Teaching Strategies

For some or for all?[1]

This article is based on a keynote address delivered by **Dr Lani Florian** at the Learning for All: Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education Symposia, June 2006.

ABSTRACT

This article is based on a keynote address to the Learning for All Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education School-led Symposia, Palmerston North, Christchurch, Napier and Auckland, New Zealand, June 2006. It considers "special education" teaching strategies, and the extent to which they overlap with "mainstream practice", in order to answer the question of whether or not there is such a thing as a specialist pedagogy. Selected research on this topic is summarised, and the need to develop a notion of pedagogy that is inclusive of all learners is suggested.

Keywords

Effective practices, evidence based practice, inclusion, inclusive schools, pedagogy, special education, teaching strategies.

Teaching strategies: for some or for all?

What we do for all doesn't work for some but what we do for some supports all.

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Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Education, Special Education
Learning for All symposia
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INTRODUCTION

The New Zealand Ministry of Education defines special education as 'the provision of extra help, adapted programmes, learning environments, or specialised equipment or materials to support children and young people with their learning and help them participate in education'[2]. Other countries use similar definitions. In the United States, special education is 'specially designed instruction ... to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability' (USDOE, 1999, p.12, 425). In England, it is defined as 'educational provision which is additional to, or otherwise different from, the educational provision made generally for children of their age in schools maintained by the Local Education Authority, other than special schools, in the area' (§312 Education Act, 1996). Whether we use words "extra help", "adapted programmes", "specially designed instruction" or "additional" or "different" provision, there is a common understanding that special education involves something different from that which is on offer in mainstream schools. But what is special education and how do we know if it works?

This article focuses on "special education" teaching strategies, and the extent to which they overlap with "mainstream" strategies in order to answer questions about whether or not the teaching strategies found to be effective when teaching pupils with special educational needs are indeed different from those of mainstream education. The sections that follow briefly summarise some recent work on a range of relevant issues including: questions about whether there is a specialist pedagogy (for example, Lewis & Norwich, 2000; 2005), meta-analyses of research on meeting special educational needs (Kavale, 2007), a literature review on teaching strategies and approaches for pupils with special educational needs (Davis and Florian, 2004), and a study of teaching in inclusive secondary schools (Florian & Rouse, 2001).

PREVIOUS WORK ON SPECIALIST PEDAGAOGY

Researchers in England (Lewis & Norwich, 2000; 2005) have been interested in whether they could identify differences between learners by type of special educational need in order to link them to differentiated teaching strategies. Lewis and Norwich's (2000) literature review was organised by types of learning difficulties (low attainment, specific learning difficulties, moderate learning difficulties and severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties) and found that though the evidential base was problematic, owing in part to conflicting findings, the preponderance of the evidence did not support the notion that differences between learners could be matched to differentiated teaching. This finding was consistent with earlier work in the USA that investigated similar notions of aptitude-treatment interaction and diagnostic-prescriptive teaching (Keogh & McMillan, 1996; Ysseldyke, 2001).

As a result, Lewis and Norwich advanced the notion of a continuum of teaching or pedagogic approaches to replace the concept of a distinctive special education pedagogy as something "different from" that which is generally available. More recently (2005), they have updated this work by reviewing the evidence on teaching strategies for 14 areas of special educational needs including speech and language impairment, Down syndrome, specific learning difficulties (such as dyslexia, dyspraxia), emotional and behaviour difficulties, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder, sensory impairments (such as visual or hearing impairment, and multi-sensory impairment), profound and multiple learning difficulties, severe learning difficulties, moderate learning difficulties and low attainers.

[1] Parts of this article are adapted from Florian, L. (in press). Towards inclusive pedagogy. In P. Hick, R. Kershner and P. Farrell (Eds.). *Towards a psychology of inclusion.* London: Routledge Paul.

[2] Ministry of Education (2003). *Special Education Policy Guidelines.* Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.

In addition, they elaborated on the notion of a continuum of teaching approaches by suggesting that teaching strategies can be arranged along such a continuum from high to low intensity relative to their application as interventions.

META-ANALYSIS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PRACTICES

Where Lewis and Norwich found the state of existing research problematic, Kavale (2007) argues that the problem of equivocal evidence can be overcome by the use of meta-analysis, a statistical procedure that allows the results of many studies to be combined by quantifying the results of individual studies in a way that permits the results to be compared.

