

# Initial teacher training and pupils with special educational needs

DENISE DEW-HUGHES and HOWARD BRAYTON

At a series of one-day seminars for newly qualified teachers, Denise Dew-Hughes and Howard Brayton collected information regarding the element of special educational needs the participants had experienced during their initial training. Much of what they unearthed was predictable but there were one or two surprises. The authors conclude that there should be a continuum of training that supports individuals well into their professional career.

A recent study by Ann Hackney (1997) of trainee teachers following a special needs elective course, and their more experienced colleagues attending a long in-service course in special education, all of whom attended the same institution, was recently published in this journal. It established a profile of the personal qualities and competencies believed by teachers to be advantageous in working with exceptional children, either in mainstream or special schools. An earlier study by Philip Garner (1994) had examined the reactions of newly qualifying teachers visiting a special school. Where they had believed they would encounter 'mystery, medicine and madness', these trainees had noted the many characteristics shared by 'special' and 'ordinary' children, and also the overlap of teaching skills common to both schools. They had also noted that the staff seemed 'very committed to that line of work' and 'in spite of their participation in a compulsory course in SEN, they still acknowledge important gaps in their (own) initial experience'.

These studies raise two separate issues in initial teacher training to meet special needs. Are teachers of exceptional children born, or are they trained? While teachers of children with special educational needs (SEN) are seen as a breed apart, committed specialists in a special line of work, then personal qualities can go a long way in providing the range of skills required, and the pressure on training institutions to teach these as discrete skills is lessened. If they are trained, then should their course differ significantly in content and delivery from that of the mainstream teacher, or are special pupils now so much a part of mainstream education that no teacher can afford to have only a nodding acquaintance

with their needs? If new teachers are aware of 'important gaps' even when their career plans lead them into the mainstream of education, they are recognising that their SEN training has left deficits which cannot be made good by relying on personal qualities alone. Moreover, the implications of the Code of Practice require *all* teachers to be early diagnosticians and to deal appropriately with a pupil's difficulties at Level 1.

Many new teachers are finding, however, that the numbers of pupils with a wide diversity of special needs call for levels of skill which they believe have not been delivered by their initial training. Moreover, these teachers are not numbered among those who choose to work with special children through a sense of personal interest or commitment. They are subject specialists, in mainstream secondary schools, who find that a considerable part of their professional practice involves pupils whom they do not feel skilled enough to teach.

At a series of one-day seminars for newly qualified teachers on meeting special needs in mainstream secondary schools, their recollections of training and course content were compared with the requirements of their first post.

## Profile of the group

Seventy new teachers were interviewed; they were from fifty-four schools which ranged from the south coast to the Scottish border. These included C of E, RC, Jewish, single-sex and grant-maintained schools. Each new teacher was a subject specialist who also had pastoral care of a class group. None had trained as a teacher of pupils with special needs, or had intended to work with them specifically. Sixteen per cent were mature-entry teachers. All reported 'large numbers' (up to 50 per cent) of pupils with special needs in their subject classes. Many felt that, as the most junior members of staff, they had been allocated the lower streams or bottom bands of children 'where they could do least damage'. They had learning support assistants in lessons for at least part of the time. Many of these assistants were allocated to specific pupils or classes; none worked

exclusively with the teacher interviewed. Only 4 per cent had time allocated for planning with the assistant.

### **Recollections of initial teacher training**

Numbers attending the seminars suggest that in secondary schools there is a ratio of one teacher with a BEd degree to seven BA or BSc subject-specialist graduates with a PGCE. The group believed that the requirements of secondary-stage teachers for training in special needs are homogeneous; different subjects did not require different approaches and the issues of basic literacy and numeracy skills were common to all. Responses of the group suggested that these special education requirements are at present better served by the one-year PGCE, despite its time constraints, than by the four-year BEd.

- Forty-four per cent of the teachers interviewed reported a positive experience of special needs training at college. These were all subject graduates with a PGCE.
- Fifty-six per cent had a negative response, considering their training to be a 'very inadequate' preparation. This group consisted of thirty-four BEd graduates and five subject graduates with PGCE.

#### *Positive experiences*

Positive experiences included a thorough introduction to Code of Practice, specimen school policies and tutorials on specific needs such as those of gifted pupils. For teaching practice, members of this group had been offered experience of a special school (or a consortium which included a special school), or a placement had been found by request. They had shadowed a pupil with special needs or done research in special schools. Colleges had provided general sessions on special needs by experienced tutors. Many of these sessions had been subject specific and covered both primary and secondary age groups. Special education activities and information had been included in 10 per cent of tutored time; this had covered policies, individual education plans, Code of Practice and statementing procedures.

