

## **SUPPORTING PUPILS WITH SPECIAL/ADDITIONAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

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### **Background**

I began my educational career as a support assistant working with pupils in Years 6-10 (ages 10-16) with emotional and behavioural difficulties. The main portion of my experience came from working at a UK Comprehensive School (supporting pupils aged 11-16) that served 1841 pupils, of which 113 were on the Special Need Register. Of these, I supported 10 with severe/complex Specific Learning Difficulties, diagnosed as dyslexic. I supported groups of up to 4 pupils in withdrawal lessons and some on a one to one basis 25 hours a week. The learners I worked with were all on Model 3.3 of the Code of Practice (attending a mainstream school with a Resource Base for Specific Learning Difficulties). They received speech and language lessons at the Resource Base an hour a day and were supported in all mainstream lessons with high literacy content, and also in Mathematics and Science.

They all had similar difficulties with visual sequencing, and /or auditory sequencing and sound blending. Some had further problems with handwriting, dyspraxic tendencies, moderate learning difficulties, and issues with social skills and behaviour, all of which combined to cause difficulties in reading spelling and comprehension skills, as well as poor planning and organisational skills. But each was a unique individual, with his or her own strengths, weaknesses, learning style, and special "Good Morning, Miss" smile.

The aims of their special needs provision were to improve their literacy skills via an individually tailored multi-sensory learning programme, to help them access the curriculum more easily through in-class support and by teaching them strategies to ultimately give them independence and improve their confidence. My job was to help them to do just that.

The pupils I worked with were severely dyslexic, and the experiences I have listed reflect that. The support details below are just as applicable to any learner from infants to adults who have difficulties in literacy or numeracy. The strategies may need to be tailored to age and curriculum and tailored to suit the individual, but the same basic needs are there. I supported all the areas of literacy in a variety of ways, all different for each learner, for although they share similar difficulties, they can manifest themselves in different ways. I have found that concrete learning procedures are most successful, that repetition and reinforcement via multi-sensory teaching methods works well. If a learner does something himself it will mean more and be retained better than if they are just told how to do it. In my experience, this works well for dyslexic learners, no matter what the difficulty.

For these varied learners, support demands were often very different, yet there were ample similarities. My approach was the same; support the child. Their approach was the same; they needed help.

### **Support**

As a Support Assistant, I view my role as one of not only providing educational support, but supporting the learners as individuals, taking a genuine interest in them and being someone whom they can trust, and who they can approach, in or out of class, to represent them and voice their concerns to the subject teacher, speech and language teacher or SENCo and other professionals. In short, an ally, guide, confidante and advocate.

In my position it was essential to know and understand teaching methods and language support techniques used, the best support strategies to use for the learner to get the best results, and the expectations of the learner. That was the easy part; that much I could get from their IEP. In order to best support a learner with Special Needs it is vital to know their problems as individuals, but it must be remembered that the child comes first, not the difficulties.

The first and most important thing in supporting a child is to get to know the child. I always try to find out as much as I can about their interests, who their friends are, what pets they have, what they do at weekends. To best support a child you have to know them and gain their trust, and get them to see you as someone who is always there for them, not just another member of staff who is there because they are paid to get them to work, or may not have the time for them as people whilst trying to get through all they have to learn that day. With the best will in the world, teachers are over-stretched; time is short and divided between everyone in the class.

But over-familiarity should be avoided. They still have to see you as an authority figure, but a friendly one, but always be ready to admit when you make mistakes, that you struggle with things, that you fail sometimes and you know what they are going through, if only in a small way. A one-to-one support situation is unique in that you spend more time with the child than anyone that may ever work with him and the bond between you is a very special relationship based on trust. This may sometimes mean you are let into their confidence about situations you would rather not know. If it is something that places the child in danger, you have to report it, first telling the child that you have to do this for their own good. Otherwise the information they share with you should be taken to the grave, like the sacred trust shared with a doctor, priest or solicitor. Betray a child's trust and they will never forgive you, and you can never forgive yourself.

I have lost count of the times children called me "Mum." It still makes me smile. One of my most treasured possessions is a piece of glass tubing filled with sand and sealed at both ends that was given to me by a 14 year old boy with emotional and behavioural difficulties, with the face of a cherub, the voice of an angel and a life you would never wish on your worst enemy.

### **Practicalities**

On a practical level, when supporting any learner in a mainstream lesson, before we started I would ensure they were seated with a clear view of the teacher, the OHP or whiteboard. I would then ask him them how they were that day. I would chat briefly about things I know they are interested in, ask how they found the last homework, address any problems with the class teacher and ensure that they have all the appropriate equipment needed for the lesson. I always carried a spare set of everything from pencils to a spellchecker and calculator etc. I would then ensure they had the correct textbooks and exercise books for that lesson, open to the correct pages. If they did not have them, I would borrow whatever was necessary.

