

1

Special educational needs (SEN) as a concept

Overview

This chapter will address the following issues:

- the development of special educational needs (SEN) as an issue for teachers
- provision for pupils with SEN
- the potential impact of labelling upon pupil self-perception
- teacher attitudes and expectations.

Introduction

In her seminal report of 1978, Mary Warnock (Department of Education and Science, 1978) suggested that as many as 20% of pupils have some form of SEN at some point in their school lives. If we accept her figure – and although it is one that we might dispute, it has been largely agreed by many authorities – it is evident that these pupils form a significant part of the overall school population and therefore require the careful attention of all teachers. Since the publication of the Warnock Report, advances in our understanding of pupils with SEN and the approaches to providing them with an appropriate education have been considerable. However, for many teachers, these pupils continue to provide a challenge and in some instances remain on the periphery of learning. The demands of learning present many pupils with difficulties that may damage their personal self-esteem to an extent that it deters them from making progress and in some instances leads to general disaffection with school. The demands of the curriculum, approaches to classroom management and organisation, the expectations of teachers and other adults, and the general ethos of the school are all factors which may support or impede the learning of pupils described as having SEN. These issues and the responsibility of

2 THE PRACTICAL GUIDE TO SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN INCLUSIVE PRIMARY CLASSROOMS

class teachers to ensure their effective management form the basis of discussion in this book.

The term 'special educational needs' (SEN) was originally intended to provide an opportunity for schools, local education authorities and other service providers to ensure that pupils who have difficulties in learning or accessing the curriculum receive appropriate levels of support. The Education Act 1996 stated that:

Children have special educational needs if they have a *learning difficulty*, which calls for special educational provision to be made for them

The Act went on to define a learning difficulty as being when children

- a) have a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of the same age; or
- b) have a disability which prevents or hinders them from making use of educational facilities of a kind generally provided for children of the same age in schools within the area of the local education authority; or
- c) are under compulsory school age and fall within the definition at (a) or (b) above or would do so if special educational provision was not made for them. (Education Act 1996, Section 312)

It is important to recognise that the definitions here provided establish a distinction between pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities who will require teachers to address their needs through modified teaching approaches or through specialist resources or curriculum modification, and others who, whilst possibly having a disability, may not require such modifications. Assumptions should not be made about the learning needs of pupils simply because they have a disability. Indeed, many pupils described as disabled perform well in schools and find that their disability has little or no impact upon their ability to access learning. Here, interpretation of the language within the definitions provided above is a critical factor. Applying labels to pupils, which may have deficit connotations or may be perceived in a negative manner could be a significant factor in lowering expectations and contributing to a failure in learning. Pupils with disabilities or clinical diagnoses have often been subjected to stereotyping that leads to discrimination in respect of the education with which they are provided. Many adults with disabilities have reflected upon their experiences of schooling and have had reason to recall with some resentment the low expectations of teachers, which inhibited their achievements and perpetuated negative images of them as individuals (Noble, 2003; Sainsbury, 2000; Souza, 1995, Toolan, 2003). When a label such as cerebral palsy or Asperger's syndrome is attached to pupils, it is often the case that even before meeting them teachers will have an image in their mind of the difficulties, associated with teaching such individuals. Whilst it is undoubt-

edly true to say that an understanding of factors which might affect access to learning is of considerable help to the teacher, the low expectations which are often fuelled by disabling labels can lead to underachievement and a denial of entitlement to appropriate learning opportunities.

The term (SEN) is one that has been subject to considerable debate in recent years. Bailey (1998) suggests that it is a difficult term because of its association with location. In many instances, pupils perceived as having SEN have received some or all of their teaching in an environment separate and different from that provided to their peers. Sometimes this has meant totally separate schooling in a special school or unit, and in other instances it may refer to the removal of pupils from classrooms for 'specialist' teaching or other interventions within a mainstream setting. Bailey (1998) asserts that pupils with special educational needs are often perceived as those who require access to a *service*, that is different from that provided for other learners. Such a perception immediately informs teachers that they are likely to be required to provide intervention, that is different from or additional to that provided for other pupils. Inevitably, this notion encourages the conscientious teacher to focus upon the needs of the individual and to attempt to devise ways of overcoming perceived barriers to learning. This focus upon individual needs may have both positive and negative outcomes. A recognition of individuality may encourage the teacher to examine pupil learning styles and preferences, and thereby enable an adjustment of teaching approaches to address these. Effective teachers differentiate their lessons to ensure that individual needs are recognised and planned for in a way that celebrates pupils' abilities rather than emphasising their difficulties. However, when teachers focus only upon what may be regarded as learning difficulties and adopt simplistic methods, that aim to 'contain' pupils without due regard to their place within a group or whole class, they are as likely to damage the self-esteem of the individual as they are to encourage inclusion in learning.