#### *Negative experiences*

Well over half the group had listed negative experiences of their training. These included: no input apart from discussing another student's experiences, or a single lecture on the Code of Practice and statementing. There had been limited opportunity for practice in special schools; one college had been unable to arrange an appropriate placement. Teaching practice in all-white middle-class schools had offered some new teachers little preparation for city appointments in mixed-race schools with a large special needs register and many statemented pupils. An optional module on special education at college had not been encouraged, nor, for some teachers, had 'hands-on' experience during teaching practice in placement schools.

Most reported that such special needs training as they had acquired was picked up during practice rather than being taught at college. This could apply to many aspect of teaching in the wake of Circular 9/92's recommendation of raising the percentage of school-based training to a minimum of two-thirds (Department for Education (DfE) 1992). Teaching practice had made students feel very undertrained for the diversity and dimension of special needs in schools. None of them reported that their training course had addressed the teaching of basic skills in literacy and numeracy at primary-age levels to secondary-age pupils. This was cited as still being a problem. Teaching practice had indicated that schools differed widely in their attitudes to pupils with special needs. Where attitudes had been negative, teachers believed the response to special needs was often 'money driven'. Overall, the group reported that the support they received as undergraduates both from placement schools and tutors compared favourably with their first year in teaching. They believed they were often left unsupported by senior colleagues in circumstances which required an experienced response.

### **Main areas of concern**

The new teachers recorded four main areas of concern which constituted the discrepancy between training and employment. These were information, ethics, policy and practice.

#### *Information*

All believed they needed far more training in special needs awareness. They stressed repeatedly the issue of how to teach basic literacy skills to secondary-age pupils. They required help with 'the paperwork':

- devising and conducting tests appropriate for monitoring and recording progress, especially in those pupils 'achieving well below their peer group';
- how Attainment Targets and 'the standards required by OFSTED apply to bottom bands and low streams';
- preparing individual education plans and writing formative Records of Achievement.

#### *Ethics*

- Confidentiality and sharing information (who needs to know what?)
- Diagnosis of disability and access to relevant medical information, especially for those pupils with a sensitive family or school history
- Pre-judging ability from SEN reports and transfer documents

#### *Policy*

- School policies on team-teaching; strategies, lines of management, roles and responsibilities

- The role of the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), especially with regard to training
- Induction and first-year mentoring for new teachers

#### *Practice*

- Wide-ranging differentiation techniques, especially in examination conditions for pupils with communication and language difficulties
- Reluctant learner support and management of 'low self-esteem in pupils achieving well below peer group'
- Roles and responsibilities of class teacher at Code of Practice Level 1 and liaison with the learning support assistant

#### **Training recommendations**

The training and information that newly qualified teachers wanted from their college course focused on three main areas: classroom, policies and management.

#### *Classroom*

- Differentiation techniques and support materials, central resource base management
- Subject-specific advice on special needs from heads of department, or need-specific advice from the SENCO (such as for dyslexic, hyperactive and short-attention-span pupils)
- Managing challenging behaviour
- Working with assistants: optimising their role, knowing their line management and responsibilities, their level of training and the teacher's role in providing training
- Planning for joint and separate approaches with other staff, utilising advice from colleagues, dealing with pre-judgement based on diagnosis or a 'static history' description of need
- Awareness of individual pupils' needs, background knowledge and case histories, including issues of confidentiality and entitlement to information
- Access to external support agencies and resources, including local education authority (LEA) provision

#### *Policy*

Training should include access and addition to unambiguous and realistic policies on the following issues and disseminating them to all members of the school:

- Equality of opportunity for pupils with special needs, pre-judgement guidelines on recording pupil difficulties
- Managing disruptive pupils, guidance on acceptable levels of disruption, the legal position of restraint and the burden of care for other pupils
- Confidentiality; how and what to record of pupil difficulties, especially out-of-school information on background and family

- Equality of opportunity for all pupils with special needs, 'pre-judgement versus information' from feeder schools
- Roles and responsibilities of non-teaching adults, support or therapy personnel
- Induction procedures for new teachers and SEN guidance 'before start of first term'

#### *Management*

Training should offer an acknowledgement of, or introduction to, the following aspects of school management.

