Developing autism content in teacher training courses

Following campaigning by the National Autistic Society it has been compulsory since September 2018 for all English Initial Teacher Training (ITT) courses to include content around autism to all their students. The aim is to improve Newly Qualified Teachers’ (NQT) understanding of autism and how being autistic may affect pupils' experiences of school. The training also aims to equip NQTs with practical teaching strategies to use in the classroom.

In 2016 Mark Lever from the National Autistic Society stated:

‘Every teacher deserves the right training and every autistic child needs a teacher who understands them.’

This article gives a brief overview of the work we are doing at Edge Hill University to develop autism content in our 3-year ITT degree: BA (Hons) in Early Years Education with Qualified Teacher Status.

Inclusive teaching

Promoting inclusive provision for all children with any kind of Special Education Need or Disability (SEND) is a priority in our degree course, and we have a central focus upon starting with the ‘unique child’ and celebrating diversity and difference.

For autistic pupils it is a key priority due to the high number of autistic pupils in mainstream schools, and the high exclusion rates for autistic pupils across the
education system. As a teaching team we also have two staff members with autistic children who have experienced first-hand some of the challenges for pupils and families.

Our course covers the 3-8 age range and most of our graduates begin teaching in nursery, reception or Key Stage 1 classes. This is a vital time for children and often signifies a child’s first experiences away from home and in the education system. It is also a time when initial concerns might be identified, when children and families may be going through the assessment process and a time when early supportive interventions are vital.

Our aim in developing our degree course content was that we did not want autism awareness to be a token add-on session. We wanted students to:

- develop a deepened awareness of the individuality of the autism spectrum and how being autistic affects different children
- be confident in working jointly with families to offer positive practical support and creative provision.

What we did

We began by auditing our teaching modules for content around inclusion and SEND. Our degree course already covered a great deal of content around this including:

- historical background to inclusion and SEND provision
- SEND Code of Practice and current legislation
- provision mapping of support in schools and nurseries
- multi-agency working and the roles of different professionals
- importance of early identification and early intervention
- working in partnership with families
- features of inclusive Early Years and Key Stage 1 classroom environments
- potential barriers to learning for different groups of learners and practical strategies to address these
- supporting transitions for children with SEND
- celebrating difference and diversity in the Early Years principles to becoming an inclusive practitioner.
We began by ensuring that all this content promoted the inclusive teaching approaches that we want our future teachers to have, and to make explicit reference to autistic children within all of these.

Alongside this, we built in specific content around autism. This included:

- overview of characteristics of autism
- diagnostic pathways and roles of different professionals
- how to raise/ and follow up concerns and support families with the assessment process
- consideration of potential difficulties a child may face when entering an Early Years classroom
- different intervention and support strategies and starting points for provision.

Our focus throughout is upon the unique child. No two autistic children are the same and so teaching and learning provision needs to be individualised for every child. Students need to have the confidence to work jointly with families and to observe and interact with a child to identify the best ways to support them.

Our focus is upon giving our students enough understanding of the core characteristics of autism to give them clear lens through which to assess a child. We want them to look beyond external behaviours to understand what makes an individual child tick.

- Is a child finding the classroom environment challenging due to sensory needs?
- Is a child struggling to follow classroom routines due to needing clearer communication strategies?
- Is a child presenting with certain behaviours because they are frustrated?

It is only after careful observation and working with children and families that teachers will be able to plan effectively for support and appropriate next steps.

We use a case study approach to promote the idea of the unique child. During our teaching sessions, we consider five very different children who present differently in terms of their communication, their social interaction and their behaviour. Each child is at a different stage in the assessment/diagnosis process and is in a different type of school or nursery. This approach allows us to explore many different issues and approaches and gives our students a breadth
of understanding and a range of practical support strategies on which to build when they go into a classroom.

To ensure that our students reflect upon autistic pupils in relation to all areas of the curriculum, we use a reflective diary approach. After each teaching session in their final year, we ask students to reflect upon the implications of what they have just learnt for autistic children in the classroom. They can choose a different focus each time - for example sensory, communication etc. This ensures that students continue to reflect upon this varied group of learners and develop practical ideas to support their future teaching.

Our students communicate to us that they find our autism content very valuable when they go out on teaching practice, and that their learning develops even further when they finally get to work with an autistic child and their family. While this is something that can be difficult to recreate in a university setting, the students on our postgraduate teaching course have all gone out into SEND specialist schools for an additional week to gain more experience. The feedback from students who have done this has been amazing and we are looking at building this into our 3-year degree course in the near future.

We are lucky as a teaching team that we have some autism knowledge due to our previous professional roles in schools. Nevertheless, we are keen to develop our degree content and to do research around the best ways to equip our future teachers to be the kind of knowledgeable, understanding and inclusive teachers that we would all like to be.

Ultimately, we want them to view having an autistic child in their class as a great opportunity to support this child and their family, and to develop their own practice. No parent would expect a teacher to know everything there is to know about autism, but they would want a teacher who views their child in a positive way, is keen to learn more about their child and will work together with them as a family.

We would be keen to hear from any parents, teachers or other university professionals doing similar work.