

Draft:

Please do not quote without permission

Reforming teaching: is there such a thing as special pedagogy?

Lani Florian
University of Cambridge

Paper presented at the Disadvantaged and Disabled Learners and Social Justice Seminar,
sponsored by the British Educational Research Association Social Justice Special Interest
Group and the Society for Studies in Education

Moray House School of Education
University of Edinburgh
14 March 2005

Abstract

This paper focuses on 'special education' processes and teaching strategies, and the extent to which they overlap with 'mainstream practice', in order to answer the question of whether or not there is such a thing as a specialist pedagogy. Recent work on the question of specialist pedagogy (e.g. Lewis & Norwich, 2005), meta-analyses of research in meeting special educational needs (e.g. Kavale, in press), and a DfES scoping study on teaching strategies and approaches for meeting special educational needs (Davis and Florian, 2004) are summarised. The findings of these studies suggest the need to move away from the a preoccupation with questions about placement towards a notion of pedagogy that is inclusive of all learners. To this end, Alexander's (2004) definition of pedagogy is offered as frame within which specialist knowledge is subsumed.

Reforming teaching: is there such a thing as special pedagogy?

Introduction

When I qualified as a teacher in the United States in the 1970's 'special education' was widely understood as being about social justice. The civil rights movement had raised consciousness about issues of discrimination, and in 1975, P.L 94-142 guaranteed the right to education, *in the least restrictive environment* (LRE), for all school-aged children regardless of type or severity of disability. Since then there has been a debate, not only in the US but also in other countries with similar kinds of legislation, about the appropriate placement - where and how to provide - for pupils who are identified as having special educational needs. In England the right to a mainstream place is qualified on the grounds that it does not disrupt the education of other pupils.

The concept of place is central to discussions about pedagogy for two reasons. One is because the notion of LRE, as that which is least disruptive to the identified pupil AND for other pupils in the class, is fundamentally about pedagogy. If we take pedagogy loosely “to mean the broad cluster of decisions and actions taken in classroom settings that aim to promote school learning” (Lewis and Norwich 2005, p. 7), then by definition it is intimately related to what is available in a given context for responding to a difficult situation, be that about a child's learning or behaviour, or a teacher's capacity to respond to or manage that situation.

The second reason is because the debate about place has long been linked to pedagogy insofar as answers to questions about what is special about special education have been underpinned by what Lewis and Norwich (2000) have called the ‘general differences position’. This position is based on the difference position in the longstanding 'development vs. difference' debate in the psychological literature (e.g. Zigler, 1982)

where children with various types of disabilities and/or learning difficulties are thought to be qualitatively different as learners and therefore in need of educational responses or treatments that are uniquely tailored to respond to those differences.

What is special education?

The concept of special education has been notoriously problematic because of the elusive nature of its definitions, assumptions and practices. In the United States, special education is "specially designed instruction...to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability"(USDOE, 1999, p12425). At last count there were 13 categories of disability covered by the special education legislation.

In England the focus is on meeting 'special educational needs'. The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice

does not assume that there are hard and fast categories...It recognises...that each child is unique and...that there is a wide spectrum of special educational needs that are frequently inter-related, although there are also specific needs that usually relate directly to particular types of impairment...The areas of need are:

- communication and interaction
- cognition and learning
- behaviour, emotional and social development
- sensory and/or physical

(DfES, 2001 p. 85, §7.52)

Special education provision means...educational provision which is additional to, or otherwise different from, the educational provision made generally for children of their age in schools maintained by the LEA, other than special schools, in the area (§312 Education Act, 1996)

In Scotland, the non-categorical nature of special educational needs is also recognised. Recent education legislation specifies that "a child or young person has additional

support needs (ASN) where, for whatever reason, the child or young person is, or is likely to be, unable without the provision of additional support to benefit from school education provided or to be provided for the child or young person". Whether we use the term special education, SEN provision or additional support, there is a common understanding that special education involves something additional to that which is on offer in mainstream schools. But what is it and how do we know if it works?