- Liaison between the SENCO and classroom teachers with strategies agreed across school
- Access to information, records of special needs, individual education plans
- Updates on changes to Code of Practice, LEA and government policy; reporting difficulties, writing individual plans
- Management of assistants, their authority and responsibility, agreement of support provision across the school
- Provision and staffing for extracted or excluded pupils
- Mentor's role versus SENCO in special needs – 'who trains the new teacher?'

#### **The present position**

At the present time, newly qualified teachers leaving higher education institutes report that there is a discrepancy between their preparation for meeting special needs in the classroom, and the reality which they face in their first post. Over half the teachers interviewed believed their college training had not prepared them for the diversity and dimension of special needs in mainstream schools, especially the low levels of basic skills which they were called on to teach. They stressed the need for factual information about learning difficulties, access to records and support structures. They also believed schools should have clear, well-publicised policies and guidelines on all issues, and these policies should be promoted through a clear management structure.

Above all, they wanted better induction from their schools and liaison with senior colleagues, the SENCO and specialist advisors. Schools could provide this by preparing an induction pack for new teachers which would contain necessary information and essential documentation on policy and management. They agreed with the suggestion that they would be ideally placed at the end of their first year to produce an induction pack in their own school.

Given the right information, structure and support, all the teachers surveyed showed an extremely high dedication to meeting the needs of all children, however complex their difficulties, within their own differentiated classroom practice.

## Moving forward

The dedication of these young professionals to satisfying the education requirements of their pupils would seem to be matched by a similar dedication of training institutions constantly to improve the present position, while responding to the changing political fashions of course content and delivery. New teachers' needs are clearly expressed and unambiguous and appear to be held in common by this sample group which covered a wide range of schools. It also appears that the new teachers currently entering the profession believe that the 'technical rationality' of course content and mode of delivery described by Hargreaves (1990, quoted in Garner, Hinchcliffe and Sandow 1995) can provide them with appropriate professional strategies to meet the needs of exceptional children. This is in contrast to the more time-consuming critical or rational approaches to reflective teacher training, abandoned by many institutions since the introduction of the National Curriculum has emphasised the need for subject-based training. The warnings of Furlong (1992) that this will result in courses which are 'narrowly functional, emphasising only what will be professionally useful to teachers' appear to cause less concern than the danger of courses not being functional enough or which misinterpret the usefulness of their content.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that training course designers are unaware that the complexity of special needs has increased in mainstream schools arising from a variety of practices and policies over recent years, and substantial progress has been made in responding accurately and speedily to rapidly changing situations. Two main elements of course content and design remain central to the issue; these are the model of delivery and the proportion of tutor time which can realistically be allocated to special needs.

### *Model of delivery*

From their responses, it was apparent that trainee teachers had experienced more than one model of delivery of SEN instruction. Some had had the opportunity to elect for a 'bolt on' optional module, which many had declined at the time, believing it to be irrelevant to a mainstream career. Some had been discouraged from selecting a separate module; others had been given the impression that special needs were optional in pupils – that it was entirely possible for schools to be constituted without any 'problem' children at all. A few had chosen special needs modules from a degree of personal interest and could not imagine how they would have managed their post without this introduction.

In response to the constraints imposed by meeting the current demand for increasing subject knowledge and competencies in trainee teachers, some institutions had favoured a permeation model of special needs training, where the concept of learning support was embedded in all other aspects of practice. The group felt this resulted in a dilution of instruction, a collective responsibility without specific regulation and assessment. It was felt that the permeation model was not

effective; special needs training suffered the same fate as the 'staff room washing up or the minibus' – collective responsibility became no one's responsibility. This echoes Mittler's (1993) concern that 'permeation is by its very nature invisible and therefore difficult to monitor'.

There was general agreement that SEN training should not be optional, should be delivered as a discrete element and should have a higher priority allocated to it. A suggestion was made that the basic outline in undergraduate training, followed by more specific instruction during the first year in post, might go some way to meeting the dilemma of time constraints at college.

### *Tutor time*

The respondents were a focus group rather than a random sample of the general population of new teachers because they were attending in-service training in special needs. But the consensus of response from them was that an inadequate proportion of training time was allocated, considering the extent to which SEN predominated once training was finished. Many had had a basic few hours' tuition with one or two texts recommended. Others had requested special schools or SEN access in mainstream, only to find that this could not be, or in practice was not supplied by their institution or placement school. All knew the stages of the Code of Practice and the role of the SENCO but few courses had considered special needs outside the contexts of slow readers and challenging behaviour. This is a rather narrow interpretation of the Circular 9/92 (DfE 1992) requirement that all newly qualified teachers should demonstrate their competence to 'recognise diversity of talent' and 'identify special educational needs or learning difficulties'.

