

LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN PRIMARY CLASSROOMS

Delivering the Whole Curriculum

Edited by
Kevin Jones and Tony Charlton

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS



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KEVIN JONES AND TONY CHARLTON

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Introduction

Teachers work within a climate of constant change. At times, these changes and their associated demands, generate considerable anxieties and concerns within members of the profession. The Education Reform Act (1988), and the implementation of the national curriculum in particular, are currently placing burgeoning demands upon staff in schools, whose energies are already being challenged by other innovation.

The new legislation states that all pupils, including those who have special educational needs, share the same statutory entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum, including access to the national curriculum. Consequently, it is the responsibility of all teachers to ensure that this entitlement is translated into good practice. For many teachers this new challenge will necessitate the provision of appropriate guidance and support to help them to respond satisfactorily to these demands.

This book focuses upon primary and middle schools and is directed towards the professional training needs and/or general interests of:

- classteachers
- special educational needs' support teachers
- headteachers and senior staff
- governors
- parents
- members of support services
- teachers on pre- and in-service courses
- educational psychologists
- others involved with, or otherwise concerned for, pupils with special educational needs.

The contents offer clear, practical guidelines to help ensure that the full breadth of the curriculum is made as available to children with special educational needs as the rest of their peers.

Part I discusses the nature of learning difficulties and – with reference to research carried out by the editors – examines ways in which learning difficulties can be recognised during the early years of education. Having addressed concerns

about the appraisal of special educational needs, the book continues by examining ways in which education should be provided in 'special' ways within the context of the wider curriculum.

In Part II, contributors focus upon key curriculum areas. First, they discuss particular difficulties which children may experience in each area. Second, they offer practical suggestions to help teachers in their efforts to maximise children's learning performance in the classroom.

Part III examines ways in which pupils' learning can be supported within classrooms, schools and homes. Within these chapters the writers discuss – and stress the importance of – the need to develop 'partnerships with pupils, parents and professionals' and make appropriate use of 'microtechnology'.

Part I

Recognising special educational needs within the primary classroom

In Chapter 1, Kevin Jones discusses how, over a number of years, teachers, parents and other professionals, have been presented with a variety of explanations for children's learning difficulties. He explains that whilst some of these accounts have located the 'source' of difficulties within the child, others have identified problems within the curriculum which is presented to the child. He then examines the shortcomings of these explanations and considers the range of factors which must be taken into account when describing the learning difficulties which are experienced by children. As a conclusion, he presents a model for the recognition of learning difficulties in primary classrooms.

The question of access to the national curriculum is the subject of Chapter 2, where Tony Charlton discusses ways in which aspects of children's emotional (mal)functioning can 'block' their ability to profit from the mainstream curriculum. He then focuses upon the association between learning difficulties and emotional problems before exploring ways in which emotional problems can generate learning difficulties (such as reading problems) which may then impede access to the mainstream curriculum. To conclude, attention is drawn to the crucial role of the classteacher in identifying, and making appropriate provisions to meet, children's emotional needs. By ensuring that such provision is appropriate, teachers may 'unblock' the 'block' that impeded meaningful access to the national curriculum.

Finally, in Chapter 3, Bill Brown explores and develops arguments for a broad-based primary curriculum that serves the interests of all children, irrespective of their special educational needs. With reference to the Educational Reform Act (1988), DES Circulars and LEA guidelines, he discusses ways in which teachers can make the breadth of the national curriculum accessible to their pupils.



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Chapter 1

Recognising successes and difficulties in learning

Kevin Jones

Very few of us would wish to marginalise children who experience difficulties in learning by excluding them from the full range of educational opportunities which are available to the majority of children of their age. This spirit is echoed in statements which suggest that: *all* children should have access to a broad, balanced, coherent and relevant curriculum (National Curriculum Council, 1989).

The making of statements is relatively easy. Similarly, the majority of us feel comfortable with the notion that *all* children, including those who are experiencing learning difficulties, should enjoy equality of access to the breadth of educational experiences which are enjoyed by their peers. Translating those rights into reality, however, is much more difficult.

Many children will require special consideration and support (ILEA, 1985) if the above aims are to be achieved. These requirements will present teachers, parents and associated professionals with a considerable, but not insurmountable, challenge. In our attempts to provide for children with special educational needs, we are likely to encounter a variety of obstacles (e.g. lack of time, resources, knowledge) which may impede our efforts to help the children concerned. Those obstacles must not be brushed aside. Like all other factors which help or hinder access to learning, they must be assessed and responded to. If we are serious in our attempts to open up the breadth and depth of the curriculum for all children, we must attempt to recognise and attend to all factors which facilitate or hinder such access. This book aims to provide guidance for those who are engaged in that task.