This paper focuses on 'special education' processes and teaching strategies, and the extent to which they overlap with 'mainstream practice' in order to answer the question of whether or not there is such a thing as a specialist pedagogy. The sections that follow summarise recent work on the question of specialist pedagogy (e.g. Lewis & Norwich, 2000, 2005), recent meta-analyses of research in meeting special educational needs (e.g. Kavale, in press), and a scoping study that Cambridge colleagues and I were involved in with colleagues from the University of Manchester (Davis and Florian, 2004). These findings consider the need to move away from a preoccupation with questions about placement and towards a notion of pedagogy that is inclusive of all learners. To this end Alexander's (2004) definition of pedagogy is offered as frame within which specialist knowledge is subsumed.

Previous work on specialist pedagogy

Lewis and Norwich (2000) were interested in whether "differences between learners (by particular SEN group) could be identified and systematically linked with learners' needs for differential teaching"(p. 10). Their review acknowledged the developmental vs. differences debate in that their literature review was organised by what they termed general or unique differences. General differences are considered to be based on "needs which are specific or distinctive to a group that shares distinctive characteristics" (p. 11) and unique differences "are informed only by common and individual needs, general specific needs are not recognised" (p. 12). Their review was organised by types of learning difficulties (low attainment, specific learning difficulties, moderate learning difficulties and severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties). Lewis and Norwich

found that though the evidential base was problematic, the trend was away from SEN specific pedagogies. Two central findings emerge from their review:

- the available evidence does not support the general difference position and
- while it does not fully endorse the unique differences position there was some support for the argument that what works for most pupils works for all pupils though there might be differences in application for various types of difficulties.

As a result Lewis and Norwich advocated the notion of a 'continua of teaching or pedagogic approaches' as a consistent but more nuanced explication of the unique differences position. The problem with this, as they note, is "the tendency to split the continua into distinct types, especially for programmes of teaching of pupils at the ends of the continua of attainments" (p. 59). Lewis and Norwich argued that arguments for separate provision cannot be based on distinctive teaching approaches but "on better opportunities to provide appropriate adaptations to common teaching approaches to meet unusual individual needs" (p. 59).

More recently, Lewis and Norwich (2005) have elaborated on their notion of a continua of teaching approaches by suggesting that strategies can be arranged along such a such a continuum from high to low intensity. In so doing, they embrace the unique differences position by arguing that "teaching that emphasises high levels of practice to mastery, more examples of a concept, more error-free learning, more bottom-up approaches to literacy, for instance, is not qualitatively different from teaching that involves less emphasis on these approaches" (p. 6) However, they go on to present an extended review of teaching pupils with 14 different types of special educational needs and conclude by affirming the unique differences position, noting that "only two chapters argue for the significance of distinctive group pedagogy, ASD and AD/HD" (p. 213).

In my view, it is the tendency to split the continua that reinforces and perpetuates the belief in the general difference position that some learners are qualitatively different by virtue of their low incidence and therefore need distinctive teaching approaches despite

evidence to the contrary. It is the enduring and pernicious effect of fixed beliefs about difference and ability that creates a problem for justice. In this regard, the focus of our work should be on what sustains this tendency for splitting which in turn reinforces the concept of special education as a distinctive pedagogy.

Meta-analyses of special education practices

Where Lewis and Norwich found the state of existing research problematic, Kavale (in press) argues that the problem of equivocal evidence can be overcome by the use of meta-analysis, a statistical procedure that allows the results of many studies to be combined by quantifying the results of individual studies in a way that permit the results to be compared (i.e. through the use of the effect size metric).

In recent years the efficacy of special education has been subject to a series of meta-analyses generally undertaken and based on research conducted in the USA. Kavale (in press) has reviewed the use of meta-analysis in answering questions about what works in special education. In his review Kavale shows how early beliefs about the 'altered learning functions' or deficits of disabled children gave rise to a pedagogical emphasis on cognitive processes or process training (e.g. corrective perceptual-motor training, psycholinguistic training, etc.) which proved to be very modest in their effectiveness. He goes on to show how each attempt to define what is special about special education: for example, or modality matched instruction, instructional imbalance - the mismatch between teacher instruction and student developmental level, has failed to show anything distinctive. It is only when research which investigates the teaching-learning process in general is 'interpreted' for special education 'by modifying the way in which instruction is delivered' that we find significant effect sizes (p. 8). In addition, prereferral activities (modifications to teaching approaches and the use of alternative strategies) prior to referral for assessment for special education were found to have positive effects because, in Kavale's words, "it is predicated in modification of *instructional* activities" (emphasis original, p. 11) as opposed to some presumed within child deficit. Kavale argues that the efficacy of special education is due to a change in emphasis from strategies that

