

# Teaching needs adaptive expertise now more than ever.

I've spent the last couple of years looking at how we support teacher development to build the knowledge and confidence teachers need to educate pupils with learning difficulties. I deliberately refrain from using the euphemism 'special needs' as it labels and limits our view of who and what we are discussing here\*.

The pandemic has opened up the debate about what it means to be vulnerable in education and who might 'struggle to learn'. Working remotely, more young people are finding access to the curriculum difficult. Default mechanisms for 'differentiating' by simplifying work have been exposed as flawed. Teachers have seen the importance of making adjustment to the way they teach, not for a few pupils but for many. Perhaps too there is recognition by teachers that it is not a burden but a professional challenge, a learning opportunity. Many teachers and pupils have certainly embraced the unknown bravely.

Teachers don't have a box of tricks for pupils with learning difficulties because each and every child, no matter what their diagnosis, is different. Now, more than ever we need to deepen the capability of and support for teachers to be able to respond to individual cognition and learning differences. The Pandemic is highlighting many more young people with hidden difficulties of anxiety, of self regulation etc who without the support of an adult have found it difficult to manage their own learning. We are also encountering more pupils with complex learning profiles in mainstream classrooms more frequently (Carpenter 2010) and the number overall that need support is increasing. There is, in my view, a substantial policy gap opening up.

Teachers, particularly new teachers are often overwhelmed by the diversity of pupil profiles they face in a new classroom. They describe feeling ill equipped and lacking in relevant knowledge. 'I have two pupils with autism and one with severe dyslexic compounded by anxiety, I don't have the expertise to support them'. Feeling overwhelmed and unsure of how to proceed can result in new teachers resisting responsibility for a pupil in their class. 'This pupil is complex, so must be the responsibility of the SENCO, right?' Wrong! Working with a diverse population of learners is the job, so how do we ensure early career teachers, indeed all teachers, feel better prepared?

One big change we could make is to give teachers the strategic capability of *adaptive expertise*. Not only will this have an empowering effect on how the system works, it will have a life changing impact on the opportunity for those who struggle to learn.

We recognise effective teaching as the capacity to *adapt, generalise and transform* knowledge. This describes a pedagogy that can embrace difference not separate it. In order to respond to this difference, our teaching and learning must be agile, flexible and capable of adapting. This form of adaptive knowledge is vital to quality teaching in the modern dynamic and unpredictable context of the classroom. Yet we fail to give it sufficient prominence in professional development. Few CPD sessions focus on teaching flexibility, on how we strengthen pedagogy to be more inclusive. Prioritising how we adapt our teaching, how we problem solve around children who are finding learning difficult shouldn't be unusual. Some approaches that have been successfully embraced include lesson study but unfortunately this is often adopted a CPD 'event' rather than a methodology for whole school learning.

Arguably, the way we currently introduce expertise to teachers (in particular when it comes to expertise to support learning difficulties) is by suggesting that only by time served or working with the SENCO will we be able to support a struggling pupil with complex learning difficulties to make progress. Indeed, we see the word 'complex' as a problem, rather than a rich learning opportunity.

The current view shared in many schools of how expertise is developed is too often linear. David Berliner's theory of novice to expert, is perhaps the best known, and most commonly utilised in the CPD of teachers. The model identifies five stages of skill development in teachers to build expertise incrementally. It assumes that only in later stages can the person become sensitive to the situational challenges in their classroom in solving teaching and learning problems. It is this detail that makes me uncomfortable. It de-skills new teachers into believing they can't be effective unless they have served their time, mastered tricks or acquired specialist knowledge.

There's an important distinction to draw between the routine and procedural knowledge the education system currently advocates and adaptive expertise we so clearly need; particularly when teaching pupils with disabilities. Hatano and Inagaki (1986) highlight that where teachers had developed routine expertise, they were outstanding in terms of speed and accuracy but lacked the flexibility to adjust their knowledge to situations beyond the familiar. A teacher who is faced with teaching a child unable to follow social cues, stressed by the dynamics of the classroom ie the child who has behaviours that are atypical, should be equipped with knowledge that helps them to navigate next steps. This expertise wont provide them with a solution for every child or occasion but supports them to

theorise and take practical steps to problem solve.

The true value of adaptive expertise is that it builds teacher confidence to deal with the unknown and the unexpected. It builds capacity to work with ambiguities. It helps us think that a child who is really struggling to engage with curriculum and peers should be seen as a **learning opportunity** for the teacher, not as a problem to be delegated or denied. The reality is that teachers need to work with unusual and challenging situations, from complex learning difficulties that manifest in extreme behaviours to subtle invisible distress that is equally detrimental to a child's learning. Professional learning should be focused around complex situational experiences, every day from our first day. Supporting teachers to problem solve, to model independent thinking and to unpick complexity.

The current education system puts its energy into the supporting the systems and processes that further the dominant majority of 'typical' learners. Policymakers tend to prefer a 'one size fits all' approach to too many aspects of teaching in the name of efficiency and national standards. We frame school accountability to reward academic attainment levels. These are of course important, but does not help teachers to prioritise achievement and progress from start points.

My own experience of observing early career teachers suggests that we are producing new teachers who, without the right support, become quickly wedded to practices and expectations of effective teaching that are too rigid for pupils who find sequential learning difficult. They then feel lost when the child's learning needs or behaviour steps beyond familiarity and comfort zone. In effect, we deskill these teachers.

Instead we should be helping teachers reflect on and practice with the complex from the outset. The child who just can't work with others, the boy who explodes rather than face disappointing feedback, the girl who is just too anxious to share her learning. Supporting teachers to expect the unexpected, to grapple with intimidating, multi layered challenges. I'd love to see them using skills of seeing and doing, responding to what they see rather than believing that because they haven't studied autism or cerebral palsy therefore they cant help the child looking back at them. For this to happen we must give time to mentors, allowing them to model expertise and act as co-experts in the classroom; time to problematize and problem-solve with new teachers, rather than providing simple options to 'fix' the difficulties a child is demonstrating.

Such adaptive expertise supports the development of their own cognitive flexibility, ability and confidence to teach. There's an undeniable need to rebuild

teacher confidence and competence. By focussing on building adaptive expertise of teachers from trainee through to executive leader, we can support our recovery goals.

Gernsbacher et al. Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications (2016) 1:29 “Special needs” is an ineffective euphemism.