Beyond formal assessment in inclusive classrooms:

The complex relationship between teacher beliefs and teaching

ABSTRACT

For inclusive educational policies to be successful, teachers need to support their implementation in the classroom, in terms of their beliefs and instructional practices. But what do teacher believe about teaching and learning in children with special needs and disabilities in inclusive classrooms? This position paper considers this question. Possible ways forward will be suggested to encourage teacher beliefs that better support effective inclusive instructional practices.

This paper will examine issues of assessment beyond formally administered, standardised, norm-referenced assessments by considering the kind of informal 'assessments' that happen when teachers make judgments day-to-day in their classrooms about children's learning. Judgments that then influence their practice. It will do this by exploring teacher beliefs, in particular, beliefs about inclusion of learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). These beliefs may be considered as underpinning informal assessments, judgments based on observation, experiences, or on societal stereotypes and prejudices about disability. So aside from formal assessments teachers carry out with children on which to base their teaching, they are also carrying out informal assessments based on their beliefs, through which they're making judgments about children's likely progress trajectory, and about what and how to teach them. And these beliefs need to be understood and taken into account when aiming to support learners with SEND in mainstream.

Working as a senior educational psychologist specialising in children with disabilities, I saw how my teaching colleagues at the special school where we were based were so positive in their assessment of children's potential for learning. They were optimistic about what these learners with very severe disabilities might achieve. Not unrealistic, just positive. They could see where opportunities for progress lay and although these might be modest targets they still demonstrated progression and the learning of new skills nonetheless. However, I also saw examples of less positive beliefs in some mainstream schools when I worked with teachers to try to support other learners with SEND. Although their needs were less severe than those of the children at the special school, mainstream class teachers often expressed concern about their limited progress and what they could be expected to achieve. Through these different experiences I became very interested in teacher beliefs and judgments about learning in children with SEND in inclusive classrooms, and how these beliefs influence teacher practices.

There has been policy focus on the right of students to learn within inclusive mainstream settings for almost 40 years here in the UK since the 1978 Warnock Report introduced the idea of considering learner needs rather than segregating children according to diagnostic categories. School leaders and teachers have the challenge of implementing these policies within their classrooms. This requires them to adapt curricula and provide appropriate educational experiences for a diversity of learner needs including those with SEND. While teachers tend to support inclusion as a principle, they often express anxieties about how well their training has prepared them, as well as concerns about inadequate resourcing, and about practical classroom issues. Investigating teacher beliefs and attitudes to inclusive education is important because these are recognised as important for its success (e.g., de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011).

One of the first issues we became interested in was whether primary school teachers saw themselves as dealing with something fixed or something that could be changed by their instructional practices. Using Weiner's (1985) attribution theory, we *(removed by Editor)* compared

25 special school teachers' attributional beliefs about teaching children with learning difficulties with those of 39 mainstream general class teachers, and 35 mainstream learning support teachers. We used vignettes that described children who had problems in learning. Some difficulties were portrayed as temporary – all children have temporary difficulties in understanding a new concept in maths or language. This was the group with no significant additional support needs. Other vignettes described children having longer-term problems requiring ongoing learning support, thus suggesting the child had identified longer term support needs.

We found group differences. The two groups of mainstream teachers in the sample saw the causes of problems in learning in children differently depending on whether the child in the vignette was identified as having identified support needs or whether they just had a temporary difficulty in their reading or maths, as every child has. Special school teachers however did not see a difference in the cause of the learning problem whether the vignettes described a temporary difficulty in new learning or a more sustained difficulty. Furthermore, the special school teachers viewed learner problems as more amenable to change than did the mainstream teachers. It seemed that mainstream teachers might informally assess the difficulties of children with identified support needs as rather fixed but not so the special school teachers who thought these difficulties were more amenable to change. If you are a parent of a child with SEND, you would want her to be taught by someone who believes that they can bring about change to improve your child's learning problems. In short you would want her teacher to be someone who feels they can educate your child. This after all is the purpose of schooling. These findings were therefore concerning.

This raised the question of what it might be that made these special school teachers evaluate learning in children with SEND differently from the mainstream teachers. Obvious possible candidates are the training they receive, professional development opportunities, and experience of teaching learners with SEND. These are three potentially influential experiences which might be distinctively dissimilar for special school teachers compared to mainstream teachers because they were trained differently either pre- or in-service, or because they have experience of working with students with SEND.

Studies investigating these topics use a variety of outcome variables, researching slightly different questions and different disabilities. Some studies, for example, question teacher participants on their feelings about inclusion while others investigate their knowledge, beliefs or concerns about the instructional and practical challenges of teaching children with specific disabilities. Training in SEND has been associated with more positive feelings towards inclusion (e.g., Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Batsiou, Bebetsos, Panteli, & Antoniou, 2008; Boyle, Topping, & Jindal-Snape, 2013; Kurniawati, de Boer, Minnaert, & Mangunsong, 2016) but not consistently as there are also studies reporting no effect of specialised SEND training on attitudes (e.g., Hastings & Oakford, 2003; Wilkins & Nietfeld, 2004). We (*removed by Editor*) gathered data from 199 mainstream, general class, primary school teachers from two school districts in west central Scotland. We also found no evidence that training was associated with attributional beliefs about working with children with SEND. Indeed Woodcock and Hardy's (2017) study of Canadian teachers even found teacher views were more negative after professional development activities. These studies suggest that we lack convincing evidence of the nature of the relationship between professional development activities and teacher beliefs.

