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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Supporting inclusion in post-compulsory education: Developing trainee lecturer skills

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Abstract
This article examines the current proposed initial teacher education (ITE) qualification framework from the perspective of pre-service vocational post-compulsory lecturers regarding the need to develop SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) inclusive classrooms. Considering the current post-compulsory staffing crisis, general further education colleges are often choosing to employ industry subject specialists with little/no teaching experience to deliver entry-level courses, often to learners with marked SEND needs. Due to the growing proportion of SEND learners choosing mainstream post-compulsory educational providers, an analysis of the ways that these trainee teachers are prepared through their additional professional study is called for. Employing a desk-based research approach, supported with a literature review, which ties together the seemingly disparate threads of the post-compulsory teacher training curriculum and SEND enrolment data, this study shows that the current post-compulsory teacher training qualifications need adaptations to support trainee teachers. With many lecturers only starting their teacher training after a period of employment, there is a disparity when perceiving inclusion theoretically versus practically. While equality, diversity and inclusion are a key factor in the ITE core content framework, the lack of strategies to support SEND learners within skill-based subject specialisms is potentially a barrier to SEND inclusion.

KEYWORDS
inclusion, ITE, post-compulsory, SEND

Key points

- Training gaps in SEND inclusion: While post-compulsory trainee teachers receive generic adaptive strategies during their training, these often lack relevance to specific vocational contexts, leading to a mismatch between theoretical knowledge and practical implementation in SEND inclusive classrooms.
- Emotional challenges: Many trainee teachers experience anxiety and uncertainty when teaching SEND learners due to limited specialist training and practical experience, highlighting a disconnect between the inclusive ideals promoted in policy and actual teaching conditions.
- Recommendations for initial teacher training reform: Suggestions include mandatory SEND training prior to completion of a formal qualification, structured SEND placements during Cert Ed/PGCE programmes and curriculum adaptation to ensure alignment between skill-based teaching and inclusive practices.

- Need for further research and curriculum development: There is a noticeable lack of research into the preparedness of trainee teachers for SEND inclusion in vocational education. More targeted studies and curriculum enhancements are essential to bridge this gap and support inclusive teaching effectively.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 2015 SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015) cited the need for mainstream educational providers to make 'reasonable adjustments' to accommodate learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), the majority of SEND learners at post-compulsory stage choose mainstream providers to the figure of 97.5% (Natspec, 2022). The route many SEND learners take via mainstream study is that of general further education (GFE) college-large providers who offer a more vocational route for learners seeking subject specific employment (Natspec, 2022).

The move to mainstream inclusion across all levels of education is one certainly supported by the hegemonic principles of 'norming', many SEND campaigners have advocated for this move towards a less segregated education system, which prior to the 2014 Children and Families Act reforms and subsequent 2015 SEND Code of Practice, was still up for debate at national political level (Conservative Party Manifesto, 2010). While inclusion may be the overwhelming societal ideology that education seeks to support, from the perspective of teacher training, there exists elements of 'ableism' when considering the ability of educators to provide SEND learners with a unique and supportive educational experience (Maher et al., 2022).

Often due to the much-publicised FE staffing crisis (MccLean & Morrison Coulthard, 2023), those teaching on entry level courses within GFE colleges are 'pre-service' trainee teachers (ETF, 2022)-industry specialists relying on their concurrent/planned teacher training qualifications to provide theoretical and often generic strategies of how to achieve SEND inclusive classroom environments. Generic strategies are often aligned to supporting neurodiverse learners and include ways to lower cognitive load, such as 'chunking' of information into more manageable units and allowance of extra time for processing new information (BDA, 2018). Unlike the regulated provisions of Primary and Secondary education, where a degree in a subject specialism is a precursor to accessing teaching roles (Department for Education, 2024), many professionals within the post-compulsory sector find themselves in a classroom employed in a lecturing role before any formal teacher training has been received.

As professionals who are tasked with reflection and self-improvement through Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities (Education and Training Foundation, 2022), there is evidence that GFE teachers support inclusive practices and that the pedagogical narratives of modern education all underpin inclusion through the employment of adaptive strategies to support 'high quality teaching' (Soslau, 2012). While there is noted some emotional disparity between inclusion from theoretical versus practical perspectives (Weber & Greiner, 2019), this desk-based research study seeks to analyse how post-compulsory trainee teachers are supported in fostering inclusion, by evaluating the 'Learning and Skills Teacher Level 5 Occupational Standard' created by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IFATE, 2024) against which post-compulsory teaching qualifications are mapped, while considering suggested practical strategies to support trainee teachers in creating inclusive classrooms.

