

*Oideas 55*

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## **LEARNING FROM LEARNING SUPPORT TEACHERS: LESSONS FOR CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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*ABSTRACT: This article offers a retrospective description and analysis of literacy lessons taught by approximately 150 learning support teachers who completed the Graduate Diploma in Learning Support in St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra between 1990 and 2006. Although much of the core content of their lessons remained constant throughout the sixteen year period, it is possible to discern lines of development and differences of emphasis in their teaching methodologies and practice over that time frame. The changes in the provision of continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers since 2006, and the more recent cutbacks in the education budget, underline the importance of prioritising what teachers most need from CPD in order to best serve the needs of children with special educational needs. Two areas in terms of planning CPD for teachers are identified: firstly, the need to value and nurture the craft of teaching and secondly, the importance of effective whole-school approaches in addressing the special educational needs of children. The twin concepts of craft-knowledge and whole-school endeavour working in tandem, can link the individual expertise of the teacher with the collective resource of the school.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is a scarcity of published accounts of the work practices of learning support teachers in Ireland. Through my work as a lecturer in the Special Education Department of St. Patrick's College, I have had the opportunity to visit learning support teachers in their classrooms and to observe their teaching at first hand. Of the many insights I have gained through these visits over a period of sixteen years, two in particular have continued to impress me: firstly, the need to value and nurture the craft of teaching and secondly, the importance of effective whole-school approaches in addressing the special educational needs of children. These concerns have remained constant despite adjustments in whole-school organisational arrangements and changes in the approaches employed by individual teachers. This article reports on selected aspects of school visits which I made in my capacity as course director and tutor of the Graduate Diploma in Learning Support in St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra. Although this course was offered since 1974, the paper is confined to a retrospective description and analysis of the lessons taught by learning support teachers who attended the course from 1990 until it was discontinued in 2006. Some contextual and background

information precedes an account of my detailed observations, records and reflections on their teaching over that time. This is followed by a discussion of the two issues highlighted above.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

There has been a shift of emphasis in the provision of continuing professional development for teachers which reflects the changes in the provision of additional support for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) both nationally and internationally. The academic year 2005-2006 was the last year the Colleges of Education and Universities in Ireland were funded by the Department of Education and Science (DES) to offer postgraduate courses which were dedicated exclusively to learning support teachers. Since September 2006 these institutions, funded by the DES, have been offering a combined post-graduate course for learning support / resource teachers and teachers in special schools and classes. These courses changed in September 2009 when the fifteen-week block release for teachers from school was reduced to eight weeks full-time attendance in college. Given the implications of these changes and other recent cut backs in education, it is important to prioritise what teachers most need in order to best provide for children with special educational needs (SEN). As continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers of children with SEN heads into a new era, it is timely to reflect on the learning support provided by teachers who attended these courses in the past.

Between 1990 and 2006 I visited approximately 150 learning support teachers in primary schools and watched them teach lessons of thirty to forty minutes duration, to small groups of children, who had been withdrawn from their mainstream classes. Although most pupils were operating at, or below, the tenth percentile on nationally standardised tests of reading, some of these children, particularly in areas which were not designated as being disadvantaged, were functioning at higher levels. These teachers taught in a variety of schools representing the range of primary schools in Ireland. All schools were within a hundred mile radius of Dublin. Although I also saw the teachers teaching Mathematics, this article is restricted to the English language and literacy lessons I observed over that sixteen year period.

Readers should note certain limitations to this review. All these teachers were attending an award-bearing course and while my visits were essentially supportive and advisory, because their teaching was assessed the visits also contained an evaluative element. Inevitably this is not a value-free account and it is up to readers to judge the credibility of my interpretation for themselves. I am indebted to these teachers for their openness and professionalism which enabled me to learn so much.