Individuality is to be celebrated. Every learner is an individual, and the likelihood is that in most classes, all pupils will have strengths and weakness, preferences and dislikes, and interests and subjects which they find boring. The same is also true of teachers, as it is of everyone. Recognising individuality in learners is important, but must be managed in a way that puts neither the individual nor the class at a disadvantage. When teachers plan for an individual pupil, it is often the case that the work prepared is of equal value to others in the class. Singling out pupils for treatment that is different may simply draw attention to their difficulties and exacerbate the discrimination, which comes with a focus upon perceived deficiencies. The term (SEN) can easily become pejorative. If it focuses upon the learning difficulties of the individual pupil, this may mean that pupils' strengths, personality, interests or abilities become secondary to the challenges that they face in learning. All teachers must ensure that they look beyond the simplistic use of labels to see pupils as individuals who, in common with all others, have needs (Norwich,

1996), and ensure that they are part of a community of learners sharing in the experiences of a whole class.

Teacher expectations are inevitably coloured by their previous experiences of teaching pupils. They are also subject to the influences of stereotyping and the mythologies and folklore of the staffroom. Pupils with SEN are generally regarded as presenting a challenge to the management and pedagogical skills of the teacher (Rose, 2001). It is certainly true to say that many pupils with SEN require particular interventions, in some instances, specialist resources or teaching approaches and additional attention to planning, in order to ensure that they receive effective access to learning. However, the overgeneralisation of pupil needs on the basis of a special needs label is not helpful to teachers attempting to provide effective learning opportunities. For example, whilst you may have had experience of teaching a pupil with a recognised diagnosis, such as autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) or attention-deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), this is not an indication that the next pupil encountered with such a label will learn, behave or react in the same way as the first such individual. In addition, there are specific teaching approaches that have proven effective with some pupils who have received specific diagnoses. For example, 'structured teaching' (Schopler et al., 1995) and 'social stories' (Gray, 1998) are two methods often cited as efficacious in the education of pupils with ASD. It would be erroneous to suggest that these approaches, having worked with some pupils with ASD, will therefore be effective with all pupils who have been subject to this diagnosis. Similarly, it is a narrow interpretation of teaching to suggest that these teaching methods, having been developed for use with pupils with ASD, may not have benefits for other learners who do not have this label. You will need to develop an approach to teaching that is receptive to new ideas and techniques. However, you will also need to consider these in a more critical manner that looks beyond the narrow application for which they have often been designed. Teaching systems developed to address a specific population may be transferable for use with other learners, but teachers looking for a ready-made, off-the-shelf system that will meet the challenges of teaching are likely to be disappointed.

As a teacher who is new to the profession, whilst needing to be aware of the many benefits of learning from more experienced colleagues, you will also need to be wary of the teacher who is quick to forecast difficulties. Warnings of family traits – *'this pupil will give you grief, I taught his elder brother and the whole family is nothing but trouble* – or stereotypic views of individuals – *all pupils with Down's syndrome are stubborn and difficult in class*, are both discriminatory and unfounded. All pupils, regardless of need and ability, exhibit personal learning traits and behaviours, that single them out as individuals. Whilst much is known about the likely challenges faced by pupils with specific diagnoses such as ASD or Down's syndrome, each will be characterised by individuality as a learner. Predictions based upon stereotypes are responsible for the self-fulfilling prophecies that result in low

expectations, and underachievement. As you develop your skills as a professional, you must gain the confidence to make your own assessments of the learning needs of individuals, and to avoid being influenced by those who perceive pupils as 'types' rather than individual learners.

Changing patterns of need and provision

The majority of pupils with SEN are educated in mainstream schools. This has always been the situation, and whilst a small percentage of the overall population of pupils with SEN receive their education in segregated special provision, teachers have always accepted that they will have pupils in their class who present difficulties with learning. However, it is possible to observe some changes in the population of mainstream classrooms, as a result of both societal changes and the implementation of legislation. These changes mean that teachers are at times likely to encounter pupils with more complex needs in their classrooms than might have been the case 15 or 20 years ago. These influences upon change are likely to persist and are therefore worthy of some further consideration.

