

Inclusion or Special Educational Needs? Uncertainty in the 21st Century

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Chapter Summary

This chapter explores the ongoing uncertainty that pervades how we think about special educational needs, and how different perspectives on inclusion interpenetrate with views on different models of pre and post service teacher education in relation to special educational needs. This is illustrated by a casestudy of working with a child with a diagnosis of Dyspraxia in the classroom.

The chapter then goes on to review the recent history of teacher education in relation to special educational needs in the UK and USA. In this context, there follows a discussion on whether there is a special pedagogy for special educational needs, and what implications this has for the work of student teachers and teachers in general. A detailed critique of the work of Lewis and Norwich (2005), currently influential in pre service teacher education in the UK, concludes that the delineation between special knowledge and special pedagogy is a false and even dangerous dichotomy.

Key questions for reflection 1

How can we conceptualize the terms inclusion and special educational needs?

How should we balance theoretical knowledge about particular categories with experiential knowledge of the child?

Is uncertainty when working with children with special educational needs a good or bad thing?

Introductory example

The classroom door opens. The children and teacher enter. The activities of school life begin. Teacher and child both operate in the context of a shared primary task, that of learning, which is implicitly created by and charged to them by the expectations of parents, society and for teachers, their own sense of responsibility and vocation.

The teacher in a primary school is faced with the challenge of achieving this task with thirty children, each of them a *complex individual*, although often the teacher's experience of them is as part of a group. The children also have the difficult challenge of finding their place in a group of their peers, working out how to relate to the adult leader of the group and engaging in the task of

learning. In most such class groups in schools, this task of learning seems to be more difficult for some children than for others. There seem to be barriers, whether internally or externally created, to their achieving the smoother progress that some children appear to achieve.

Here I present reflections from my time as a class teacher working with one child Dougie, in a Year 4 class (8-9 years old) in a mainstream school. Dougie was thought to have a diagnosis of dyspraxia, and in my perception had difficulties with the task of learning that was presented to them in the context of our classroom, when compared to many of his classmates and I was confronted with the daily challenge of trying to work out how to help him with that learning. Accordingly, I searched for ways to deal with his problems, including seeking advice from other professionals, particularly the school's Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO). However, much of the time, I just felt uncertain as to what was the best thing to do for him.

Being uncertain: Working with Dougie

Dougie had problems with writing and physical coordination, sometimes known as dyspraxia, and he had had this diagnosis formally for some time. He presented from the beginning of the year as an able, articulate child, but one who found it very difficult to express his ideas and thoughts in written form. Dougie showed considerable difficulty with spelling, handwriting, and the general process of writing, often getting 'stuck' when asked to write. On meeting with Dougie's parents shortly after he started at the school, Dougie's mum, when asked about his social relationships, commented 'Oh, Dougie doesn't do friends'. Dougie, over the course of the year, found it hard to fit in with the other children in class and tended to be quite intellectual, being interested in a whole range of subjects and having a wide ranging general knowledge compared to the rest of the class. He found it hard to interact with the other children, and had a tendency to irritate them in an almost deliberate way, pinching them or poking them or taking their pencil or book. At the time it seemed to me that Dougie did this as a way of starting a relationship with them, his actions having a playful quality to them, but the other children tended, unsurprisingly, to get annoyed by him and found him a "pain" to be around.

In the following vignette, I detail Dougie's involvement in a fight with another child and his interactions with me.

Dougie had had a fight with another boy, Jordan, in the after school football club the day before. Jordan's mother had informed me about this at the start of the new day and I had spoken to the two boys about it. It seems to have started over nothing serious, Jordan had pushed Dougie after he kicked the ball at him, and Dougie had lost his temper. I hadn't seen any evidence of this 'losing temper' by Dougie in class before this. In the afternoon we had a PE lesson and some of the children played a game of football. Perhaps not surprisingly, Dougie and Jordan ended up having another altercation. It happened rather quickly, and I wasn't quite sure what had caused it. Anyhow, Dougie was shouting at Jordan. He sounded very angry, and was almost screaming, he seemed quite different from his normal persona, his

usually playful, laconic, lazy self in class. This was scary – I was wondering what was going to happen next – I aimed to stay calm, to try and contain his obvious anger and frustration, but as usual in such situations of displayed anger, worrying whether I would be able to? ‘Try and calm down, Dougie’

Dougie did not respond to this (or did he?) and ran off to hide, curled up in the corner of the small entrance porch that led in to the main building. I went over to him and crouched down next to him.