## **LEARNING SUPPORT TEACHERS' LESSONS**

Analysis of my observation notes of the learning support teachers' lessons reveals three different periods, which reflect a development in methodologies and approaches used by learning support teachers. Although there was considerable overlap between these periods, there was a definite difference of emphasis in teaching, which corresponded to the time sequences outlined below. Table 1 outlines the three phases, representing the time periods 1990-1994, 1995-1999 and 2000-2006, with a summary of the main elements covered in the lessons.

**Table 1:** *The main elements covered in the lessons*

<b>1990-1994</b>	<b>1995-1999</b>	<b>2000-2006</b>
Sight vocabulary	Sight vocabulary	Sight vocabulary
Phonics	Phonics	Phonological awareness & training
Word analysis		Some word analysis
Spelling		
Games	Games	
	Some oral language	Oral language
Some individual reading	Individual reading	Some individual reading
	Some story reading	Story reading (especially Big Books)
	Some whole group reading	Whole group reading (guided)
	Some computer work	
		Some reading strategy work
		Some writing

Although much of the core content of their lessons remained constant throughout the sixteen year period, it is possible in retrospect, to discern lines of development and differences in emphasis over that time frame. The first phase, 1990-1994, was characterised by a strong orientation towards the teaching of discrete literacy skills with a particular emphasis on teaching decoding skills. While this skills-based focus remained during the second phase, 1995-1999, it is also possible to identify early attempts to address the teaching of oral language coupled with a movement away from a purely skills-based approach towards a more whole-language approach to the teaching of reading. The third phase, 2000-2006, appears to represent a more integrated approach with a much stronger emphasis on the search for meaning in teaching reading. These changes mirror the developments in the teaching of literacy outlined in the international literature (National Reading Panel, 2000). Each of these phases is now examined in more detail.

#### **Phase 1: 1990-1994**

Lessons during this period typically lasted thirty minutes, were divided into short, five to ten minute slots, and covered a range of discrete activities. Basic sight vocabulary, usually drawn from lists of high frequency words, was taught using flash card drill, relying on children's visual memory. Visual representations of progress, such as word-walls and ladders were used to motivate children to increase their store of basic sight words. When teaching phonics, the teachers emphasised the isolated sounds of letters and relied on drill and practice. Word analysis generally involved teaching compound words and breaking multisyllabic words into syllables, with less attention to blending the syllables together again to make real words. The teaching of spelling involved some rote learning of spelling rules and usually relied on auditory memory with particular attention on rhyming words and phonograms. Overall, the teaching of these pre-requisite reading skills tended to be concerned with isolated words and was seldom related to continuous reading of text.

Where continuous reading of text occurred, it tended to be confined to the final minutes of a lesson when individual children read a few lines from their readers and were assigned further pages or a new book to read at home. The teachers I observed throughout this time tended to use a lot of workbook material. The use of games was very common and children made jigsaws and played board games which had a strong phonic component. However, these games did not appear to be related to the work carried out earlier in the lesson, again reflecting the isolated nature of the activities.

As observer of these lessons I was conscious of a certain pressurised atmosphere as the teachers tried to move quickly through a series of short, unrelated activities in the time allotted to each lesson. The arrival of the next group of children often signalled the end of the lesson rather than the more appropriate consolidation and closing activities, which the teachers had actually planned.

### **Phase 2: 1995-1999**

Although the learning support lessons continued to be dominated by the direct teaching of skills during this period, it was possible to discern a greater influence of whole-language philosophy and approach to the teaching of reading, particularly in the second half of this period. Nevertheless, sight vocabulary was taught in much the same way as it had been in the earlier period. However, the teachers now contextualised these words and provided practice and reinforcement through the use of games. Similarly, although the teaching of phonics was still dominated by the explicit teaching of isolated sounds, the teachers often used commercial phonic programmes to practice these sounds in the context of words and sentences. In contrast with the earlier period, there was little evidence of teaching word analysis skills in the second half of the 1990s.