What about experience? Do more experienced teachers hold more positive attitudes about learners with SEND? One of our studies *(removed by Editor)* found that teachers with more than 15 years' experience attributed the causes of difficulties in learning as internal to the child compared to teachers with fewer years who attributed more to external instructional factors such as curriculum

content and delivery. Viewing the cause of difficulties as external to the child suggest that there are instructional 'handles' for change, positive actions the teacher can take to address these: viewing difficulties as internal however implies the opposite. Boyle et al. (2013) similarly found experience to be associated with less positive attitudes. In their study, attitudes to inclusion were found to be more negative after the first year of teaching. Earlier studies too had reported teachers with more teaching experience to be less positive about inclusion of learners with SEND compared to teachers with fewer years' experience (Alghazo, Gaad, & El, 2004; Center & Ward, 1987; Glaubman & Lifshitz, 2001; Soodak, Podell, & Lehman, 1998). It looks as though little may have changed in this regard over the years. At best, De Boer et al.'s (2011) review of 26 studies reported neutral attitudes towards inclusion among the negative, classifying 19 studies as indicating neutral attitudes and seven as negative. Florian and Rouse (2009) have argued that initial teacher education requires an overhaul of its core elements to better prepare teachers for inclusive classroom practice.

There is some evidence that it is not experience as a teacher per se, but specifically experience of SEND, which makes teachers more positive towards inclusion (e.g., Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Specht et al., 2016). *Removed by Editor* found that teachers with experience of SEND viewed locus of causality of difficulties in learning as external, attributing them to the curriculum, teaching methods, aspects of the learning environment that could be addressed professionally by the teacher. Hastings and Oakford (2003) however reported no relationship between experience of SEND and attitudes.

A consistent finding over the years though is the importance of teacher self-efficacy (Ghaith & Yaghi, 1997; Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Soodak et al., 1998; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). This is about self-belief, how capable a person believes him/herself to be towards executing the actions to achieve a specific goal (Bandura, 1977). For teachers, this could be executing actions toward the goal of classroom engagement, or effective behaviour management, or optimal instructional strategies (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). In thinking about assessment-practice links, which was the theme of this year's *Psychology of Education* conference, self-efficacy can be thought of as teachers' self-assessment of their own abilities. There is growing evidence that self-efficacy influences teacher beliefs about learners with SEND *(removed by Editor)*, as well as classroom practices and instructional behaviours (e.g., Ghaith & Yaghi, 1997; Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2012; Wilson, Woolfson, Durkin, & Elliott, 2016). But what influences teacher self-efficacy in teaching learners with SEND? *Removed by Editor* found the culture and climate of the school, its ethos, to be an important factor in individuals' beliefs about their own efficacy: individual teachers are influenced by what others in their school say and do. Additionally, they are influenced by collective beliefs about what their school can achieve professionally in terms of children's learning.

As well as the school culture, Wilson, Woolfson & Durkin (2018) found that mastery experience was a key factor. This is about achieving success, mastery, in previous attempts at carrying out a task. Perceptions of successful past performance lead to increased self-efficacy beliefs, whereas perceptions of failure lead to a decrease in self-efficacy beliefs. This is Bandura's (1977) seminal concept applied to teachers and teaching (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007) and extended to teaching children with SEND. This suggests that rather than experience of teaching children with SEND having a positive influence on teacher beliefs for which there is conflicting evidence, it is mastery experiences with learners with SEND, satisfaction with their professional work in the classroom, that predict self-efficacy beliefs, self-assessment of their teaching abilities. The importance of mastery learning may also explain why Schwab, Hellmich and

Görel (2017) found that the more advanced student teachers in their study showed reduced self-efficacy for inclusive teaching compared to the new student teachers. It may be that the more senior students now realised the challenges they faced when including learners with SEND in mainstream class activities but had not yet experienced mastery learning of the necessary skills to deal with these challenges.

Bandura (1997) stated that 'Enactive mastery experiences are the most influential source of efficacy information because they provide the most authentic evidence of whether one can muster whatever it takes to succeed ' (p.80). However he pointed out that while such experiences provide a valuable source of information for judging personal efficacy, individuals also need to have the opportunity to focus on and interpret these experiences by making meaning of them through cognitive processing. This has important implications for the content and structure of professional development activities, as outlined below. We would like to offer four main conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS

Teachers' personal beliefs about progress in children with SEND can influence their informal, day-to-day assessment, and expectations of learning. This can present barriers on the ground for implementation of inclusive educational policies.

Both initial teacher education and continuing development programmes for in-service teachers need to help teachers focus on examining the informal assessments and judgments they make about learners with SEND. To change beliefs to better support inclusive practices, training programmes for teachers should not just deliver knowledge and information about specific groups of learners with SEND, e.g., a professional development day on autism spectrum disorder, but rather also help teachers focus on their core personal beliefs.

Training programmes and CPD for teachers need to ensure mastery experiences Delivering information about the nature of a condition without an accompanying mastery experience can result in teachers having increased awareness and understanding of the difficulties in learning that accompany a diagnosed disability, alongside having less confidence about their ability as a teacher to deal with this. This can have the effect of lowering teacher self-efficacy rather than raising it, with corresponding links to practice. Professional training should also provide a forum to highlight examples of mastery experiences to ensure that teachers both notice and remember them.

Training and development sessions should provide opportunities for teachers to identify, challenge and reframe any negative stereotypes about the causes of difficulties in behaviour and learning in children with SEND. These beliefs, which may reflect beliefs about people with disabilities held by the wider society, need to be examined by education professionals to ensure they are not barriers to effective teaching of children with SEND in inclusive settings. Professional development sessions should also provide opportunities for identifying and reflecting on mastery experiences.

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