‘Dougie, what’s wrong?’

‘There’s no use in getting yourself all upset like this.’

Dougie’s response was, ‘Go away, Go away, leave me alone,’ said in a hysterical, very pained way. I felt it was important to show him that I was going to try and stay and help him, and said, ‘I’m not going to go away. I want to try and help you.’

Dougie kept on repeating, ‘Go away, go away...’ oblivious to anything I was saying.

I felt somewhat at a loss as to what to do, wishing someone else would come and along and help who Dougie was not going to tell to go away. I decided to leave him for a while and went back to the rest of my class to see how they were getting on. Five minutes later Dougie came back over to the main group, looking a bit calmer and a bit sheepish. He sat on the side. I let him sit there until the end of the lesson. When the lesson had ended I asked him if he was feeling better. He said that he was. We discussed what the problem had been and he explained how Jordan had tackled him for the ball (it seems fairly), but how he had got angry and pushed him. I said that I could see that he had felt angry but that he could not just run off when he felt upset. He nodded. We went back to class and Dougie sat in his seat quietly, although he seemed less than present. I was busy with the rest of the class until home time. The next time that I had ten minutes (the morning of the next day at break) I took Dougie aside and discussed with him how he was feeling about the other children in class. Did he want to be friends with any of them? He mentioned a few names. I asked him if he had tried inviting them over to his house? He said that he had with Michael, but that it had not worked out and that they had just ended up fighting. I suggested to him that perhaps sometimes he tries to be friends with the other children by ‘winding them up’ and perhaps this doesn’t really work. He just looked blankly at me – not in a way that he hadn’t heard me, but rather that he was blocking out this line of thought – his face looked quite hard set. He had done this a few times in the past – I felt exasperated. I could not get through to him, even though in normal class interactions I have a good relationship with him. He seemed unwilling to hear, unable or unwilling to escape from the pattern of rejection and isolation that he found himself in, even though he clearly wants to be engaged with his classmates on some level. I gave up and sent him back out to play.

As in a number of other interactions over the year with Dougie, the vignette above shows how uncertain and sometimes exasperated I was at times when working with him. There was something incongruous about him. On the one

had he would engage you in this almost adult way about topics that interested him, yet would dissolve at times into inexplicable non-communication. As well, as can be seen in the first part of the vignette, when he curled himself up into a ball, it was evident that he was very upset and was suffering. I thought that this was linked in some way to his dyspraxia, but this did not in itself help me to get a purchase on Dougie - there were no concrete cues to hold on to.

The Task of Learning

Dougie had very good maths skills and was verbally very able, but found the mechanics and process of writing difficult and had very poor spelling. He enjoyed using computers and was slowly developing the ability to type. With writing, he sometimes put lots of effort in to it, sadly with usually poor results, but sometimes would not be bothered to try at all. As I noted, Dougie's general knowledge was very good, he would often talk about things precociously, discussing technology using quite advanced terms. When he spoke to his peers about things like this, he would often do so in something of an adult way, sometimes going over their heads. He didn't seem to be on the same wavelength as his peers. Discussions with the SENCO during the year led us to devise a typical school programme for him. We were though rather unsure of how to help him, however based on what we knew, we devised an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for Dougie. I reproduce one of the targets from the IEP here, which had as its focus increasing attention to writing tasks:

Target to Be Achieved	Achievement Criteria	Possible Techniques	Possible Strategies	Ideas to Support Strategies
To complete tasks within time set	Task observed to be completed within time set on at least 5 occasions	Achievable tasks set Use of a Timer Record Chart Praise/Reward for Achievement	Praise/Reward Write amount of work expected at start of task	Encourage Dougie to fully focus on task