The learning support teachers in this period demonstrated their growing understanding of the importance of oral language in the teaching of literacy and the need to present reading as a search for meaning. Activities such as sharing personal news, similar to 'Our News' in the mainstream class, became part of the lessons. Although these early attempts at the formal teaching of oral language rarely moved beyond the identification of characters and objects in pictures, I noted that a small number of teachers also extended children's responses beyond simple labelling and tried to elicit more detailed descriptions.

While there was hardly any reading of continuous text in the previous period, some group reading was now in evidence. However, as in the earlier period, this tended to be limited to the final minutes of the lesson, where each child read a few lines aloud, 'round-robin' style. As was common practice then, there was more emphasis on reading accuracy and on testing, rather than teaching reading comprehension. Although I observed some teachers reading stories aloud, this tended to occur with the younger children only and then at the end of the lesson.

Just as the previous phase (1990-1994) was characterised by somewhat stressful attempts to fit a series of short teaching units into the lesson, time management also appeared to be an issue for the teachers during the period 1995-1999. In their attempts to address the teaching of oral language, the teachers appeared to let the discussion run on and were then under pressure to fit all the planned lesson activities into the allotted time.

### **Phase 3: 2000-2006**

The movement towards a more meaning-based approach to the teaching of literacy gathered further momentum during the period 2000-2006. However, this was also accompanied by intensive instruction in phonemic and phonological awareness and skills training, particularly with the younger children. In addition, much of the word analysis and phonic work during this later period was firmly rooted in auditory training and attention to sound-patterns in words, with most teachers using commercial or school-designed programmes.

One of the biggest changes I observed from the earlier periods was the way in which the learning support teachers tried to make links across different activities to integrate various aspects of the lesson. For example, although the method for teaching sight vocabulary did not appear to have changed since the early 1990s, the particular words the teachers now taught

were usually related to the reading that formed part of the lesson. There was a similar attempt to integrate listening, reading and some writing. In addition, a small number of teachers used a thematic approach and integrated the work around particular topics.

The teaching of oral language appeared to become much more structured and this was reflected in the teachers' written plans. This could perhaps have been attributed to the fact that oral language had been given the status of a subject in its own right with the introduction of the revised *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). Additionally, the learning support course in St. Patrick's College had always maintained a strong focus on the teaching of oral language, not just as a pre-requisite for learning to read and write, but as an essential skill in itself. In contrast with the earlier periods, my observation notes reveal that the teachers appeared to be more confident about an oral language curriculum, assessment procedures and appropriate methodologies for teaching.

The stronger emphasis on oral language was also evident in the reading in which the children were engaged. The use of 'Big Books' and storybooks had become prevalent and children were taught basic concepts of print and story structure. Almost all of the teachers I visited made some attempts at guided reading with particular emphasis on prediction, discussion and comprehension before, during and after reading.

Whereas most of the reading in the earlier periods was conducted on an individual basis for brief periods of time, the reading during this period usually involved the teacher guiding the whole group, as they read from the same text. Additionally, most children were involved in some form of peer-tutoring reading programme which was organised and monitored either by the learning support, class, or home school community liaison teacher. The amount of time and the quality of attention given to individual reading varied greatly. Some teachers listened to and monitored the children's reading and comprehension every day; others did this on a weekly basis; others noted the books read at home and assigned new books as required.

While there was little evidence of the teaching of writing in the 1990s, apart from some handwriting and completing worksheets, most learning support teachers during the 2000s spent some time teaching writing skills. Activities usually consisted of writing letters, letter groups and words related to phonic and spelling activities. However, a very small number of teachers also taught narrative and expository writing. Teaching directly and explicitly, they used writing strategies and frames to introduce children to the skills involved in the writing process.

This most recent period was, in my view, characterised by the teachers' growing confidence in their teaching ability. They did not try to pack as much content or as many elements into lessons, as in the earlier years. In contrast to the somewhat disjointed and hectic pace of the nineties, these teachers' lessons appeared to be more coherent in terms of structure and pace.