Most had found in their first professional year that their schools lacked clear management policies and that access to information was disorganised. Their main practical concerns of differentiation to meet needs, and the collaborative working practices with assistants, SENCOs and other professionals, had to be learned on the job. Above all, no one expressed the opinion that their course contained redundant elements of special needs, so they clearly felt the need for a higher percentage of time to be allocated to SEN.

School management and policies cannot legitimately be regarded as a constituent of teacher training. Even though the new teachers rated highly the contribution of management and policies to a support structures, these are the concern of individual schools. Similarly, the organisation of induction, first-year mentoring and SENCO input are in the domain of senior management teams, not tutors, and are more suitably delivered in post.

## Conclusion

What can be drawn from these two sides of the training coin is the scope for closer liaison between the institution

and the new teacher's school over this extended training period. Recently Anthea Millett (1997), Chief Executive of the Teacher Training Agency, has suggested that a teacher's probationary period be extended, with Qualified Teacher status after one year and a confirmation of efficiency at the end of five years. This introduces the notion of a continuum of formal training over a period of nine years, only four of which would be undergraduate. The pressure on institutions to pour ever larger amounts of instruction into a limited time, and the ever-increasing needs of new teachers for further instruction, might be eased by introducing a different structure to this extended period, allowing greater flexibility for phasing across a wider choice of optional modules. The mentored first year, where it had been successful for many of the respondents, had been viewed as an extension of their college course with specialisms pertinent to an individual school forming the basis for in-post training. This had been particularly so for new teachers who had taken up their first post in a school which differed substantially from their teaching practice or their own experience. The higher percentage of in-school, as opposed to college-based, training has established a precedent for this mode of delivery. In the field of special needs, this would bring into greater prominence the role of the SENCO by adding a further dimension of specialist tutor, or at least closer liaison with the mentor and participation at management level with a responsibility for training.

The newly suggested Qualification for Head Teachers lies at the end of a training continuum which begins with first-year undergraduates. It is difficult to envisage any part of this continuum which would not include special

educational needs, and indeed SEN must be embedded in the new headteachers' training as a vital part of planning and management for whole-school support. If we are to meet the introduction of such extended training periods positively, then the increased demand of both newly qualified and experienced teachers for more and more training can be spread across a wider band of provision.

## References

- DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION (1992) *Initial Teacher Training (Secondary phase)* (Circular 9/92). London: DfE.
- FURLONG, J. (1992) Reconstructing professionalism: Ideological struggles in initial teacher education. In M. Arnett and L. Barton (eds), *Voicing Concerns: Sociological perspectives on contemporary education reforms*. Wallingford: Triangle Books.
- GARNER, P. (1994) Oh my god, Help!: What newly qualified teachers think of special schools. In S. Sandow (ed.), *Whose Special Need?* London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- GARNER, P., HINCHCLIFFE, V. and SANDOW, S. (1995) *What Teachers Do: Developments in special education*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- HACKNEY, A. (1997) SENCOs of the future? *Support for Learning*, 12 (3) 116-21.
- MILLETT, A. (1997) Article title. *The Times*, 28 June.
- MITTLER, P. (1992) Preparing all initial teacher training students to teach children with special educational needs: A case study from England. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 7, 1-10.

## Correspondence

Denise Dew-Hughes  
104 Woodstock Road  
Oxford  
OX2 7NE

# S.E.N. (MARKETING)

## Dyslexia Bookshop

(Proprietor - Roy Hardman)

- Bookshop established in 1984 specialising in books on Dyslexia
- Exhibition Agents for a number of other specialist companies
- Booklist updated monthly, including books recommended for the reading lists of RSA and BDA Diploma courses

**We attend all major Special Needs Exhibitions each year including:**

Special Needs London at The Design Centre in November

Special Needs North at Haydock Park in April

Special Needs Essex in May

See us at the

**Special Needs London Exhibition November 6 - 8**

and see the books at first hand.

Write, fax or telephone for a current stocklist to:

9 The Close, Church Aston, Newport, Salop TF10 9JL Tel: 01952 810922 Fax: 01952 275225