The particular focus of the first two chapters is upon ways in which teachers, pupils, parents and other professionals can join together to:

- (a) seek out those factors which help or hinder access to the breadth of the curriculum;
- (b) use that information to describe a pupil's special educational needs;
- (c) give appropriate consideration and support to that child, in order that s/he gains access to the breadth and depth of the curriculum.

CHOOSING THE BEST APPROACH

There are many different ways in which children's special educational needs can be appraised. Tests abound, as do checklists, rating scales and advice on observation and recording procedures. In choosing the best approach we must ensure that our overall strategy is the one which leads to the most accurate description of the child's special educational needs and the most appropriate form of provision.

A QUESTION OF BALANCE

At this juncture, it is important to clarify what we mean when we refer to the special educational needs of children who experience difficulties in learning. There are many different ways of interpreting the word 'special', each having considerable impact upon the kind of provision which is made for the children concerned. This can be illustrated by comparing two different interpretations.

First, let us consider the word 'special' when it is applied to the needs of children in an educational context. In 1988, Jones and Charlton conducted a questionnaire survey, to which 35 primary school teachers from three local education authorities responded. Teachers were asked, amongst other things, to describe the special educational needs of children in their classes. The completed questionnaires revealed a number of descriptions of 'special' educational needs. For example, teachers suggested that particular children had a special need for:

- programmes of work to help with visual perception
- listening activities
- activities to help with sequencing in written language
- speech therapy
- pencil control activities
- phonic development
- intensive input to develop pre-writing skills
- computer programmes for spelling
- precise objectives in number
- structured handwriting programmes

Without exception, the children were said to have a special need for additional provision which focused on the difficulties which they encountered.

The descriptions of special educational needs which emerged from the completed questionnaires produced very few surprises given the fact that teachers, parents and other professionals have been encouraged to conceptualise 'special educational needs' in a particular way. Under the terms of the 1981 Education Act (DES, 1981) a child is considered to have special educational needs if s/he has learning difficulties which are greater than those encountered by the majority of pupils of the same age, which require special educational provision to be made. Thus, in relation to educational needs, the word 'special' is

often directly associated with the need for extra provision which responds to a child's difficulties in learning.

Now let us consider a different interpretation of the word 'special', within the context of our own all-round needs. When groups of adults are asked to produce descriptions of their 'special' needs the resultant list, of which the following is typical, has quite a different flavour. Adults often suggest that they have a special need for:

- love
- health
- happiness
- concern for others
- a nice place to live
- time to spend with their family
- reading
- opportunities to walk in the countryside
- money
- nice clothes
- opportunities to play tennis or go sailing

This list consists of a lot of pleasant things (and there are many others which could be added); things which those people enjoy, are interested in, concerned about, or within which they have already experienced some success. Whilst some adults consider that they have a special need to learn to do something which they find difficult, often they tend to relegate it to the bottom of their list.

So why is the interpretation of the term 'special needs', in an educational context, so different for children? Why do so many 'statements' of special educational need refer only to those things which children cannot do? Are not their special educational needs similar in flavour to our all-round needs?

Special educational provision can easily get 'out of balance' by 'focusing upon those things which the child cannot do, rather than building upon those things which the child is interested in, enjoys doing and within which some success has already been experienced' (see Figure 1.1).

There are two aspects of special educational need. Firstly there are: (a) those special needs which relate to the child's interests, concerns and successes; and secondly there are: (b) those special needs which relate to the difficulties which a child encounters.

In our desire to help particular children we often focus heavily upon the latter of the two aspects, thereby creating an unbalanced form of provision. 'Special' means building upon successes as well as responding to difficulties.

Fortunately, there is a simple way to redress the balance. Turn the term 'special educational needs' around, so that it reads, 'needs educational special' and analyse a particular child's special educational needs in that order:

1. *Needs* What are the child's all-round needs?