In recent years the efficacy of special education has been subject to a series of meta-analyses generally undertaken and based on research conducted in the USA. Kavale (2007) has reviewed the use of meta-analysis in answering questions about what works in special education. In his review Kavale shows how early beliefs about the altered learning functions or deficits of disabled children gave rise to a pedagogical emphasis on cognitive processes or process training (such as corrective perceptual-motor training and psycholinguistic training) which proved to be very modest in their effectiveness. He goes on to show how attempts to define what is special about special education based on deficit views of learners, have failed to show anything distinctive. Rather, it is only when research which investigates the teaching-learning process in general is 'interpreted' for special education 'by modifying the way in which instruction is delivered' that we find significant effect sizes (p. 212). In addition, pre-referral activities (modifications to teaching approaches and the use of alternative strategies) prior to referral for assessment for special education were found to have positive effects because, in Kavale's words, 'it is predicated in modification of *instructional* activities' (emphasis original, p. 214) as opposed to some presumed within-child deficit. Kavale argues that the efficacy of special education is owing to a change in emphasis from strategies that emphasised the remediation of learning deficits to those that focus on teaching and learning. When 'instructional techniques originating in general education were adapted to assist students with disabilities in acquiring and assimilating new knowledge, the efforts demonstrated significant success and much improved academic outcomes' (p. 12).

TEACHING STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES FOR PUPILS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS: A SCOPING STUDY

Recently, I co-directed a scoping study commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in England and Wales as part of their agenda to raise the achievement of pupils with special educational needs (SEN). The aim of the study was to examine the relevant published literature in order to 'map out and assess the effectiveness of the different approaches and strategies used to teach pupils with the full range of special educational needs' (Davis & Florian, 2004 p.7).

The review of literature that informed the scoping study was structured in terms of the four areas of need identified in the SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001); language and communication, cognition and learning, physical and sensory, and emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Although there was concern that organising the review in this way would fragment the findings doing so led us to conclude that:

> *certain teaching strategies and approaches are associated with, but not necessarily related directly to specific categories of SEN (such as autism, learning difficulty). However, the teaching strategies and approaches identified in the review were not sufficiently differentiated from those which are used to teach all children to justify a distinctive SEN pedagogy. It was clear that sound practices in teaching and learning in both mainstream and special education literatures were often informed by the same basic research, and that certain teaching strategies developed for one purpose could be effectively applied to other groups of children with different patterns of educational need (for example co-operative learning). This does not, however, diminish the importance of what might be construed as special education knowledge as an element of pedagogy applying to all learners.*

In other words, although the scoping study was initially structured in terms of areas of SEN it was clear from our reading of the literature that there was a considerable overlap between different areas of need in relation to different teaching approaches. When we searched the literature by teaching strategy we found many relevant reviews that covered all areas of need leading us to suggest that the areas of need are important elements of human development for all learners. Our view was that these elements interact in ways that produce individual differences that make it difficult to prescribe a course of action to remedy a particular problem. Thus, children with "complex needs" often require support to a degree which is beyond that typically required by their peer group. This support is called "special education". And while there is an important role for special or additional education support, such support does not depend on teaching strategies that are different from those that are available to all children.

TEACHING STRATEGIES IN INCLUSIVE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

There is limited research that has been carried out on pedagogy in inclusive classrooms and until recently much of this work tended to focus on the primary years. In an extensive review of the research on inclusive practice, McGregor and Vogelsberg (1998) reported only seven studies specifically focused on secondary school practice. While more recent work (for example Deshler, et. al., 2004) has begun to address this gap, a concern often expressed in the literature is that teachers in mainstream schools are not prepared or trained to work with pupils with special educational needs. This concern prompted our study of inclusive practice in English secondary schools (Florian & Rouse 2001).

This study was designed to investigate what happens in secondary schools when subject specialist teachers attempt to create the conditions for inclusive learning in their classrooms. We were interested in examining the extent to which classroom practice in the various subjects of the English national curriculum was consistent with that which is promoted as effective by the literature on inclusion.

A questionnaire was developed containing a list of 44 teaching strategies derived from a review of the literature carried out by Scott, Vitale & Masten (1998). The strategies were organised under the following broad headings: differentiation strategies; cooperative learning strategies; classroom management strategies and social skills. Teachers were asked to rate their familiarity with these strategies. They were also asked to rate the strategy as appropriate or inappropriate to the teaching of their subject. If teachers thought the strategy was appropriate they were asked to indicate if it was a teaching technique that they typically used or something additional that was used specifically to ensure the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. If they thought the strategy was inappropriate they were asked if this was because it was unhelpful or too difficult to manage. A glossary defining ambiguous terms was appended to the questionnaire.