We also worked on strategies to improve his self esteem and later in the year, other ideas to help him with writing, such as using the computer for typing. We also implemented a positive behaviour strategy, where Dougie was given reward points at the end of the week, designed to encourage him to see when he had achieved things and to hopefully make him reflect on his tendency to lose his temper and have outbursts. This blend of a cognitive model of attributions (i.e. self esteem) and behavioural extrinsic motivators was typical of many of the programmes that we would devise in school for children with learning difficulties and indeed they did have some effect on Dougie. One notable example occurred when the class had been working for about a month on individual research projects. I had been encouraging him to increase his use of computers in various aspects of his work, as he seemed to show a real interest in them and it made the process of producing work much easier for him when compared to writing by hand. Dougie decided to present his research project using a PowerPoint presentation. This was something

that at the time was outside of the capability level of most of the other children and they were very impressed by his use of the technology when he made this presentation. I remember being struck by a subtle change that came over him and as well his relation to the group after he made this presentation. He seemed somehow more confident, and the other children also seemed to treat him differently. No longer was he just someone who annoyed them or said things they did not understand, but he was now, even if only on occasion, someone who had powerful things to do and say to them, something in fact to contribute to the group's primary task.

Reflecting on Dougie

When you are in the midst of the activity of teaching, of course, you don't often have the luxury or ability to stop and reflect on what influences are extant in your work, yet reflecting now, it is clear that there were a number of theoretical approaches that were at play in my mind and in the minds of other adults working in the school, when thinking about children such as Dougie. They came to be present in our minds from a range of sources – our training, our perception of government policies, influences from our own time as children in school, and from the media. From these sources we had also absorbed ideas about specific conditions - dyspraxia, Asperger's, dyslexia etc., and had in our minds a set of thoughts, developed to a greater or lesser extent, about what learning was like for children who came under those categories. At the same time, the knowledge I gained about Dougie, through my intersubjective relationship, even if imperfectly, about Dougie's needs, wants, desires – about him as a person, was also of significance when I made decisions, often in the moment, about how to work with him. The same of course was true for the other children in the class.

This tension about what we might term theoretical versus tacit knowledge, is one that looms large in debates about education and pedagogy in general. However, it is has particular significance when we consider the context of special educational needs. This is for two reasons. Firstly, as I alluded to when discussing Dougie, the psychological and the medical have a heavy influence in the discourse of the classroom. When we use phrases like 'Dougie has a diagnosis of dyspraxia' we inescapably admit a scientific lens on the human subject, with all the inherent dangers of applying labels to individuals. Many, of course, including as you will see myself, argue, in contrast to Barton (1988) that the potential benefits of the scientific lens outweigh the dangers (not that we should ignore these), and that we in fact do children a disservice by ignoring its potent role. In other words, the place of theoretical knowledge in special education is highly contested.

The second reason, which is in some ways conceptually aligned to the first, is that there is an ongoing debate, representing if you like the two polarities of special education and inclusive education, as to whether there is in fact any special pedagogy for special education? Those at the inclusive education pole argue that there is not and what matters is the attitudes and dispositions that teachers, such as a commitment to equality, high expectations for all children, and an ability to consider the individual needs of each child. Of course, this is

something of a false dichotomy and those at my putative special education pole would not (at least in public) disagree with any of these aims. What is at stake though is the balance, and it is here that the two reasons I put forward interpenetrate, because in the end they both turn on the weight we place on sociological versus psychological conceptualizations of special educational needs. How you balance them on the scale of both national policy and local practice (including the practice of the individual teacher in the individual classroom), determines answers to questions such as what should the balance be between special and mainstream school provision and how best should we prepare teachers for working with children with special educational needs. This second question will now be considered

Debates in preparing teachers for working with children with special educational needs

Key question for reflection 2

What does the term pedagogy mean?

Is there a special pedagogy for special education?