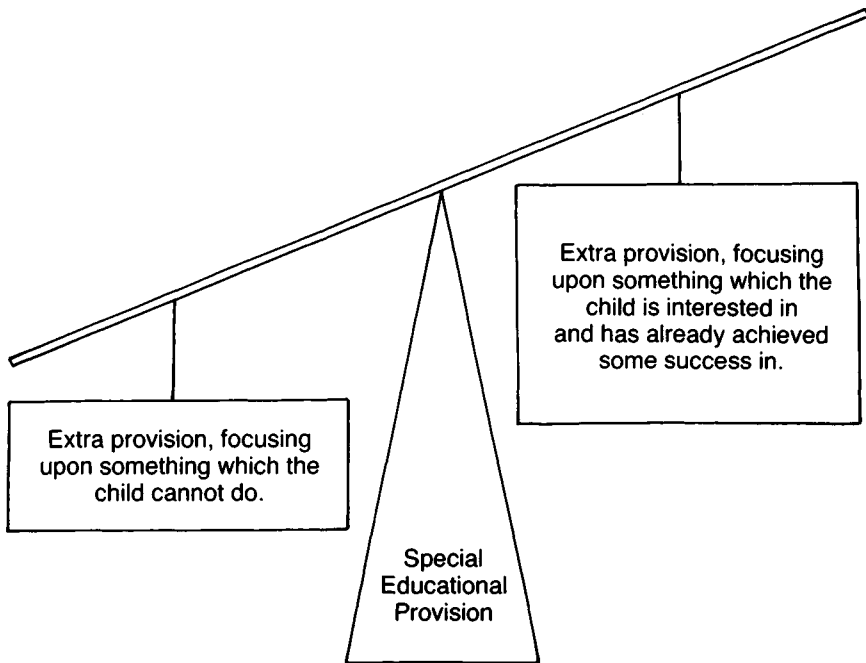


Figure 1.1

2. *Educational* What are the child's educational needs?
3. *Special* What factors cause the child to experience successes and difficulties in learning? How can that information be used to give the child access to the breadth of educational needs outlined in 2 and to the fulfilment of their all-round needs in 1?

The following text illustrates how a consideration of the above components, in the suggested order, can lead to a more balanced picture of a child's 'special educational needs'.

All-round needs

If we were to ask children to describe their own special educational needs (as indeed we should as part of a comprehensive appraisal of their needs) they would be likely to come up with a list which is quite different from that drawn up by their teachers. Their list would probably contain items similar to those chosen by adults. Children typically suggest that they have a special need for:

- activities which are of particular interest or concern to them
- opportunities to pursue areas of the curriculum within which they have already experienced success

- activities in which they can gain approval
- learning which involves them actively

Some children realise that they need to develop skills and understanding in areas within which they encounter difficulties, but such 'special' needs are not high on their list.

Thus, our first task in planning appropriate provision for children who experience difficulties in learning is to ensure that the overall pattern of the school day feels 'special' to them. If we respond to their all-round needs, the resultant learning experiences will provide a motivating context within which we can begin to help them to overcome specific difficulties. This view has been previously expressed by Rowland (1987) who suggests that:

if our concern leads us to concentrate primarily upon devising a machinery for diagnosing children and preparing detailed packages for learning according to clearly defined objectives, I fear we shall be missing out on the heart of what these children, and indeed all learners, need from their teachers. The need is for teaching- and learning-relationships in which the children's interests, abilities and concerns are seen to be at the centre of their curriculum, and in which their expressions – whether in writing, painting, speech or other symbols – are taken as being serious endeavours to communicate something of significance.

The challenge with which children who experience learning difficulties present us is to listen more carefully, and take bolder steps towards understanding their world, as reflected in the choices they make and the interpretations they form of their environment. Such a challenge is not easily met in the classroom.

The importance of providing a learning context which involves children actively in purposeful and interesting activities is a recurrent theme throughout this book.

The process of matching teaching and learning experiences to the all-round needs of children can be refined even further by probing the particular interests and concerns of individual pupils. This process, which often leads to successful learning outcomes, was clearly evident in the case of Mark, a nine-year-old pupil who had experienced considerable difficulties in learning to read over the four years of his formal schooling. A discussion, at which Mark and his parents were present, revealed that he had a particular interest in farming and farm-machinery, interests which had emerged from several visits to his uncle's farm. On the basis of this information the context within which the teaching of reading was based was changed. 'Fiction' from reading-schemes was replaced with 'factual texts' related to farming. This change of context, coupled with other factors (e.g. the introduction of paired-reading) helped Mark to develop an interest in books, a desire to develop his reading skills and experience considerable success.

When the child's all-round needs have been considered in detail, the focus of

our attention can shift towards an examination of the breadth of their educational needs.

Educational needs

Special educational provision has often been criticised for being narrow in focus; for concentrating upon the ‘basics’ at the expense of other educational needs.

Over recent years many statements have appeared (see Chapter 3) which affirm that:

All pupils share the right to a broad and balanced curriculum, including the national curriculum. The right extends to every registered pupil of compulsory school age attending a maintained, or grant maintained school, whether or not he or she has a statement of special educational needs.