Advances in obstetric practice mean that many children who in previous years would have had little chance of surviving to school age are now entering schools. Whilst this improvement in life chances for these pupils should be welcomed, a significant number of such children are likely to exhibit a range of learning needs. At the same time, there appears to be a significant increase in the incident of specific disorders, such as ASD and ADHD, in many schools. This change in demographics is beyond the control of teachers and therefore should concern you only in respect of ensuring that you develop a range of teaching strategies suitable to meet the complex needs of a diverse school population. The promotion of a more inclusive education system must be welcomed for the opportunities that are being afforded to pupils who in previous years might have been denied effective teaching or the chance to interact with their peers. There is now an increased imperative for all teachers to ensure that they develop their professional skills, knowledge and understanding in a way that enhances the learning opportunities for all pupils.

In recent years, the training of teachers has become a largely technocratic process more concerned with a focus upon procedure and providing fundamental professional skills than on encouraging new teachers to reflect upon processes of teaching and learning (Garner, 2001). Teaching is a challenging profession and requires that you develop a wide range of skills in managing your classroom. However, in order to develop optimum effectiveness, you need to acquire the ability to interrogate your own practice, analyse its effectiveness, in relation to a wide range of pupil needs, and adjust your teaching in order to address these. Such a professional approach should be founded upon a recognition that learning to be an effective teacher is a challenging mis-

sion which requires continuous updating of knowledge and a willingness to apply this new learning to a wide range of teaching situations. In addition, it demands that you challenge your own thinking about how individual pupils learn and recognise that your responsibility to address the needs of all pupils in a class is most readily addressed through an analysis of pupil needs within a whole-class context. The demands of the curriculum and an inordinate concentration upon attainment against national expectations, whilst not always acknowledging other learning outcomes, can sometimes appear to militate against the conscientious teacher (Booth, Ainscow and Dyson, 1997). The most effective teachers rise to this challenge and are able to ensure that the individuality of learners is addressed whilst maintaining an overview of whole classes of pupils. In some schools, pupils who have been labelled as having SEN are regarded as a threat to the ability of teachers to maintain high academic standards and achieve the desired learning outcomes. However, the most effective teachers often find that by planning to address the needs of these pupils they devise approaches which are not only successful for the targeted individual, but also have a positive impact upon other learners in the class.

Emerging ideas of service delivery

Whilst inclusion has quite rightly led to a reappraisal of the ways in which mainstream primary schools address the education of pupils described as having SEN, most local authorities continue to maintain some specialist provision. Special schools have long played a major role in addressing the needs of those pupils deemed to have the most complex learning needs (Mittler, 2000). However, it is now largely accepted that pupils should be assigned a special school placement only when it is clear that mainstream schools are unable to meet their learning needs. Recent legislation and advisory documentation (DfEE, 1997, DfES, 2003a; OfSTED, 2004) has called for greater collaboration between mainstream and special schools. In some instances, this has led to formal partnerships being established between mainstream and special schools. Often, such partnerships have been designed either to aid the transition of pupils from special into mainstream schools (Rose and Coles, 2002), or to ensure that teachers benefit from the expertise of teachers who have an established commitment to working with pupils with SEN (McLeod, 2001). However, teachers in mainstream schools may also be able to learn from some of the approaches to teaching or about the creation of learning environments more commonly associated with teaching in a special school. Pupils with SEN have at times led teachers to reconsider their teaching strategies. This in turn has encouraged the introduction of specific approaches that have enabled curriculum access where previously pupils have been unable to participate effectively in learning. Examples of this include the introduction of structured teaching, as advocated by the TEACCH programme, which has supported

teachers of pupils with ASD in gaining curriculum access (Mesibov and Howley, 2003), or the use of symbols or other approaches to augmentative communication, which has allowed pupils with communication difficulties to participate (Latham and Miles, 2001).

As a teacher working in primary school, you should become familiar with some of the approaches that have become common practice in special provision. Often, teachers working in special schools or units have had to adjust their practices and devise strategies to ensure access to learning or increased participation. It is certainly true that many of these strategies will not easily transfer to a mainstream classroom without modification. It is equally clear that, where teachers have been prepared to make adaptations, either to their own teaching, or to the classroom environment, this has had benefits for learners who have otherwise struggled. As mainstream and special schools begin to work more closely together, opportunities for sharing ideas about effective teaching and learning are likely to emerge. The movement of practices between phases of school provision is likely to prove beneficial, but only where innovative teachers demonstrate a willingness to engage in debate about the implementation and efficacy of new ideas, and to make changes in their own practice. For many teachers, such a challenge will be welcomed as they maintain a focus upon the needs of all learners in their classrooms. For others, the demands made by pupils with SEN and the suggestion that changes in practice may be necessary could be regarded as threatening. Communication between teachers and the provision of effective support networks which encourage reflective classroom enquiry and enable a sharing of ideas are essential if the needs of a complex school population are to be addressed.