## **LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE**

Having traced a line of development in the learning support teaching I observed from 1990 to 2006, I now attempt to draw some lessons from that review. This may help to inform planning for CPD for teachers of children with learning difficulties. Space does not permit a critique of specific aspects of literacy teaching at a micro level. Instead, I have selected two areas which I consider important at the macro level of teaching, in terms of future planning for the provision of CPD for teachers of children with learning difficulties. As stated earlier, the first is the need to value and nurture the craft of teaching and the second is the importance of

promoting and supporting sustainable, whole-school approaches that meet the special educational needs of children.

### **1. Learning support teachers' craft-knowledge**

One of the strongest features of the learning support teachers' teaching I observed was their expertise in the craft of teaching. Most of these teachers had been class teachers for a considerable number of years before they took up a position in learning support and they were able to draw on that body of experience and expertise as they now focused exclusively on children with learning difficulties. These teachers displayed a level of excellence in their teaching that is sometimes referred to as craft-knowledge (Day, 2005). That is,

*the professional knowledge and thought which teachers use in their day-do-day classroom teaching, knowledge which is not generally made explicit by teachers and which teachers are not likely always to be conscious of using.*

(Brown and McIntyre, 1993, p. 19)

Instead of documenting all the instances I observed, the craft-knowledge of these teachers is illustrated below by three specific examples, which recurred persistently during my visits to classrooms: firstly, the teachers' ability to teach essential skills for learning and living, secondly, their expertise in planning and structuring a lesson and thirdly, their proficiency in providing much needed training and practice in skills which are critical to literacy learning.

#### ***Essential skills for learning and for living***

Quite apart from the teaching of literacy concepts and skills, the learning support teachers I observed were extremely good at teaching and giving children practice in basic social and life skills such as taking turns, greeting each other, listening and paying attention and organising their personal belongings. Much attention was given to such daily learning routines as accessing and tidying the resources in use, learning when and how to interrupt or contribute to the group, and learning to repeat or think aloud. This sort of incidental but essential teaching appeared to be part of these teachers' craft-knowledge. One of the implications of the new weighted system of allocating teaching resources for children with SEN is that most of those teachers who formerly catered for children in need of learning support in literacy and Mathematics, are now teaching children with more serious levels of need. This has particular significance in terms of these children's need and ability to learn essential skills for living and learning. Because these social and learning skills are not learned intuitively by many children with SEN, it is important that these critical teaching practices are valued, highlighted and prioritised in future CPD courses for teachers. The craft-knowledge needed to teach and facilitate these skills must remain a central element of these teachers' teaching repertoires.

#### ***Expertise in planning and structuring a lesson***

Most of the lessons by learning support teachers followed an obvious structure with a distinct beginning, middle and end to each lesson. This structure was also recorded in the teachers' detailed termly and daily planning. I have no doubt that the level of teachers' planning and structure which I witnessed facilitated the children's learning. However, despite the fact that by 2006 very few learning support teachers I visited were teaching more than four children in a group, most of the teachers planned for and taught the whole group as if they were a homogenous group of children. I observed very little variation or differentiation to cater for different children's needs, strengths and learning styles within the groups. Future courses in CPD will need to highlight the importance of individual planning and differentiation to best serve the learning needs of all the children. As the practice of devising children's Individual Educational Plans (IEP) becomes more commonplace, as well as a legal requirement (National Council for Special Education, 2006), teachers will justifiably look to CPD courses to help them plan for, implement, monitor and evaluate individual children's learning and progress.

### ***Skills training and practice***

Although it was possible to detect a shift from a skills-based to a more integrated, meaning-based approach in the learning support teachers' teaching during the observation period, the direct teaching of skills, particularly at word level, remained constant. Teachers used drill, practice and repetition to reinforce these skills. While the direct teaching of such skills for children with learning difficulties is well supported in the literature (DEST, 2005; Rose, 2005), the research evidence also points to the need for these children to learn to transfer these skills to the real reading of continuous, meaningful text (Pressley, 2006). With a few notable exceptions, very few learning support teachers I observed taught children how to use and practise these skills when reading in context. While many of the children appeared to learn by exposure to, repetition of and immersion in literacy activities, the lack of direct teaching and modelling of how to read and write meaningful text was particularly disadvantaging for the children with more serious learning needs. Even when they were quite proficient in decoding and analysing words in isolation, these children did not seem to apply these skills when reading in context. Pupils were not proficient in questioning, self correcting and monitoring their own understanding and they did not appear to integrate new knowledge or skills into their existing repertoires. These children need to be taught strategies to enable them to learn and to transfer that learning from one situation to another. My observations suggest that the learning support teachers were highly proficient in teaching necessary literacy skills in isolation. However, future CPD courses might profitably concentrate on the virtues of teaching cognitive, meta-cognitive and practical strategies to children with learning difficulties and to provide structured and plentiful opportunities for transferring skills to real literacy and life contexts.

The three illustrations above present a flavour of the learning support teachers' craft-knowledge in action. In discussing and helping teachers evaluate their own teaching, the learning support teachers I visited appeared to be quite unconscious of this quality in their teaching. There is a need to respect and acknowledge what the very best teachers do all the time. There is also a need to develop a language that best describes teachers' craft-knowledge without diluting its complexity or integrity. By focusing on what teachers do best, it is possible to raise their confidence as teachers, thereby empowering them professionally. By valuing and highlighting the most positive and effective aspects of their craft-knowledge, it is possible to facilitate and nurture teaching of an even higher quality. This requires self examination and guidance at a number of different levels, ideally in a collaborative partnership between practising teachers and schools, in-service providers, teacher educators and researchers.

## **2. Whole-school approach for children with learning difficulties**

The account of learning support teachers' practices outlined in this article is based on observations of teachers teaching small groups of children withdrawn from their mainstream class. Only a very small number of teachers observed was involved in some form of co-teaching with their mainstream colleagues. Despite the fact that most of their school plans espoused a whole-school approach to the education of children with SEN and or learning difficulties, very few of the schools I visited appeared to be operating any visible or obvious whole-school approach to catering for the needs of these children. Although, my records show that a small number of schools was providing additional learning support for children with SEN within the mainstream class from about 2004 onwards, my interpretation was that the responsibility for supporting these children was left almost exclusively to the learning support teacher and or the resource teacher. In most cases, the learning support and resource teacher had separate case loads and separate instructional learning programmes and it was not uncommon for them to operate autonomously without reference to the class teacher, the principal or even to each other. Although the roles of learning support and resource teachers have merged since the implementation of the general allocation model for accessing resources for pupils who need additional support in mainstream primary schools (DES, 2005), there still appears to be very little collaboration regarding teaching children with learning difficulties

between learning support/resource teachers and class teachers. The research evidence clearly points to the importance of teacher attitude and the need for all staff to commit to the concept of inclusion if all children, including those with learning difficulties, are to be made fully part of a school (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Because the children with learning difficulties are the least likely to be able to transfer their learning from one situation to another, it is essential that teachers work together in planning and catering for these children's learning.

Most of the teachers I visited argued for a whole-school approach and for collective responsibility for children with learning difficulties. However, the practice in schools does not appear to have kept pace with the rhetoric or desire for such a collegial response. As long as children are withdrawn from class on a regular basis they will continue to be viewed as separate from the rest of the school population. As long as they are expected to follow at least two separate instructional programmes, attempts to seriously target their individual learning needs are likely to be haphazard and ineffective.

Schools are often the first place to experience and thereby reflect the changes within society. There is no doubt that the landscape of mainstream primary schools in Ireland has changed radically in the past decade. Change is never easy and the recent expansion and developments in Irish society have made it inevitable. McDaid (2007, p. 270) quotes an estimate from McManus (2007) of "20,000 minority language children in primary schools, with a further 12,000 such children in post-primary". The large number of languages spoken in Ireland today is represented in Irish primary classrooms. More than one in five mainstream primary teachers is now employed as a supplementary support teacher for children with SEN. The traditional model of the individual teacher, autonomous within the classroom, operating without reference to any other adult, is no longer tenable. Knowledge and expertise are not the exclusive domain of any individual teacher and most children with SEN require the services and support of their parents and professionals well beyond the individual teacher (Lacey, 2001).

Inclusive practice demands that children receive high quality education throughout the entire day, rather than for a few periods a week. In practical terms, this means focusing the support around the mainstream class, with the class teacher at the heart of curriculum provision. For too long, class teachers have been disempowered by the removal of the children with difficulties from their classes, despite the fact that policy documents state that it is the class teacher who has front-line responsibility for all the children in the class (DES, 2000). There is of course a case for withdrawing some children for intensive work at certain times and the individual needs of particular children will dictate the necessary balance between in-class and withdrawal work. However, such work needs to be incorporated into children's IEPs and to be part of the mainstream class teacher's programme.

It is the class teacher's programme, with its appropriately differentiated plans for individual children's needs, that should be the blueprint for all to follow. This places the onus on support teachers to adapt and accommodate the class teacher's programme so that all children are included as fully as possible in the mainstream class and are enabled to avail of the most appropriate education. This demands much closer collaboration between class teachers, learning support/resource teachers, children's parents, SNAs and all relevant auxiliary staff in planning, delivering and evaluating the learning programmes of children with learning difficulties (Doherty, 2005). School leadership and management have a critical role to play here. So too have the providers of CPD. In addition to the curricula and programmes of education they traditionally followed during their pre-service education, teachers need enhanced skills, proficiency and understanding of areas such as communication, consultation, negotiation, interpersonal relationships, planning, leadership, management and most importantly, collaboration.



There is a dearth of research on inclusive practice for children with SEN and learning difficulties in Irish schools. Schools cannot be expected to embrace the concept of inclusion without the evidence of its effectiveness and feasibility. Yet ironically it is the schools, rather than the researchers, academics and even the human rights campaigners, who will provide the most convincing arguments for and against the effective inclusion of all pupils in the mainstream school. Future CPD needs to equip teachers with the skills and confidence to engage in small-scale action research projects that answer the most fundamental and pressing needs of their own schools as they attempt to overcome the barriers to achieving successful educational outcomes for all. For only schools can grapple with the very real issues they themselves confront, such as finding time to collaborate together, co-ordinating programmes, recording and evaluating progress and differentiating their teaching to reach those most difficult to teach. It is the schools themselves who will generate sustainable, effective, inclusive practices. Given the supportive conditions, teachers are in the best, and most persuasive, position to 'go public' and share their knowledge and expertise with others.

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the work of these learning support teachers, the most striking and recurring feature that emerges is their unstinting commitment and dedication to their pupils. They had attended a demanding, university-accredited, post-graduate course at least one day a week for a full academic year. As well as teaching in school, they fulfilled their course-work and teaching practice requirements and submitted themselves to a rigorous evaluation and assessment process. Because I believe good teachers are the most effective means of ensuring high quality education for all pupils, I consider it essential that we look after our teachers by supporting and up-skilling them. Whole-school approaches will only develop by building on the good practices in which teachers already engage and by enabling and facilitating them to share and develop these practices with each other.

The system for allocating resources for children with SEN has changed. CPD courses have changed. Further change is inevitable, indeed desirable. However, the needs of children with regard to their learning have not changed that much. Good teachers are as necessary as ever and the principles and craft of teaching remain constant. Craft-knowledge represents the most positive aspects of what I observed of the learning support teachers I visited. Looking forward, this craft-knowledge needs to be harnessed more productively within a whole-school approach. The twin concepts of craft-knowledge and whole-school endeavour working in tandem, can link the individual expertise of the teacher with the collective resource of the school. Schools are now being given the opportunity to respond in flexible ways that best meet the needs of all their pupils. Providers of CPD must collaborate seriously with schools in order to meet this challenge and responsibility.

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