(National Curriculum Council, 1989)

This right is implicit in the Education Reform Act (1988) which entitles every pupil in maintained schools to a curriculum which is balanced and broadly-based and which: (a) promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils, and (b) prepares such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

The Act also sets out certain key elements which must figure in every pupil’s curriculum. They include:

- religious education for all pupils at county and voluntary schools, except those in nursery classes
- the national curriculum for those of compulsory school age in maintained schools. All pupils in primary schools should have access to: the core subjects of English, Mathematics and Science; and the foundation subjects of Technology (including design), History, Geography, Music, Art and Physical Education.

Thus, it is no longer appropriate to confine those children who experience difficulties in learning to an unbalanced diet of reading, spelling and arithmetic. Like all other children they are entitled to the breadth of educational experiences outlined above.

There are two senses in which the breadth of a child’s educational needs should be considered. Firstly, we must ensure their participation across key aspects of learning (i.e. the core and foundation areas, religious education, and other important cross-curricular areas such as Health Education and Education for Citizenship). Secondly, we should ensure that children are able to gain access to the breadth of learning within each of the core and foundation areas. For example, in mathematics children should not be confined to ‘number’. They should be given the opportunity to participate in other areas of the mathematics curriculum such as: ‘using number, algebra and measures in practical tasks to solve real-life problems’, and ‘selecting, interpreting and using appropriate data’

(DES 1985: National Curriculum Council, 1989a). Likewise, in English, children should not be restricted to a diet of 'phonics'. We must ensure, amongst other things, that they: 'are able to understand the spoken word, express themselves effectively,' and 'develop information-retrieval skills' (National Curriculum Council, 1989b).

Children can be introduced to all these areas of learning from the earliest stages of their education. For example, it is a fallacy to suggest that children need to 'know their sounds' before they can become involved in information-retrieval, which can be achieved through the use of pictures and home-made 'factual' books in the first instance.

Special educational needs

Finally, we must turn our attention to the special consideration and support which children will require if they are to fulfil their all-round needs and gain access to the breadth of their educational needs.

Basically, there are two different ways of determining the special consideration or support which a particular child will require. On the one hand, we could attempt to:

- (a) identify and describe the child's successes in learning;
- (b) recognise factors which lead to those successes;
- (c) use that information to design similar learning experiences in areas of the curriculum within which that child is encountering difficulties.

On the other hand, we could try to:

- (d) identify and describe the difficulties which are being experienced by the child;
- (e) recognise factors which cause those difficulties;
- (f) modify the learning environment so that those factors are less likely to cause difficulties in the future.

Unfortunately, many professionals rely on the latter perspective. That is a pity, because the information which emerges from a recognition of factors which cause the pupil to experience success in learning is often equally (or even more) valuable. Since both perspectives have the potential for yielding relevant information they will both be discussed in the final parts of this chapter.

RECOGNISING FACTORS WHICH LEAD TO SUCCESSFUL LEARNING

A number of writers (e.g. Lindsay and Galloway, 1988) have claimed that it is only possible to identify and describe a child's special educational needs by appraising the reasons for their successes as well as their difficulties.

We can begin this process by using a procedure which has been referred to as ecological mapping (Laten and Katz, 1975). This procedure is designed to

estimate the 'fit' of a pupil into various aspects of the learning environment. A teacher or associated professional can create an ecological map in the following way:

First Note the settings in which the pupil operates (see Figure 1.2).

Second Note those areas in which the child is experiencing both success and difficulty. On the ecological map, areas of success are indicated by solid lines between the child's name and the relevant area. Similarly, areas of difficulty are shown by broken lines (see Figure 1.3).

Note: In some areas (e.g. Maths) a child might experience success in, for example, 'measure', whilst encountering difficulties in others, such as 'number'. The ecological map can easily be adapted to accommodate this additional information (see Figure 1.3, in which Maths is now split into the two areas of number and measure).