Schools from a network of secondary schools around England that met regularly to share experiences and ideas about how to develop more inclusive practice were invited to participate in the study (further details of the network and the work of the schools can be found in Ainscow, 1999). Four schools volunteered to participate in the full study and a fifth agreed to administer the questionnaire. Nominations from senior staff and the special education needs coordinator (SENCO) at the four case study schools were used to identify subject specialist teachers considered skilled in including pupils designated as Special Education Needs (SEN) in their classes. Each teacher was observed for the equivalent of two full teaching days and participating teachers also kept inclusion journals for a period of five weeks. The journal guidelines asked the teachers to make one entry each day paying particular attention to their own thoughts and feelings about the commitment to inclusive practice, how subject area knowledge informs their teaching, how they account for individual differences, and "what works".

A total of 268 teachers completed the questionnaire for an overall response rate of 66%. With few exceptions, teachers overwhelmingly reported they were familiar with and used all of the strategies listed in the questionnaire. The most frequent response was that the teacher was very familiar with the strategy and used it, typically, with all pupils. Only two strategies, consult with pupil on preferred learning style and the use of learning support assistants for 1:1 teaching, were identified as being used specifically because a pupil was designated as having SEN. Teachers were evenly divided as to the use of team-teaching as a typical or additional strategy. Importantly, a number of teachers noted in written comments that they did not differentiate between teaching strategy and whether a pupil had a special educational need.

Overall, there were no apparent differences between schools with respect to teachers' knowledge about practice although teachers in schools with more experience in mixed ability teaching made more suggestions about what works. That they may not be able to engage in a practice is different from not knowing how to do it, and some teachers made this comment when filling out the questionnaire. Organisational arrangements and resource constraints were factors that determined whether certain strategies were used.

For instance, it would not be possible to make use of information and communication technology if the hardware was not available. Notably, teachers tended not to differentiate between types of students. Though they found the support of colleagues with specialist knowledge invaluable they did not view the pupil designation SEN as particularly helpful when thinking about teaching strategies.

Whether or not these findings would be replicated in other schools is not clear. Indeed many subject teachers may not recognise themselves or their practice in the above descriptions. What is important to note is that there were differences between subjects that need to be considered when thinking about how to include pupils who experience difficulties in learning in those subjects. It is not simply a matter of placement. Different subjects will make different demands on learners and teachers of those subjects will use different strategies in teaching the various subjects of the curriculum.

CONCLUSION

Though it is often argued that lack of knowledge on the part of mainstream classroom teachers, attributed to lack of training, is one of the main barriers to inclusion, careful consideration of the evidence on teaching practice and pedagogy in special education suggests that teachers do not lack knowledge of effective teaching stratgies. What they may not know is that the *label-treatment interaction* or *prescriptive-teaching* approach to individual differences in learning has not shown that interventions are differentially effective with different kinds of learners. Meta-analyses of "what works" in special education show that the teaching strategies used in mainstream education can be adapted to assist students identified as having SEN in learning.

Moreover, while many who have attempted to articulate what is "special" about special education often begin with a defence of teaching practices that have been shown to work with students identified as having disabilities (for example Cook & Schirmer, 2003), the strategies they identify also work with students who are not identified as having special educational needs. My own view is that it is the process of adaptation that defines the special education knowledge needed by teachers. This adaptation depends on a responsiveness to individual differences within the context of whole class teaching (Jordan & Stanovich, 1998) but it does not depend on the identification of SEN (Florian & Rouse, 2001). Rather, we need a notion of teaching theory that is inclusive of all learners.

To this end, a growing number of researchers are now suggesting that difficulties in learning might be reconceptualised as dilemmas for teaching. In this way difficulties in learning may be viewed not as problems within learners but as problems for teachers to solve (Hart, 1996; Clark, Dyson, Milward, & Robson, 1999; Ainscow, 1999). Such a view discourages teachers from seeing themselves as unprepared or not qualified to teach children who are identified as having special or additional needs because they experience difficulties in learning. Rather, teachers are empowered to work with their colleagues on adaptations that address the demands that different subjects, topics or tasks make on different learners.

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