There are significant theoretical tensions, between sociological and psychological positions, and on the balance between a focus on theoretical as opposed to tacit knowledge. Such tensions have been amply reflected in trends in policy development in relation to both service provision for and teacher training in relation to children with special educational needs. In England, the ideological move towards inclusion heralded by the influential Warnock report (Warnock, 1978) and to a significant extent supported by New Labour, has to some extent been reversed by the Conservative-Liberal coalition government since 2010. Their reversal of New Labour's programme of special school closures is a case in point. The Children and Families Act (Department for Education, 2014) has also heralded greater emphasis on the role of specialist skills and knowledge for teachers and other care professionals working with children with SEN. In the USA, although there is a much more clearly embedded tradition of specialist training for special educators, since the passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 (Department of Education 1997), there has also been growing debate about mainstreaming (Kavale, 2002) and the extent to which specialist knowledge, restricted to special education teachers, is the best way to achieve good outcomes across different groups of children (Brownell et al 2005; Jones & West, 2009). This policy question is linked to an ongoing debate as to whether developing specific understanding about particular diagnostic categories and associated specific teaching strategies does makes teachers more effective practitioners. As noted, there is often an implicit view, from authors writing from a sociological perspective, that professional development which promotes an overall positive disposition and attitude towards inclusion is far more important than specific knowledge about specific conditions (see for example Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Leatherman &

Niemeyer, 2005). Lewis & Norwich (2005) writing from such a perspective, reviewed teacher effectiveness studies to consider whether or not there is a specific SEN pedagogy. In their influential writing, they conclude in quite strong terms that in most cases there is not. Children may need more repetition, over learning or attention to detail, but they characterize this as a change in emphasis, not a qualitatively different pedagogy. Thus they argue that there is no special pedagogy for special education.

Lewis and Norwich's work, following on from Barton (1988) as well as importantly Oliver (1990) in disability studies, has led to the dominance of a concept of inclusive teaching in which there is much less emphasis on knowledge of differing diagnostic categories, and much greater emphasis on an inclusive pedagogy (see for example Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011). This reduces barriers and encourages a diversity of learning strategies tailored to individual needs (i.e. the two poles of inclusive versus special education). Others have disagreed with this balance between the two poles. Osler and Osler (2002) presented data to indicate that particularly for some impairments, the level of understanding about those conditions and what implications they can have for teaching strategies makes a significant difference to the effectiveness of the teacher in meeting the needs of those children. Wedell (2008) drawing on government statistics on academic outcomes for children with SEN argues that student teachers in England and Wales are generally unprepared for meeting the needs of those with SEN and concludes that emphasis in teacher education on subject knowledge rather than on child development and the psychology of learning meant that teachers were not well equipped for supporting children with SEN. In other words, understanding specifically how children with SEN differ from typical development and an understanding of particular approaches to learning when development does vary is important. This builds on earlier concerns identified by Garner (1996a) who reported on the levels of dissatisfaction with training provider teaching in this area, and (Garner 1996b) the lack of relative emphasis to special educational needs given by training providers in the UK. In fact, Hodkinson (2009) identifies this tendency towards dissatisfaction as a historical trend going back to the 1960s.

The debate about the balance between theoretical and tacit knowledge in the work of teachers working with children with special educational needs, and in their training, is very much a live and contentious one.

Teacher Education and Special Educational Needs

It is important to highlight the historical differences between the training approach taken in the UK as compared to other countries. The USA, as well as many European countries, have a tradition of specialist initial teacher training for SEN teachers, who would in the past go on to teach in specialist provisions for children with SEN, although there is an increasing trend for such teachers to start and continue their careers in mainstream settings as well (Hegarty, 1998; Hodkinson, 2009). In contrast, there has never been any established tradition of specialist education for teachers of SEN, at least in initial teacher training, in the UK (Hodkinson, 2009), although the reasons for

this are not very clear. It could be that since 1980, UK education policy has been very heavily influenced by Barton's sociological discourse on special education although it is also possible that the relatively low levels of funding for initial teacher training in the UK may be equally implicated. Whatever the historical forces at play, the debate between the inclusive education and special education poles (or the sociological versus psychological positions on special needs) is alive and well in relation to policy on teacher education. In particular, there currently is concern amongst UK policy makers that in initial teacher training in the UK there is not enough emphasis on SEN, which although it is a gross generalization mirrors, as I have described, something of an opposite trend in the USA . Particularly influential in this regard has been the report by the UK House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee (2006) which undertook an in-depth review of SEN provision in schools, and received representations from a range of stakeholders, including teachers, parents, other professionals and special interest groups. The Committee concluded that there was a lack of emphasis on training in SEN in both initial teacher education and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) frameworks and recommended that "SEN training should become a core, compulsory part of initial teacher training for all teachers" (p.70). No doubt partly in response to this report, and other policy reports with similar conclusions such as the Lamb Enquiry (DCSF, 2009) government policy in the UK since 2008 has placed more emphasis recently on special educational needs training for teachers, with a range of albeit patchily implemented initiatives. These include a national training programme for Special Educational Needs Coordinators (Training and Development Agency for Schools, 2010) and a proposed greater emphasis on SEN in initial teacher training in the Children and Families Act (Department for Education, 2014). The debate about theoretical versus attitude/tacit knowledge is also active, specifically with regards to how teachers should be prepared for working with children with in specific diagnostic categories, such as autism. Simpson (2004) identifies a trend in the US towards non-categorical and cross-categorical special education initial teacher education programmes, that is to say that many training providers are moving towards programmes which focus on SEN in general, without a specific focus on any one diagnostic category, although when compared to the UK, US programmes still have much more specific content on particular diagnostic categories (Barnhill et al. 2010).