THE RESEARCH APPROACH AND STRATEGY

The research approach for this study is desk-based research with a view to completing a larger piece of research based on the findings and recommendations. With this in mind, data collection has not been primary, and only a secondary analysis of the research collated can be undertaken. This desk-based approach has some criticisms in that the data must be viewed from an analytical stance as an objective researcher (Moore, 2006). A review of the available literature in the field of 'preparing' and 'supporting' trainee teachers to create SEND inclusive spaces was conducted but was found to be limited, determining that an investigation into the support trainee teachers receive is warranted and seemingly 'unchartered territory' for research.

When considering the question of *how* trainee teachers are supported in achieving SEND inclusive classrooms, it is important to realise that SEND inclusion is addressed within the initial teacher training core content framework and that 'adaptive teaching' comprises a mandatory strand (Department for Education, 2024); alongside this, all teachers enrolled on the programmes must undertake a level of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) training as part of their Certificate of Education/Post Graduate Certificate of Education (Cert Ed/PGCE) qualification. Perhaps then it is not a question of whether pre-service trainees receive training in SEND but more if the guidance that they have received

has given them enough key information to feel adequately prepared to teach SEND learners in mainstream environments (Foyle, 2023).

The secondary research was conducted with a view to align to that of a 'scoping review' where various areas of interest were explored simultaneously to 'provide an overview of the existing evidence base regardless of quality' (Peters et al., 2015) and the boundaries for analysis were dated 'post-2015', to align to publications in reaction to the SEND Code of Practice (2015) being published and adopted. From the perspective of 'white' versus 'grey' literature, a range of sources was used including academic journals, eBooks, national legislatorial publications and online publications, with the justification that as a review focused on qualitative data, 'grey' literature can provide that 'first-hand' experiential perspectives (University of Exeter, 2024). From the perspective of search parameters for scholarly online searches, search terms input into the 'Ex Libris Discovery' index included 'SEND teacher training, 'SEND teacher anxiety' and 'SEND Inclusion' with the geographical area broadened to include international perspectives.

Many areas for discussion appeared from the desk-based study and included the emotional reaction of teachers to SEND learners, the perspective of SEND learners within mainstream classes and the nature of inclusion within mainstream education. Key themes transpiring from wider reading were as follows: 'teacher anxiety' around being faced with individuals who may need adjustments (Warnes et al., 2021) due to a perceived lack of training; the disjoint between inclusion in theory versus inclusion in practice (Weber & Greiner, 2019) again linked to training but further linked to societal awareness of SEND; need for enhancements in teacher professionalism regarding inclusion, both from an institutional and governmental level (Yusuf, 2023). From the research however, there were notable gaps that call for further research, particularly on teacher training and SEND learners at post-compulsory level. In fact, at present SEND specialist teaching qualifications are often limited to defined specific learning difficulties (SpLD), for example dyslexia with little to no teaching qualifications, which exist to allow teachers to become 'specialists' in this area (Eggar, 2022).

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

From a synthesis of the available literature, there is a potential gap in the *perceived* level of support pre-service post-compulsory lecturing staff receive. Institutionally, most GFE colleges support the notion that industry specialist staff become recognised 'teachers' by completing their professional Cert Ed/PGCE qualifications within two years of appointment to a teaching role. This push towards professionalising the sector is positive and while most teacher training qualifications at post-compulsory level are generic, the Learning and Skills Teacher Occupational Standard (IFATE, 2024) does support inclusion as an ideal and offers strategies to support trainee lecturers in assisting all learners; the framework realistically accepts its limitations in that the initial teacher training qualification suite is the start of becoming an educator but notes 'an employee in this occupation is responsible for … a diverse group of students, including those with special educational needs …' (IFATE, 2024).

Yet from a critical perspective, the Level 5 Occupational Standard described above, while designed to support teaching that is 'current, comprehensive and challenging …' (IFATE, 2024) does not detail adaptations for learners at a subject-specific level; these are generic and unrelated to skill-based disciplines. One of the 'Knowledge' competencies described in the framework relates to trainee teachers knowing 'methods for creating and adapting inclusive learning resources' (IFATE, 2024) and while some of the competencies ascribe to the need to form professional alliances with 'colleagues and stakeholders' (IFATE, 2024), there is little in the way of 'how' to support inclusion at curriculum planning and delivery stage. It is understandable that with a wide range of vocational areas within post-compulsory education, it would be incredibly challenging to provide a subject specialist SEND approach which could support for example Construction SEND learners and Performing Arts SEND learners, but it is equally challenging for pre-service trainees to receive generic tutor adjustments and adaptive strategies which do not seem to pertain to the SEND learners in their predominately skill-based classes.