emphasised the remediation of learning deficits to those that focus on teaching and learning. When "instructional techniques originating in general education were adapted to assist students with disabilities in acquiring and assimilating new knowledge, the efforts demonstrated significant success and much improved academic outcomes" (p. 12)

Kavale's review is fascinating in that it departs methodologically from Lewis and Norwich, but it confirms their finding that the trend is away from SEN specific pedagogies. Still the belief in aptitude-treatment interaction (ATI) models of meeting special educational needs persist. As Ruth Kershner and I (2004) have noted this is due in part to the growing attention being paid to the nature of certain types or patterns of SEN (e.g. dyslexia; attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); autistic spectrum disorders). This mainly follows a bio-medical approach to diagnosis and treatment not only in health but in education and other social services as well. It is supported by growing public interest in human biological differences studied at genetic level and by medical concerns about causal factors in developmental impairment such as the feared links between autism and the MMR vaccine. And yet, recent research in neuroscience using neuroimaging techniques designed to investigate how the brain learns appears to be providing further support for the development or unique differences position (Goswami, personal communication) though much more work needs to be done in this area.

Thus despite the lack of firm evidence to support the notion of specialist pedagogy, there is continued attention to what could be considered 'special' about teaching pupils with special educational needs. The persistence of belief that we have not yet articulated adequately what is special about special education is highly relevant to our consideration of teaching strategies for pupils with SEN, to which I now turn.

Teaching strategies and approaches for pupils with special educational needs: a scoping study.

In the summer of 2003, a scoping study was commissioned by the DfES as part of their agenda to raise the achievement of pupils with special educational needs (SEN). The aim

of the study was to examine the relevant published literature in order to ‘map out and assess the effectiveness of the different approaches and strategies used to teach pupils with the full range of special educational needs’ (Davis & Florian, 2004 p.7). Given the contested nature of the concept of special educational needs in England, there was considerable interest in the question of a special pedagogy despite the Lewis and Norwich review.

In fact, there is no shortage of literature reviews on teaching pupils with SEN, but they address very different research questions and they have been undertaken in different national contexts. In England for example, there is the Audit Commission review of SEN (Dockrell, Peacey and Lunt, 2002), the EPPI-Centre review of effectiveness of school-level actions for promoting participation by all students (Dyson, Howes and Roberts, 2002) and the Lewis and Norwich investigation discussed above. In the US, there have been substantial recent reviews including Gersten, Baker and Pugach’s (2001) study produced for the *Handbook of Research on Teaching* and McDonnell and McLaughlin’s (2000) report on students with disabilities and standards based reform carried out for National Research Council. Additional literature reviews on teaching pupils with the full range of SEN are to be found in Scott, Vitale and Masten (1998); and McGregor and Vogelsberg (1998). There is current work in New Zealand focussing on building capacity in ‘regular’ education to support 'diverse' learners, and so on.

When examining these reviews one is immediately struck by the range of literature covered and by the lack of agreement in the bibliographic citations. This is due in part to the range of the research into teaching and learning in special and mainstream education but it is also a result of the definitional problems, assumptions, research questions and search methodologies that guided the reviewers.

For example, there are many teaching approaches and strategies identified in the literature on pupils with SEN and the published evidence about approaches to teaching children with SEN tend to be theoretically based (e.g. advocating task analysis and behavioural objectives for pupils with learning difficulties), ‘condition’-related (e.g.

general strategies for teaching children with Down syndrome), subject related (e.g. specific approaches for developing literacy), or some sort of combination (e.g. sight-word approaches for teaching young children with Down syndrome to read).