Special Pedagogy?

Lewis and Norwich (2005) strongly argued that there was no such thing. If they are right, then the answer to the debates between the inclusive education pole and the special education pole in relation to teacher education seems quite clear. Teachers need to know about broad principles of inclusive pedagogy, but knowing clear, hard facts about autism or Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder AD(H)D or dyspraxia is not a priority. It would not have helped me when working with Dougie to know more about dyspraxia. Well, in thinking about this argument, I would like to explore Lewis and Norwich's work, which has been influential certainly in the UK, in a bit more depth.

In *Special Teaching for Special Children*, Lewis and Norwich (2005) differentiate between what they term the general differences and unique differences positions on special educational needs *pedagogy* (my italics). They write that,

...general differences position pedagogy is informed by needs that are specific or distinctive to a group that shares common characteristics. In this position the specific needs of a sub-group of those with disabilities and difficulties are in the foreground; needs that are common to all and unique to individuals, though important, are more in the background...

(2005, p.3)

In contrast, the unique differences position is set out as:

...pedagogic decisions and strategies are informed only by common and individual needs. Unique differences are in the foreground, with common pedagogic needs more in the background. General specific needs are not recognized. This is a position which assumes that while all learners are in one general sense the same, they are also all different. This means that particular pedagogic strategies are relevant or effective for all pupils, irrespective of social background, ethnicity, gender and disability. Differences between individuals are accommodated within this position, not in distinct groups or sub-groups, but in terms of the uniqueness of individual needs and their dependence on the social context. Yet, for this to be so, common pedagogic needs have to be considered in terms of principles that are general and flexible enough to enable wide individual variations to be possible within a common framework

(2005, p.4)

This could be regarded a useful encapsulation of the special education versus inclusive education polarity. The book is then structured as an investigation as to whether, for any specific group, there is in fact, any evidence that there is a general differences pedagogy which is effective. A number of individual chapters are then contributed, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, by experts in various diagnostic categories, including autism, dyslexia, moderate learning difficulties and so on. Finally, the authors conclude, based on this survey, that with the exception of specialist services for hearing and visual impairment, there is no good evidence for the existence or effectiveness of a 'general differences' pedagogy and services for children with special educational needs would be more effective if we consigned it to history, and they conclude that "the traditional special needs categories used in the UK, and internationally, have limited usefulness, in the context of planning or monitoring, teaching and learning in most areas." (2005, p.220) The authors also make a very clear distinction between knowledge and pedagogy. There is, they argue, clearly particular knowledge about specific categories of need, but no special pedagogy. It is on this distinction that I want to focus.

Pedagogy is a term that is often used within academic and educational debates, and in many courses of initial teacher education, but it is quite hard to pin down what it means. One position is that it is something akin to a science of teaching. Shulman (1987) argues that we need to be able to develop schema of how effective teachers work with children. This could be considered a cognitive account. In contrast, another position, which could be termed romantic or constructionist, sometimes associated with a Piagetian perspective, is that pedagogy is the process of child rearing and development that leads to the formation of an active choosing individual (see Hamilton, 1999) where the teacher's role is that of a guide. There are also feminist and sociological critiques of these positions, leading to alternative ideas of what pedagogy is. For example, Walkerdine (1984) rejects a scientific view of pedagogy, calling rather for its deconstruction so that we can lay bare the way in which societal inequalities are reproduced via practices in the classroom. Finally, and perhaps more dominantly in recent decades, there is the sociocultural position on what pedagogy means. In this perspective, the separation between what is learned and how it is learned is challenged. Activity, concept, and tools (including importantly language) are interdependent. Thus pedagogy is viewed as praxis where there is a dialectic relationship between theory and practice.