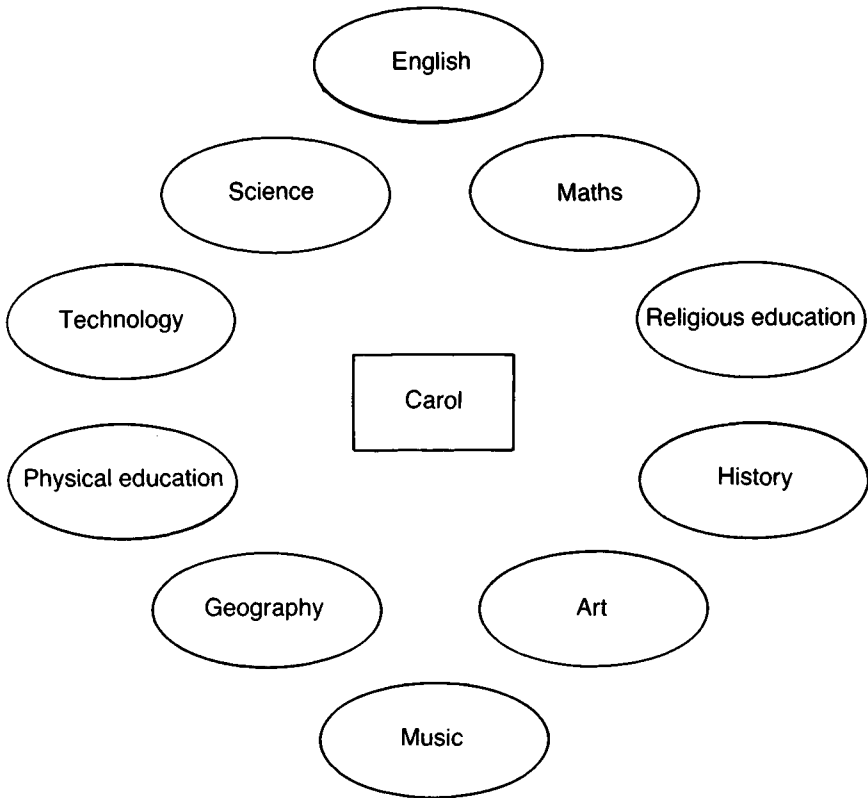


Figure 1.2

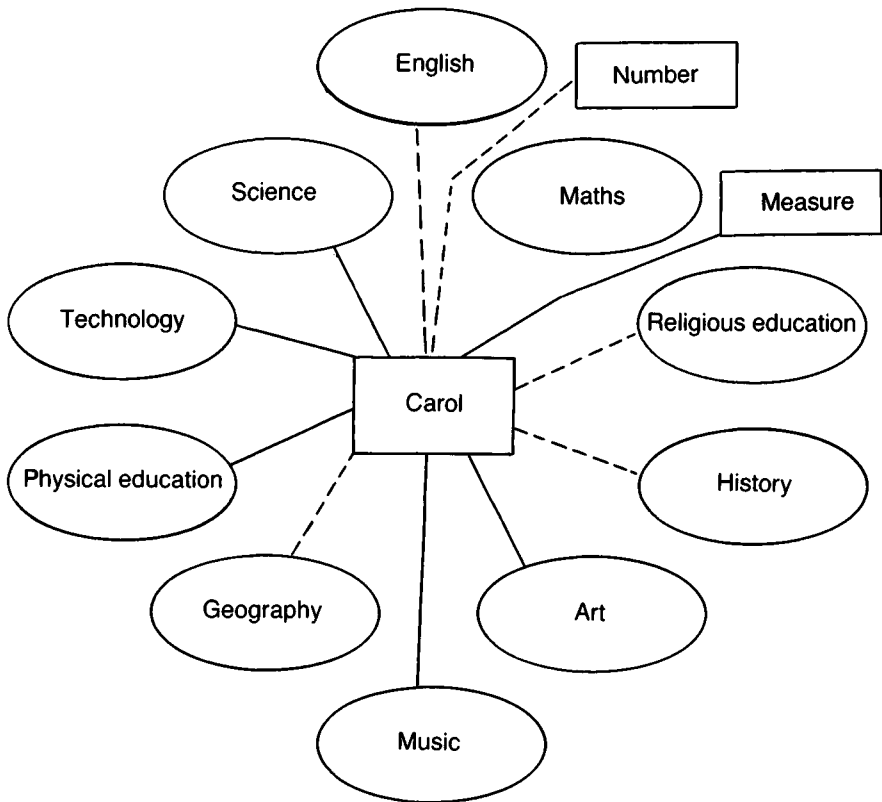


Figure 1.3

Third Examine factors within those settings which appear to be contributing to those successes. This stage of analysis revealed that Carol was achieving success in those areas of the curriculum which typically involved:

- hands-on, active approaches to learning
- a balance between paired/group work and class teaching
- a variety of methods of recording (e.g. diagrams, photographs, models, discussion, written, graphical)

The structure of lessons in which Carol appeared to achieve the most success comprised:

- a short introduction in which the teacher conveyed the purpose of the whole lesson to the class, or to a group of children
- a period of time in which the children, in pairs or small groups, were allowed to explore the materials/resources which the teacher had prepared for them
- an instructional period during which the teacher gave some background infor-