

‘Harry Potter and the Paradox of the ‘Expert’’

Dominic Griffiths

In this article its author, Dominic Griffiths reflects upon the current cultural gap between those who locate themselves as working ‘on the inside’ of the world of ‘special educational needs’ and the ‘inclusion movement’ and those who might be describe as ‘mainstream classroom teachers’. Griffiths warns of the dangers of the dangers of ‘enculturation’ of the ‘insiders’ which can lead to communal visions of mainstream teachers as ‘barriers to inclusion’. Equally, from ‘outsider’ perspectives, the world of special and inclusive education may be perceived as ‘mysterious, hidden in a fog of arcane acronyms and populated by specialist ‘experts’. The author calls for a conscious demystification of this world and an active reaching out to and nurturing of mainstream colleagues without whom, he argues, the inclusion project cannot succeed

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Introduction

Reflecting upon last year’s Inclusive and Supportive Education Conference (ISEC) in Lisbon last Summer, there was much inspiration that one could take away from the event. ISEC represents a five-yearly chance for the world of special and inclusive education to meet, to network, to exchange research findings, to share professional and personal experiences of working in the field and to develop our thinking, both individually and together.

The conference’s 2015 theme of ‘Equity in Education’ located (rightly, in my opinion) the efforts to build inclusive education within the wider socio-political framework of social justice: a theme lucidly expanded upon by keynote speakers, Professor Mel Ainscow and Professor Roger Slee.

And yet, for me, as a delegate, over the days of the conference there grew a creeping sense of disquiet.

Let me try to explain. There were many really stimulating and useful presentations that got to grips with specific issues in developing inclusive practice 'in the field' and I have taken away many useful ideas to share with my students, but I could not help but notice the discourse of 'struggle' and 'the fight' a discourse that, it seems to me is too often littered with military metaphors and a position of 'conflict' that I worry might act as a potential blocker to the very aims that we seem to share. Whilst we can draw great intellectual, practical and indeed moral support from colleagues at an event such as ISEC, I do worry about the dangers of a form of 'enculturation' (Grusec and Hastings, 2007) that could distance us from our 'mainstream classroom' teaching colleagues.

I will share an example of this from the conference. On the last day of the conference I attended an 'Inclusive Teaching and Learning' workshop, hoping for our group to collaborate in sharing ideas on practice. Near the start of the workshop I noted that I felt that many 'mainstream' classroom teachers were positively disposed towards inclusive education but felt lacking in confidence in their own professional skills to facilitate inclusive pedagogy (e.g. Richards, 2010) and that attitudes are more positive when teachers have had a chance to access to initial or further training in supporting children with SEN (e.g. Boyle *et al*, 2012). I suggested that we needed to 'nurture' teachers in developing their confidence and competence in this respect. This comment was met with a sharp retort from another workshop member. 'It's not the teachers I'm interested in: it's the children'. This proved to be a turning point in the discussion, which then briefly descended into a swapping of anecdotes about how children were being 'sold short' by our obdurate mainstream colleagues. This, I feel, was a wasted opportunity for a group of highly committed professionals to address a key 'blocking' factor in the development of inclusive practice in mainstream schools, through the development of a plan to facilitate support to develop teachers' confidence, perhaps through training or collaborative action.

The 'Culture Gap'

It seems to me that there might be a number of factors underpinning the 'culture gap' between those working within the field of special and inclusive education and those in the 'mainstream'.

Firstly, it must be admitted that those trying to develop inclusive practice in schools have sometimes been met with passive or even outright opposition. Indeed in my own research findings there have been examples of less than positive attitudes, for example, the comment from a teaching assistant, who stated her belief that examination access arrangements not be offered to children with a record of poor behaviour (Griffiths and Woods, 2010) or the Special Needs Coordinator who resigned her post in frustration, as she felt strongly that there were forces in her school in the leadership team that were actively blocking the development of a more inclusive school as it might compromise the school's examination results data and school league table position (Griffiths and Dubsky, 2012) These types of attitudes and practices may have understandably contributed to an 'us and them' mindset, and this notion of 'struggle' and 'battling' on behalf of the children with SEN (e.g. Broomhead, 2013; Pearson *et al*, 2014) has, it seems to me, taken deep root in the thinking and culture of many colleagues working within special and inclusive education.

Linked to this is the documented 'enculturation' of those of us that have undertaken 'specialist' training. Woolhouse (2012), for example, found that teachers who had undertaken specialist dyslexia training subsequently located themselves less in a mainstream teachers' community of practice and more in a community of practice with other 'specialists', whilst perceiving these two communities as having potentially competing interests.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that specialist training *per se* is the problem, though the potential problems linked to such enculturation should not be underestimated, I would argue.