I wonder then, with such a contested term, which wraps around itself differential conceptualisations of learning, teaching and curriculum, what Lewis and Norwich (2005) mean when they aim to separate out pedagogy and knowledge in relation to special needs. In fact, I would argue that unless one takes a markedly cognitive view of what pedagogy is, it is quite hard to sustain such a split, and that raises the question of why the authors try so hard to maintain it.

This question is given further saliency when we look at the individual chapter contributions on the different diagnostic categories. In fact, in contrast to the overall conclusion that there is no evidence for a 'general differences' position, for a specialist pedagogy, it is actually the case that the individual contributions, in terms of the evidence presented, give a different picture. For example, Porter (2005) on Severe Learning Difficulties, gives a review of a number of studies on working memory, and concludes that:

...In considering the implications of this research one needs to take into account familiarity of material and individual differences but we can hypothesize that individuals will respond better to visual material and small chunks of information especially when this is presented in auditory form and that they need to be helped to use strategies such as rehearsal...

(2005, p.56/57).

In Chapter 11 on Dyslexia, Read (2005) discusses a number of multisensory intervention programmes, focusing particularly on Walker's (2000) review, which concludes, according to Read, that:

...the student with dyslexia may need more input and a different structure of teaching from other children. It also presupposes that the teacher should be aware of (a) the factors associated with the acquisition of literacy, (b) the particular difficulties in literacy that can be noted in dyslexic children, (c) the principles of multisensory teaching, (d) the importance of selecting clear and coherent teaching aims and (e) an awareness of the important role-played by both pre-reading strategies and proofreading, as a post-writing strategy, in the teaching of students with dyslexia...

(2005, p.141)

Now Read (2005) notes the contested and sometimes uncertain nature of experimental studies in this area - a theme which runs through many of the chapter contributions. However, in both this case, and with Porter (2005), it seems quite clear that they are suggesting particular teaching strategies that relate to these particular groups of children, and which it is at least conceivable are different to strategies which might be considered for other children. In other words, they are proposing a special pedagogy,

I would argue that this dismissal of the possibility of a role for special approaches in special education, common amongst many theorists adopting an inclusive pedagogy stance, is heavily influenced by a Foucauldian critique of psychology, and we can trace the path of this influence through disability studies to inclusive education. Barton (1988) makes this history clear in his seminal 1988 paper. In this critique, when we turn the lens of science on the human subject, we forget that power and knowledge are mutually constitutive, and that what appears as the knowledge of science, actually has a history linked to inequities in power relations. In this critique, science's position of dominance is upended and it makes no sense to think of pedagogy as having a scientific component to it. This is, I would argue, one reason why in the literature on inclusive education, knowledge (i.e. science) and practice become split and seen as separate entities.

However, such a split has dangers. Firstly, science and psychology really can tell us things that we want to know. As we progress in to the 21st century the possibilities for developmental psychology and neuroscience to tell us really important things about human activity, and specifically about how different children might learn, is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Yes, we need to be careful in interpreting this science, and in some ways it is probably a healthy strategy to always engage in contesting its implications, but to suggest that it does not have implications for how we think about the human mind and its development is really unsupportable. Secondly, I very much agree with the socioculturalists that knowledge and practice need to be in constant conversation with one another. A view of pedagogy, as suggested by Lewis and Norwich, where they are split off in to different camps, fails to properly encapsulate the activity of teachers and children in the classroom. It is also important to note another danger inherent in the splitting of knowledge from pedagogy in relation to special needs. Lewis and Norwich (2005) argue that we do not need to know about special pedagogy, but that there is 'split off' knowledge about particular diagnostic categories which we might want to know about. However, this is a very fine grained argument, that

is easily open to misinterpretation. In particular, the message that teachers might receive is that they don't need to know anything about what science can tell us about diagnostic categories. This is not the message that Lewis and Norwich intend directly, but it might easily be the one that is communicated, particularly in an education system where a sociological discourse facilitates, at least for some, suspicion of the role of psychology in education.