The review of literature that informed the scoping study was structured in terms of the four 'areas of need' identified in the SEN Code of Practice (language and communication, cognition and learning, physical and sensory and emotional and behavioural difficulties). Although I was concerned that organising the review in this way would fragment our findings doing so led us to find that:

certain teaching strategies and approaches are associated with, but not necessarily related directly to specific categories of SEN (such as autism, learning difficulty, etc). However the teaching strategies and approaches identified in the review were not sufficiently differentiated from those which are used to teach all children to justify a distinctive SEN pedagogy. It was clear that sound practices in teaching and learning in both mainstream and special education literatures were often informed by the same basic research, and that certain teaching strategies developed for one purpose could be effectively applied to other groups of children with different patterns of educational need (e.g. co-operative learning). This does not, however, diminish the importance of what might be construed as 'special education knowledge' as an element of pedagogy applying to all learners.

In other words, although the scoping study was initially structured in terms of areas of SEN it was clear in the analysis that there is a considerable overlap between different areas of need in relation to different teaching approaches. It was also evident in examining the theoretical models that underpin much of the research in this area that there is a growing need to move away from the belief that one model of learning informs and justifies one model of teaching. Thus, the findings of the scoping study led to focus more broadly on the question of pedagogy.

Pedagogy

In the scoping study, we followed Alexander's (2004) definition that pedagogy “is what one needs to know, and the skills one needs to command, in order to make and justify the many different kinds of decisions of which teaching is constituted...[including]

- *children*: their characteristics, development and upbringing
- *learning*: how it can best be motivated, achieved, identified, assessed and built upon
- *teaching*: its planning, execution and evaluation, and
- *curriculum*: the various ways of knowing, understanding, doing, creating, investigating and making sense which it is desirable for children to encounter, and how these are most appropriately translated and structured for teaching” (p. 11).

We argued that it is not the differences among children, their characteristics or upbringing that is problematic but when the magnitude of these differences exceeds what schools can accommodate that children are considered to have special educational needs. Our view was that this position was supported by the requirement to organise the literature review according to the areas of need as specified in the 2001 SEN Code of Practice. We had difficulty in categorising many of the literature reviews on teaching strategies because of the overlap between area of need, teaching approach, and teaching strategy. When we searched the literature by teaching strategy we found many relevant reviews that covered all areas of need leading us to suggest that the areas of need are important elements of human development for all learners. Our view was that these elements interact in ways that produce individual differences that make it difficult to prescribe a course of action to remedy a particular problem. Thus, children with complex needs often require support to a degree which is beyond that typically required by their peer group. This support is called ‘special education’.

However, the process of providing this support, the provision of something ‘additional to’ or ‘different from’; or making accommodation – either by differentiated teaching or the use of high intensity strategies, in and of itself, does not constitute pedagogy but is an element of it. This does not diminish the importance of special education knowledge but

highlights it as an essential component of pedagogy. Lewis and Norwich (2005) come to a similar position when they argue that pedagogy is “mediated by many other demands and considerations” (p. 7). Their teaching framework places knowledge, curriculum and pedagogic strategies in a reciprocal triangle where each has an influence on the other. But when they ask whether pupils with SEN need distinct teaching to learn the same content as others, their answer is a qualified no.

In our own consideration of the evidence of whether there is or should be a SEN pedagogy we found that though there is a great deal of literature that might be construed as special education knowledge, the teaching approaches and strategies themselves were not sufficiently differentiated from those which are used to teach all children to justify the term SEN pedagogy.

Our analysis found that sound practices in teaching and learning in mainstream *and* special education literatures were often informed by the same basic research (e.g. Heward, 2003). Some of the research that underpins the National Literacy Strategy for example was based on studies that sought to understand the differences between readers with and without special educational needs. Similarly, there are strategies that have proved to be effective for teaching academic skills to pupils with learning difficulties even though they were developed for other purposes. Co-operative learning is a well-known example of a mainstream practice that has had positive effects on attainment for pupils with special educational needs.

Our conclusion was that questions about special education pedagogy are unhelpful, and that the more important agenda is about how to develop pedagogy that is inclusive of all learners.