From the 'mainstream' perspective, there may also be a problem of perceptions of 'the specialist', not least the problem of the 'mystification' of the world of SEN. We have our specialist conferences, specialist methodologies (and, dare I say it, our specialist journals!) and our field of practice seems to be surrounded by a vast lexicon of acronyms (ADHD; SLI; SpLD; SLCN; ABA; EHC, etc), that could seem as arcane as Harry Potter's pseudo-Latin incantations when performing spells.

This may not help 'mainstream' practitioners' sense of professional empowerment, I would suggest.

Whilst our 'specialist' teaching methodologies might be perceived by the non-specialist as very different from mainstream practice, Lewis and Norwich (2005) have argued eloquently and persuasively that, for the most part, these seemingly 'separate pedagogies' are not as separate as they are sometimes perceived. To give an example from my own area of training teachers to develop literacy skills of learners with dyslexia, the methodology for teaching phonics emphasises a multisensory approach, and a structured, cumulative building of phonic knowledge with plenty of opportunities for over-learning (Kelly and Phillips, 2016); but it is still, at heart, phonics teaching; something that all mainstream primary practitioners are engaged with.

I was recently involved in some research, examining the wider impact on their professional settings of specialist dyslexia training of teaching assistants (TAs) (Griffiths and Kelly, 2016). Whilst results indicated changes in TAs' attitudes, understanding and individual practice, resulting in accelerated pupil progress, the wider impact of their training upon their school settings threw up some interesting and often contrasting results. On the one hand, many of these TAs had gained recognition as 'experts' in dyslexia and found themselves the 'go-to' person for colleagues seeking advice, even leading whole-school staff training. On the other hand, many TAs reported that their colleagues considered them to be withdrawing children from class to conduct individual 'specialist' programmes of literacy, of which those mainstream teachers felt they had no knowledge, so leaving the 'expert' TA to 'get on with it' and therefore not considering the possibilities of collaborating with the TA to follow-up children's new literacy learning in mainstream lessons.

A parallel example from my own experience was an interchange at an SEN conference in the North of England where a speaker at a presentation on the deployment of TAs was encouraging mainstream classroom and subject teachers to spend more time working directly with the children identified as having SEN, rather than always leaving them to be supported by a TA in lessons.

Reaction from some sections of the audience to this advice was less than positive. One delegate stood up and questioned indignantly why, when she had a specialist autism-trained TA working with her, would she not deploy that specialist to work with autistic children in her class. 'Because', replied

the speaker, 'if you always leave it to that TA, how on earth are *you* going to learn how to work with kids with autism?'

These are examples of what might be described as '*the paradox of the expert*'. The 'specialist' is there on the staff, but how s/he is perceived and deployed can either be an 'enabling' or 'blocking' factor, in terms of schools developing their inclusive practices, I would argue.

Ways Forward?

So what are the ways forward?

I believe, firstly, that those of us who are working in the field of special and inclusive education need to be proactive in demystifying the practices and pedagogies in our field. If Lewis and Norwich's (2005) contentions about SEN pedagogy not being so separate are correct, then we should be actively collaborating with mainstream colleagues to explore the continuities of practice between 'mainstream' and 'special' pedagogies and looking to exchange support ideas: and it is worth remembering that this should be a two-way process. I have learnt much over the years from mainstream colleagues about resources and classroom activities that have proved to 'SEN-friendly'. This is part of what Ainscow (2015) means when he talks about the need to 'move knowledge about' and is demonstrated 'at street level' in examples such as those highlighted in Devecchi and Rouse (2010).

Secondly, another vehicle for this demystification is through well-organised, accessible and properly facilitated short course training opportunities for teachers on aspects of SEN, such as those recently developed by the National Association for Special Educational Needs (NASEN, 2016), with the vital element of peer-supported 'follow-up' activities to help embed new learning in practice.

Finally, those providers of 'specialist' teacher and TA training courses might include training on the sharing of good practice as well as honest discussions about the implications of the development of 'specialist' professional identities for professional relationships with 'mainstream' colleagues and how they might cultivate mutually respectful and collaborative productivity.

Summary

In summary, it seems to me clear that this project of developing inclusive education can only progress successfully with mainstream colleagues 'on board'. I would argue that this can only be achieved if these colleagues feel that they can develop their sense of confidence and professional empowerment in learning to work with the diversity of learners in their schools. Not only that, but that they may well already have elements of their practice that are SEN/Inclusion-friendly and that they can bring these ideas and practices 'to the table' through opportunities to share their good practice. In short, these colleagues are a precious resource who need to be nurtured and, indeed, included.

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