An emerging model of schooling in which partnership between mainstream and special provision plays a key role will not only depend upon the policy decisions of local authorities, but will also require the enthusiasm of individual teachers, such as you, who are prepared to assess continually their own skills and understanding. Recent moves toward establishing a more interdisciplinary approach to the management of children under the *Every Child Matters* (2003) agenda should provide increased opportunities for developing effective support networks for all children. It should also encourage teachers to play a leading role in enabling a change in current concepts of special educational needs. To date, this concept has tended to focus upon perceived pupil learning deficits and has encouraged a belief that pupils labelled as 'special' are in some way making additional demands upon schools. The agenda of *Every Child Matters* requires that all agencies that are concerned for the welfare of children, including schools, refocus their attention to ensure that needs are addressed under the following five imperatives:

- Be healthy.
- Stay safe.

- Enjoy and achieve.
- Make a positive contribution.
- Achieve economic well-being.

These five headings apply to all pupils and do not distinguish whether individuals are labelled as able, or have learning difficulties or disability. Schools must consider how they provide a learning environment and create an ethos, that encourages each of these five factors. The emphasis here is as much about pupil well-being as it is about academic outcomes or attainment of preordained targets. This is not to suggest that these indicators will not remain important. Indeed, it may justifiably be argued that making a positive contribution to society and achieving economic well-being is most readily achieved when pupils have attained a higher level of academic knowledge and understanding. However, a commitment to focusing upon 'the whole child', as required under this critical legislation, should enable teachers and schools to develop policies and practices that increasingly celebrate the diversity of needs and abilities within a school population. Lumsden (2005) has highlighted many of the challenges which inter-agency working will bring to professionals who are committed to enhancing the opportunities of learners. She emphasises the need for all concerned to develop an understanding of professional roles based upon respect and reciprocity, and suggests that this will be achieved only when effective lines of communication between you as a teacher and the other key players in your pupils' lives are opened and maintained. Your attitude to other non-teaching professional colleagues will greatly influence the effectiveness of the support provided to pupils.

These are exciting times to be a teacher in our schools. However, we are also in an era where expectations and demands change quickly, and teachers are required to respond appropriately and in the best interest of all pupils. Concepts that have been long established, such as SEN, are being increasingly challenged, as our understanding increases and our expectation rises. This change should be welcomed, particularly where it influences practice for improvements in the lives of pupils. However, as with all change, a successful outcome for pupils will depend upon a teaching profession that maintains a positive outlook for all pupils and is prepared to be innovative and committed to a search for the most effective means of ensuring that all pupils learn.

Questions and issues for reflection

- To what extent does the labelling of pupils as having SEN affect my expectations of their performance?
- How aware am I of specialist teaching approaches that may enable pupils in my class to achieve greater access to learning?
- What are the factors which currently influence the ways in which I view the learning potential of my pupils?

Conclusion

All teachers, regardless of their experience and expertise face daily challenges from pupils who appear not to respond to their usual teaching approaches. One of the most interesting aspects of being a teacher is that new challenges appear all the time, and that this requires tenacity and professionalism in order to be successful. As a new teacher you will soon realise the need to review continually your own work, and that the benefits of gaining new understanding and knowledge are a critical aspect of your professionalism. On too many occasions in the past, pupils described as having SEN have been regarded as being a problem. Sadly, you will often hear your professional peers referring to some of the pupils in their classes in negative terms. The act of teaching cannot be divorced from human rights issues and must begin with a commitment on your part to respect all of the pupils in your class and try to see the world from their set of experiences. This is a difficult thing to ask of any teacher, but the efforts which you make to understand the lives of the pupils in your class will provide benefits in terms of your appreciation of the challenges which they face and may enable you to further your empathy with those who experience difficulties with learning. Such pupils are less of a source of difficulty than is our inability to understand how we can develop our own teaching skills and understanding in order to include them effectively in our classrooms. The teaching profession is blessed with having many thousands of committed professionals who continue to strive to learn and understand more about how we can improve the lives and enhance the learning opportunities for all pupils. Your commitment to this cause can add significantly to our knowledge of how better to address the needs of pupils who have often found themselves marginalised within our schools.