008). Where required, learners were also provided with handouts with learner-friendly fonts and layouts. Teaching staff were also required to think about how they present information on their presentations. They had to reduce text information, and also consider fewer instructions. Activities such as think-pair-share were used to allow learners to engage in a wide range of activities using their senses and opportunities to articulate their thinking more effectively.

Visual overlays were not used as a strategy, partly in view of the discussions had with students, but also of the research reported by the American Society of Ophthalmology (2009) showing that it is largely ineffective and makes very little impact.

During one-to-one tutor sessions, similar practices were followed through the use of scaffolding, planning and step-by-step guidance in tackling longer pieces. In addition, individual provision was made in providing advice on how to plan more effectively and cope with the time constraints students with specific learning needs will need to learn to face in a school context. Marking strategies were also considered, and how to cope with the volume of marking, feeding back and how to be more effective in doing this. The above strategies were not all implemented at once but over time, to ensure that an

embedded and well-considered approach was in place to support learners to make effective progress.

IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIES

Teaching staff were fully trained on how to deploy the different strategies in their practice. A session was delivered on how learners with dyslexia learn, how different learners' needs might be different and how to consider personalisation strategies in lessons. In addition, further information regarding each student's needs was provided and mapped to specific strategies that might be helpful to support their learning. It was key to develop staff well. The SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) Code of Practice (2016) and discussions regarding the Core Framework for Initial Teacher Training (2016) highlights how vital it is to ensure that trainers and staff are well developed. It is therefore imperative to train staff, and in this case Teacher Trainers (including mentors and university tutors) well. During the training, a wide range of strategies and approaches were shared to ensure that colleagues were clear on how to support their tutees. By the end of the training session teaching staff were asked to embed at least one strategy in each training session, when working with the group of trainees with specific learning needs, until they felt that they could move on to more than one, and the strategies became part of their day-to-day practice.

Support tutors were trained in a similar way, and were provided with the same information. However, their roles were slightly different due to the face-to-face engagement with students, and a coaching course was added to their learning to provide them with strategies to help learners to unlock their own potential through the use of effective questioning. The individual trainees were also provided with an information pack of what tutors were trained on, and were asked to feed back on this, including any points missed or if they wanted to add

any additional information. At the end of sessions tutors and trainees were asked to reflect on their experiences and progress in their weekly summaries to ensure that continuous evaluation and refinement could take place.

EVALUATION

In setting up the project, it became clear that trainees with specific needs became frustrated that their Initial Teacher Training course outlined the importance of personalisation and differentiation in practice when it is often not reflected in their own learning and engagement at postgraduate level (SEND Code of Practice, 2015). Trainees also expressed their fear of being 'found out' as someone with learning needs, and were concerned about the stigmas around this, and that learners would judge them or see them as less capable of teaching and supporting them (Bell 2010; Glazzard 2010).

When the project was explained, and trainees were introduced to the packs and ways forward in relation to their personalised development plan, they expressed a sense of relief similar to the candidates mentioned in the discussion on labelling, that they were finally being supported to cope with their learning. Tutors also felt a sense of relief as they finally understood the needs of their learners better. As one tutor explained, 'it is not that teaching staff don't want to make provision for learners with specific needs, but it is often difficult when teaching adults, to know at what level do they need the support, and how they want to be supported.' By opening the communication channels for both learners and tutors through the coaching, one-to-one sessions and class sessions, students were able to explore how they learn best, and tutors were able to discover how they can support their learners more effectively.

Trainees felt that presenting core learning experiences in a more interactive way allowed them enough time to digest their learning rather than trying to keep up

with what is being said or how to note it down. Having notes and handouts made a real difference. The one-to-one support in combination with assignment scaffolding sessions was extremely well received. One trainee mentioned that she felt 'less panicky about the workload and what to write, the plans map next steps clearly and [she] can work on each section across a week or two to complete it in good time for submission'. Some institutions do not permit additional time, but make allowances in the marking, and it is therefore important to share how assignments are being assessed to ensure that learners are able to make sure they embed what is required but also fully understand the rationale. By using appropriate assessment for learning approaches, similar to what is used in classroom contexts, learners felt that they could navigate their learning journey better.

After the assignment ended, it was interesting to note that students' engagement with their assignments improved over time. On average, each student improved their outcomes throughout the year, on average by 5% per assignment. When talking it through with students they felt that due to the embedded supporting strategies they were able to focus on the quality of their work rather than rushing to get it done. They also felt a great sense of relief throughout the process, which again correlates with previous studies on supporting SEND learners. Overall, students felt that they were able to manage their time better due to the scaffolded nature of the deliverable, and also the assignment outlines, and they felt that they knew when to prioritise what, and also how to fit in what they needed to do with what needs to happen next. However, they still felt challenged by the demands of planning and marking they had to face in school contexts, and one student explained, that 'it was like learning to drive a car, you don't know what you don't know, but until you get it, it is very hard. Once you have managed all

the concepts, it becomes automatic and you can just do it.' The student highlights the import process each trainee needs to go through, which is to process and digest the full learning journey as a teacher trainee, and then to reach a point of automaticity where the more challenging and hugely complex art and craft of teaching becomes embedded and fluid.

CONCLUSION

All the trainees and tutors agreed that one of the greatest benefits of the project was to highlight the importance of the individual needs of each student, even when working with adults, when teaching. The needs were discussed, strategies were considered and next steps were outlined to enable all stakeholders to communicate more effectively, and they were able to reflect on practice and what works effectively in moving their learning forward. From these discussions, it became clear that it is important to continue with this project, and to continue to explore a wider range of needs and how to meet these more effectively in teacher education, when training future trainees. The project highlighted the needs and the importance of meeting these needs more effectively. However, it is fair to say that the project is a very small study, and future work requires a broader research engagement to see whether the impact is as positive as it seems in the initial phases. In addition, it is important to recognise that there were time limitations and it will be useful to see whether, over a longer period of time, the impact of such an intensive support network and approach will have the same impact on teacher education overall. ■

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