For example, while generic adaptive strategies may include 'extra time', 'the employment of modified/prompted questioning methods' or 'repetition of key learning points for assimilation', these generic strategies are not related to demonstrable skills or a skill-based discipline. For example, learners undertaking an Entry 3 Construction Skills qualification as part of the foundation learning suite with no entry requirements (City and Guilds, 2022) are tasked with using hand tools for example and/or using measuring paraphernalia, but some learners with SEND needs will struggle with the physical skills required of them and generic adjustments as suggested above do not support this outcome. This scenario could be applied to any number of vocational subject disciplines and while it would be unreasonable to suggest that SEND training for disciplines is written into the generic ITT suite, more support is needed at delivery level through the adaptations that teacher educators and validating universities make when devising ITT curricula.

The positive news is that the proposed ITT framework for post-compulsory lecturers is complete with the first cohort expected to commence their professional Cert Ed/PGCE programmes 24/25 (UCET, 2024). While there have

been welcome improvements in the indicative content pertaining to SEND (NASEN, 2024), the idea of *perceived* levels of support for pre-service trainee teachers continues to echo when further considering the disparity between inclusion in theory versus the practical implications of creating SEND inclusive classrooms. Webster (2022, p. 64) writes of the anxiety that many teachers face when presented with SEND learners and conceded that 'the majority of the teachers interviewed … expressed uncertainty about how to deal with the challenges and sometimes complex difficulties posed by pupils with high-level SEND, often pointed to a lack of training'. In the Weber and Greiner's (2019) paper, teachers experiencing SEND inclusive subject specialist classrooms in practice had a vastly dissimilar experience versus what was theoretically described through their teacher training qualification. The idea that learners are individuals is one that pervades modern education, yet many trainee teachers only receive generic information about how to successfully employ adaptive teaching strategies, one which Yusuf (2023) believes could be overcome with mandatory SEND placements for all trainees.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

Considering the points raised above, there are several recommendations suggested that would better support and empower pre-service post-compulsory trainees to provide SEND inclusive classrooms.

- More work is needed to ensure that trainee teachers have the adequate support and knowledge to create SEND inclusive spaces. Dispelling anxiety through more visibility/immersion is a key driver in inclusion, and one recommendation from this research piece is that all trainee teachers undertake defined SEND training prior to enrolling in Cert Ed/PGCE programmes—perhaps through online programmes through organisations such as the Education and Training Foundation (ETF).
- Building on the suggestions of Yusuf (2023), a second recommendation is that all pre-service trainee teachers undertake SEND placements as part of their Cert Ed/PGCE programme. While this may be difficult logistically, the newly validated ITT programmes allow for a degree of flexibility regarding placements for trainees and, with support from those responsible for the delivery of the programmes, SEND observations/team teach activities could factor into logged placement hours.
- The final recommendation is that the teacher educators look to every possible opportunity to adapt the ITT core curriculum to ensure that trainees are supported to create activities, which are aligned to skill-based outcomes but support adaptive practice for inclusion. The 'know, do, think' technique (Swancutt, 2019) suggested in Graham's (2023) book, *Inclusive Teaching for the 21st Century* is an excellent framework to prompt subject specialist adaptive teaching in an easily accessible manner. The resource suggests that educators look at curriculum planning in a linear fashion, towards encouraging 'quality differentiated teaching practice' (QDTP) (Swancutt, 2019).

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The above research has touched on many themes when considering the level of support pre-service post-compulsory trainee teachers receive for creating SEND inclusive classrooms. Key themes have included teacher anxiety, lack of teacher awareness of SEND and the gap between theoretical SEND inclusion versus the practicality of SEND inclusion–yet all point to a definite need for improved teacher training with regard to SEND. With upcoming developments in the teacher training qualifications, there is some scope for SEND inclusion to be more of a priority, and combined with support from initial teacher training delivery staff, there is room to support trainee teachers to foster inclusion and create SEND inclusive classrooms, even in skill-based industries.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and supplementary reference list.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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