Elsewhere (Florian, 1998), I have suggested there are a set of necessary but not sufficient conditions which must be met for inclusive education to become a meaningful model for meeting special educational needs. These are:

- an opportunity for pupil participation in decision-making processes
- a positive attitude about the learning abilities of all pupils
- teacher knowledge about learning difficulties
- skilled use of specific teaching methods
- parent and teacher support (p.22)

Others (e.g. Ainscow, 1997; Giangreco, 1997) have suggested similar models. These conditions also represent important constituent elements of pedagogy. More importantly, as we argued in the scoping study: “they underscore the social complexity of teaching and the change in thinking and practice that is required in order to make use of available teaching strategies and approaches”. And it is here in the change in thinking and practice that questions of social justice in education, special or not, are crucial.

But what is just in education? Questions about what kind of environments to provide for vulnerable children provoke much debate but, in my view, are less important than questions of process and pedagogy. In this paper I have tried to show that the question of specialist pedagogy is not about place though it is often confounded with it. This is not to say that place is unimportant. I agree with those who argue that segregated settings are inherently unjust. In my view, the debate about what might be considered an appropriate educational place for children who experience difficulties in learning, and the extent to which these placements help or hinder the difficulties they are intended to address distracts us from more important questions about the efficacy and the meaning of what we are really doing in the name of providing something ‘special’.

References

- Alexander, R. (2004) Still No Pedagogy? Principle, pragmatism and compliance in primary education, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 34 (1) 7-33.
- Davis, P. & Florian, L. (2004) Teaching Strategies and Approaches for Children with Special Educational Needs, A scoping study [Research Report 516], London: DfES.
- DfES (2001) Special educational needs code of practice. London: DfES
- Dockrell, J., Peacey, N., & Lunt, I. (2002) *Literature review: meeting the needs of children with special educational needs*. London: Institute of Education
- Dyson, A., Howes, A., & Roberts, B. (2002) *A systematic review of the effectiveness of school-level actions for promoting participation by all students* (Inclusive Education Review Group for the EPPI Centre. Online at: <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk>)
- Florian, L. (1998) Inclusive practice: What? Why? and How? In C. Tilstone, L. Florian & R. Rose (eds) *Promoting inclusive practice*. London: Routledge.
- Gersten, R., Baker, S., Pugach, M. with Scanlon, D., and Chard, D. (2001) Contemporary Research on Special Education Teaching, in V. Richardson (ed.) *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, (4th ed). Washington DC: AERA.
- Giangreco, M.F. (1997) Key lessons learned about inclusive education: summary of the 1996 Schonell Memorial Lecture, *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 44(3): 194-206.
- Heward, W.L. (2003) Ten faulty notions about teaching and learning that hinder the effectiveness of special education, *The Journal of Special Education*, 36(4), 186-205.

Kavale, K. (in press) Quantitative research synthesis: meta-analysis of research on meeting special educational needs. In L. Florian (ed) *Handbook of Special Education*. London: Sage

Kershner, R. & Florian, L. (2004 September) Teaching strategies for pupils with 'special educational needs': specialist or inclusive pedagogy? Paper presented to the European Conference on Educational Research, Crete

Lewis, A., & Norwich, B. (2000) *Mapping a special educational needs pedagogy*. Exeter: University of Exeter and University of Warwick

Lewis, A., & Norwich, B. (eds) (2005) *Special teaching for special children? pedagogies for inclusion*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

McDonnell, L., McLaughlin, M., & Morison, P. (eds) (1997) *Educating one and all: Students with disabilities and standards-based reform*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

McGregor, G. & Vogelsburg, R. (1998) *Inclusive schooling practices: pedagogical and research foundations: a synthesis of the literature that informs best practices about inclusive schooling*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes

Scott, B.J., Vitale, M.R. & Masten, W.G. (1998) Implementing Instructional Adaptations for Students with Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms: a literature review, *Remedial and Special Education* 19(2):106-119.

Zigler, E. (1982) MA, IQ, and the developmental difference controversy, In E. Zigler and D. Balla (eds) *Mental Retardation: the developmental-difference controversy*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum