

Special placements

A pioneering new project has provided a group of trainee teachers with a taste of life in a special school setting, as [Beverley Forrest](#) reveals



The Training and Development Agency's (TDA) SEN project was launched in summer 2008 comprising two elements: first, the introduction of a pack of teaching materials to supplement the current taught courses in initial teacher training; second, the enabling of students to undertake a short placement in an area of special provision. The project is just one part of the TDA's SEN and Disability Strategy to ensure workforce supply, development and modernisation. Students at Leeds Trinity University College had always been keen to gain further experience of working in special schools, and with the funding attached to the project I was able to plan for this opportunity. Universities worked in clusters under the guidance of a lead institution already working on the project. The enthusiasm for the project from our leaders at Derby University was infectious and we quickly began planning for the experience.

The aim of the project was twofold: to provide trainees with experience in special provision in order to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding of inclusive practice and also to give those trainees with an interest in working within special provision the opportunity to become more familiar with the nature of these settings. Students coming forward to take part in the project had strong personal reasons for becoming involved. Some were unhappy about how they had seen inclusion working for some children with SEN in mainstream. They felt the academic and social needs of these children were being compromised and were keen to look at ways in which pupils with similar needs were taught in special provision.

One commented, 'I felt as if teachers in mainstream were unsure how to provide the children with SEN with as rich and varied opportunities as the other children in the class and they did not receive the support they deserved.'

Others felt they had little concept of what a modern special school was like and had picked up on negative views of it being very much second best. One student referred to special schools as 'unappreciated' and how on the occasion she had visited one, she had been inspired by how the staff and children achieved so much by working together. Other students already had a wealth of diverse experiences in this field, such as Katie who had worked in Romania as part of her gap year with children and adults with learning difficulties, or Laura who works for an organisation providing fun activities as part of

respite care and also provides after-school care for a child with behavioural difficulties. These students were keen to find employment in special provision and welcomed any opportunity to enhance their job prospects. With so many students wanting to take part and a brief of ten places to fill, it was necessary to assume a Simon Cowell role and make difficult selections from a strong field.

The project schools represented a broad range of special provision

Once I had the students, the next step was to find them a placement school. I need not have worried, as the first five schools approached were all keen to take part. As Liz Flavell, Headteacher of Wedgwood School, Bradford, said, 'The project is essential so that schools can "grow their own" new teachers....We need to harness the enthusiasm of trainees in our school and this scheme signposts that special schools are a real choice for them. Many undergraduates are under the impression that they need to work in mainstream first, but for the right candidates, special school is the best place to do a probationary year.' All the headteachers agreed that the project was very timely given the national age profile of staff in special schools and consequently the need to attract new blood.

We were fortunate that the project schools represented a broad range of special provision. Two of the schools, Penny Field in Leeds and Wedgwood in Bradford, cater for children with the most profound and complex needs

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requiring high levels of support. Broomfield, located at Windmill Primary School in Leeds, is a unit for pupils identified as being on the autistic spectrum. St John's, Boston Spa, is a catholic non-maintained residential and day school for deaf children, which as an oral school specialises in developing pupil understanding and acquisition of spoken language. Green Meadows in Leeds is a centre of excellence for children with communication difficulties.

They were inspired by the creativity and flexibility they saw within the curriculum

The students were able to select the school where they had a particular focus of interest. They were all in the final year of their four-year degree and the placement was planned for the last few weeks of the course. All credit to the students involved that they were able to approach the placement with such enthusiasm and energy just after final exams and while undergoing a round of visits and interviews for jobs. They immediately immersed themselves in the life of the school, undertaking activities as diverse as assisting the pupils in riding donkeys, swimming with them in the hydrotherapy pool and sampling a range of food in tasting sessions. They were inspired by the creativity and flexibility they saw within the curriculum – for example, how a trip to the supermarket formed the core of a day's work: planning menus, doing calculations, interacting with the community and preparing food.

It was decided that during the two-week placement the students would keep a journal to record their experiences. The journal would provide the core of a presentation to be delivered back at Leeds Trinity on the last day of the placement. With the benefit of funding from the TDA it was also possible for the schools to provide time for mentors and students to get together – an important aspect as students were sometimes faced with difficult experiences which challenged them emotionally. In one school, a pupil with whom the students were working died and they sought help on how to deal with this unfamiliar and distressing experience.

They became very aware of the true meaning of pupil voice

Initially it had been hoped that towards the end of the placement the students would be able to plan and deliver some of their own activities with the children. However, in practice, given the limited timescale this was not found to be viable as in planning the project we had not appreciated the length of time the students would need to become familiar with the approaches used in the setting. Time was also needed to form relationships with the children and to begin to understand how best to meet their needs.

