

Evaluation of Special School Placements as part of the BA (QTS) Primary Education learning experience 2009-2010

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1. Introduction

This poster aims to profile how special school placements in Year 2 of the BA (QTS) primary programme offered by one university are being used to enhance trainee teachers' skills to support the learning of pupils with diverse needs as well as their understanding of special education needs, pedagogy and inclusion. The placement is an extension of the Training and Development Agency (TDA) programme set up in 2006-7 and is undertaken in relation to QTS standards with specific reference Q18,19,20 and 25a-d. Ofsted (2008) highlight that the best institutions do further focussed work as well as developing students' generic provision, they also gave a 'high priority to preparing trainees to meet the needs of all pupils with learning difficulties and/ or disabilities' (pg 9). The special school placements in ITE reflect possible applications of the recommendations from The SALT Review (2009) and the role HE providers can play in implementing the recommendations from the review.

Many of the students who took part in the special school placement had limited experience of working with pupils with diverse needs and their parents (Forlin 2003). Parental educational choice has been enhanced by *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) and this very much an underpinning theme in the recent White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010) and the recent Green Paper on "Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability" (DfE, 2011).

2. Overview of method

- The sample consisted of 25 students over two years out of a total cohort of 200 (male and female), with ages ranging from 20-45 years with the majority (16) falling in the age range of 20-26 years.
- These students undertook a 21 day placement in a primary special school setting in Summer 2009 and Summer 2010 supported by an ITE tutor and a member of the SEN Division at the School of Education in the University.
- The questionnaire focussed on 3 key areas of interest and was a modified version of the school experience evaluation form requiring more detailed responses:

1. Has the placement changed the students' views on inclusion, if so, how?
2. What skills have the students learnt that can be applied in a mainstream setting?
3. What do the students' responses suggest they need from their Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to prepare them to teach in a special needs setting?

4. Conclusions

"It is more challenging but more rewarding than a mainstream setting"

The special school placement provided students with a broader range of experiences during their ITE placements. It made them reflect on their views and understanding of inclusion; it enhanced their teaching skills, many of which they could see as transferable to a mainstream setting and it informed the university as a provider with feedback as to how the ITE experience could be improved for future teachers. These results concur with (Golder et al 2009). However as a provider we need to continue to develop and expand the programme to invite new schools into partnership and offer more students the opportunity to have a school placement of this type. May 2011 saw a 5 place increase in allocation and more than twice the number of students applying. In particular there is a need for:

- More specific and directed information to students prior to placement
- Preparation for both mentor training and student induction. This would lead to a smoother, more beneficial transition into the SEN placement.
- Better coordination of visits by 2 tutors across the two divisions. Input from SEN specialist tutor was seen as beneficial to effective monitoring and advice.

5. Implications for Initial Teacher Education

As we move into a new era of educational change in the UK where policy makers strive to 'remove the bias towards inclusion' (DfE 2011), it is imperative for ITE providers to consider the breadth of placement experiences provided for trainee teachers so that professional perceptions of 'inclusion' can be clarified and translated into practice, irrespective of the setting. In addition, transferable skills derived from each placement serve to enhance the future delivery of good quality first inclusive lessons in all schools, academies and other educational settings. At the time of writing (April 2011), a review by the government was underway regarding Teacher Standards with a designated focus on excellent teaching and support for those with special educational needs. Regardless of the outcome of this review, future trainee teachers will need some input, experiential learning opportunity and guidance on meeting the needs of diverse learners and ITE providers will need to consider creative and effective methods and partnerships for equipping teachers of the next generation to meet those needs. The special school placements are a practical example of supporting and developing teacher education and training in this area.

3. Results

Change in views on Inclusion

"It became evident that educational inclusion is not always possible for some children"

"I now feel more aware of inclusion of every child"

- Greater awareness of the need for appropriate adult: student ratios to meet the needs of pupils, choice of provision is important, effective use of specialists and equipment

Transferable skills to mainstream

'I learnt to be more creative when planning lessons- this is something I feel I can apply in a mainstream setting'

- Students reported development of skills in planning, differentiation, behaviour management, individualised teaching, personalised learning, team teach techniques, working with other adults, flexibility, using music and songs to enhance the learning environment, use of outdoor learning experiences, sign language, pace of lesson and great confidence in dealing with social/emotional needs

Perceived requirement from ITE in terms of preparing for teaching in special school setting:

'I was given very little support in consideration of the context'

'...students going on this placement need more preparation. It is a completely different experience from a mainstream placement'

Selected References

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