Implications for Teacher Education

Key question for reflection 3

Should teachers be engaging with best practice evidence and research on diagnostic categories in special education?

How can they filter what they need to know from the mass of information available in the academy and on the web?

In Chapter 12 of *Special Teaching for Special Children*, Portwood (2005) considers Dyspraxia. She lists a number of recommendations, such as teaching specific handwriting strategies such as encouraging children to print or write letters consistently, using paper with widely spaced lines, and using a sloping surface for reading (2005, p.156). Portwood (2005) also notes that significant emotional difficulties can be associated with dyspraxia, and that the evidence for specific intervention programmes, for example those design to develop handwriting skills, is quite poor, and that some strategies relevant for children with dyspraxia may overlap with those of other children with particular learning styles.

Looking back on my earlier life as a classroom teacher, and specifically to my work with Dougie, I think that knowing more about dyspraxia would have helped me enormously in working with him. However, in saying this, I think it is important to be clear about where I disagree with Norwich and Lewis. I do agree with them that the sociological critique of special needs highlights real dangers associated with the process of categorisation in special needs and we need to guard against these. However, if in doing so we deny the place of psychology in education, then we rob our children of the chance to benefit from its very real fruits, which, as is argued here, is a serious abrogation of our responsibilities as adults and as teachers.

We need teachers who can make use of theoretical knowledge about diagnostic categories sensitively and carefully, wielding it in close 'conversation' with what they know about the individual child. As I have indicated, teacher training in the UK currently provides very poor provision in relation to special educational needs. We need, I think, to address this deficit; we need to prepare teachers to understand how they can construct a pedagogy for the individual children with special educational needs that they work with based on their personal knowledge of the child and

a clear understanding of what we usefully know about particular diagnostic categories. I am not saying that a diagnostic category tells us everything we need to know about a child, or even that it tells us most of what we need to know. I agree that individual differences, the individual personality, likes, dislikes, strengths and difficulties of a child (the agentic human subject that we meet in intersubjective encounter) are always likely to be what is most important. However, the risk with Lewis and Norwich's splitting of knowledge from pedagogy in special education is that we end up losing the knowledge altogether, and theoretical knowledge organised around diagnostic categories does have really important and useful things to tell us. It is this lesson that teachers, particularly those at the beginning of their careers, need to heed. Specialist knowledge about diagnostic categories in special education, including what we know about best practice approaches to teaching and learning, is important in making sure that teachers can do the best for the children in their classes affected by these conditions. It is not the only or event the most important thing that they need to know, but it is far from irrelevant and teachers need to engage with what science in its broad sense can tell us about how to work effectively with particular groups of children. Teacher educators, therefore, have a responsibility to make sure that teachers are prepared for the process of engaging with best practice evidence related to specific diagnostic categories. This is a process that should start in initial teacher education but continue as teachers progress through their careers.

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Teacher Education/Training Task

Think about one child in the classroom for whom you find it difficult to help them progress with their learning or development. This does not need to be a child with a specific label. On one day, try and observe this child more closely (you can do this even if you are teaching the whole class). At the end of the day, make brief notes on what you observed and make a list of questions that you have about them.

Consider whether additional theoretical knowledge help answer your questions?

Annotated further reading

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.

In this seminal text, Schön explores the relationship between theoretical and tacit knowledge in the work of professionals, and tries to give an answer to what goes on 'in the moment' when decisions are made about how to act

Jordan, R. (2008). Autistic spectrum disorders: a challenge and a model for inclusion in education. *British Journal of Special Education*, 35(1), 11–15.

In this article, Rita Jordan draws on her extensive experience of autism education, and explores the ways in which inclusion does and does not work for this particular group. Her analysis gives another perspective on whether there is or is not a special pedagogy for autism education.

European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012) *Teacher Education for Inclusion*. Brussels: EADSNE. Available online from: <https://www.european-agency.org/publications/ereports/te4i-profile/te4i-profile-of-inclusive-teachers>

This policy report explores different approaches to teacher education for special educational needs across Europe, and illustrates how different policy stances reflects some of the tensions between inclusion and special education considered in this article.