One aspect the students found particularly useful was becoming familiar with resources and materials which they could then utilise with pupils with SEN in a



mainstream setting. Many commented on how they were now much more aware of a true multi-sensory experience and how this could be used to stimulate all pupils in their learning. They were impressed by the use of all spaces, including corridors, to create stimulating interactive displays which introduced pupils to new and unfamiliar worlds. They became very aware of the true meaning of pupil voice and how alternative forms of communication must be explored to ensure that everyone is heard.

Darren and Jenny, two students working with pupils with communication difficulties, found PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) a powerful tool in enabling pupils on the autistic spectrum to have their needs met. Working with pupils with complex behaviour needs led them to be 'much more aware of all children's needs and of looking at our reactions to interactions'. Certainly something all the students will take into their mainstream work will be recognising the importance of early identification and how their placement made them more aware of the indicators and having the confidence to act on these. At the heart of the experience was their recognition of how good practice in working with pupils with SEN is the essence of all good learning and teaching.

The culmination of the project was the evaluation meeting on the last day, which turned into a celebration of the special school experience. Listening to the students' experiences was often humorous, but equally at times moving. Students spoke of their admiration for the staff and how they had welcomed the opportunity to learn from their specialist skills. Rebecca, working at Wedgwood, believed that 'the teachers and practitioners we worked with were an inspiration', and Rachel, working with deaf pupils at St John's, said, 'I know I have taken away so much invaluable knowledge that I could not have received elsewhere.'

They loved the collegiality of the school, where staff, pupils, parents and extended services worked so well >

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Left: Students evaluate the special school experience

> together in a truly practical way. Rachel commented, 'St John's really showed me that if things are done well then the outcomes can be amazing! But it does need those dedicated people for things to be achieved.'

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We appreciate that our evaluation event was just a snapshot of the impact of this experience and plan to build on this by revisiting students towards the end of their first year in post to see if there has been any further evidence of impact. It may be that not until they are working with a particular child with SEN in mainstream will they truly relate to their experiences on the project. All the students felt, however, that already it was clear that the project had given them much greater confidence and a deeper knowledge in many areas of SEN.

The TDA has clearly been pleased with the results of the project nationally and has now found funds to take it into a second year. At Leeds Trinity University College we are clear of the impact on those students taking part, but very aware that this is only a small group of the cohort. As the students themselves pointed out, they are probably the ones who least needed the experience, as it is their peers who perhaps have least confidence in working with pupils with SEN and have the most negative attitudes. In response we are looking at moving the experience into the third year of the course, facilitating the returning group of students in communicating their experiences to the whole year group. Participating schools are also keen to set up short taster visits for interested students, so that they can become more aware of the diversity of provision in special schools and units. Arrangements have already been made

for teachers from the schools to have an input into the taught courses so that students can benefit from their expertise in areas such as working with pupils on the autistic spectrum.

We are also looking at the possibility in the future of project students returning to the schools to undertake a longer placement as part of their assessment to become qualified teachers.

Participating schools and students felt that this step would provide those trainees intent on a career in special schools with the necessary experience to be taken seriously when applying for

jobs. We are now keen to work with training institutions already undertaking this type of placement. The power of the project is evidenced by the fact that one of the students on the project has taken up a post at her placement school. This is something she would not have felt confident enough to do prior to the experience.

The project has clearly been of benefit to all those involved. At Leeds Trinity, Anne Trotter, the Schools' Partnership Manager, believes, 'The project is a fantastic opportunity for us. It has enabled us to make links with

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some new and very diverse schools and has strengthened the partnership.' Also there were many benefits for the schools involved – Lesley, a teacher in the ASD unit, says, 'It was like a breath of fresh air to have such intelligent, motivated trainees working with us. I know they got a lot from the placement, but the benefits were reciprocal.' All of the students felt that the project had given them a much clearer vision of the important role special schools continue to play within inclusive education. Our thanks go to the TDA for making the project possible and we look forward to building on the work of this pioneering first group of students and schools.

Beverley Forrest is the Associate Principal Lecturer at Leeds Trinity University College. With thanks to the students involved: Darren Barham, Jenny Davies, Rachael Oades, Kate Fellows, Kate Aldiss, Colette Carolan, Laura Miller, Rebecca Mills, Rachel Tittershill and Helen Thompson, and the staff and pupils of Penny Field, Green Meadows, Windmill, St John's, and Wedgwood.