I would encourage them to follow the teacher whenever possible, making notes myself to repeat key points and all instructions later for reinforcement. For those with auditory processing and/or short-term memory difficulties this was a lifesaver, because by the time the teacher came to the end of a sentence the child may have forgotten the start, misunderstood words from the middle and it all makes no sense at all. Having auditory sequential difficulties and poor short-term memory myself, this was essential for me too.

I would reassure them if they seemed unsure about the work set, and promote self-confidence. I always emphasised that they were not alone, that they could always ask me for help, often the hardest thing to do. I also encouraged them to approach the teacher, to see them as a person they can turn to, which is vital when unsupported.

It was up to me to ensure that I first gave of my best, in seeing that all the needs of the learner are addressed, for only when happy and confident in themselves and in the support provided for them, can they be expected to give of their best. When he was relaxed and happy, we would begin, usually well after the rest of the class, but the teachers would allow extra time for this, and we would continue when we were ready, or when I could take notes allowing them to finish writing. To this end, an understanding between support staff and teachers of what the child needs is essential to help the learner get the best out of the lesson, and to make allowances for him and assist as much as they can when unsupported. This is where supporting pupils also becomes advocating for them.

I would always emphasise that we work through the tasks together, one small achievable step at a time, always ensuring they understood all written and verbal instructions given and repeated them as often as necessary. I would ask how the learner wanted to approach the task, give guidance if they were unsure and suggest possible alternatives, thus promoting planning skills and independent learning. To this end I carried copies of blank templates, charts, tables and spider diagrams to paste in their books, thus saving time and providing a structure to work from. A small whiteboard is a good way to encourage independence in planning, it is portable, and can be wiped clean instantly to alter anything or correct spelling errors.

Those with auditory sequential memory difficulties can often have an inability to take down dictation (combined with writing difficulties, they forget what has been said, and take longer than normal to write things down, thus making it harder to remember). This is often made worse by being unsure of spellings. They can easily fall behind and miss sections of work, so to overcome this, when supporting I would write all dictated notes on paper for them to copy (again the use of a small whiteboard is ideal for this purpose) and if unable to copy at all I would write directly into their book. If they had visual sequencing or perceptual difficulties and could not copy from a board or overhead projector, we would use the same strategy. In some lessons, teachers would provide overhead sheets to copy once they had explained them to the class, thus allowing time for the concept to sink in, or even give prepared sheets to copy or keep, but where this is not done, I would encourage the learner to copy these notes from the learner next to them, (a helpful class buddy is always a good idea for unsupported lessons) which causes less visual disorientation than looking up and down to the overhead projector.

To ensure that important information was not forgotten (such as homework, tests, visits, event dates, library books to be returned and timetable changes), I would ensure it was written in a diary at the end of each lesson, and encourage highlighting of any tests and assignments due. Highlighting is also a useful tool in drawing the attention to facts emphasised by the teacher for revision, especially for those with difficulties in scanning and skimming.

When reading I would ensure they were on the correct page and would encourage them to follow the text with a ruler or line marker where they were comfortable with this. For those with visual discrimination and sequencing difficulties this ensures they keep their place on the page. If the learner was unable to read the text himself I would do so for them. One of the extra tasks I undertook as a support assistant was to record myself reading the set English reading books for the pupils each term, onto audiocassette. The purpose of this was for them to be able to simultaneously read and listen to a few chapters at a time prior to the next lesson, in preparation and to help them with comprehension and enjoyment of the text, and which could be used at the learners own pace and replayed if necessary. This multi-sensory method helped the information to be more easily understood and compensated for a weakness in either visual and/or auditory processing. This technique was also used for those with less severe difficulties when support readers were overstretched in examination situations, by pre-recording the questions.

I would ensure they always numbered and dated work appropriately with the right heading, which can lead to great confusion if not done correctly. I would also encourage them to think before writing anything down, taking a few minutes to plan sentence structure, ask if they needed spellings and providing them where required or encouraging use of a dictionary or spellchecker where time allowed. Looking for spellings of key words in the text is a useful exercise in independent learning, as is the correct use of a dictionary (which can be a problem to many, and which should be encouraged as often as possible), or a portable spellchecker. Neat writing and presentation is often a problem for those with special needs, and staying on task and completing as much work as possible (not easy for those with distractibility issues) should be encouraged and praised.

Where the learner has poor handwriting to the extent that it is illegible, I was allowed to scribe for

them, also when time was short. Often learners are taught to use a word-processor in these cases, which can be used in examinations and tests. I would often act as a reader where the learner was unable to read the test or examinations and scribe under those circumstances too.

When scribing for a child (writing their dictated answers for them) it is essential to write exactly what is dictated, no matter how nonsensical, because to do so will not benefit the child or give a true reflection of their abilities, weaknesses and where they need help. Teachers have been amazed at the quality of scribed work, implying that I and others have actually written it, but a child with expressive writing difficulties caused by handwriting, transference of thought to text and spelling problems, can dictate freely what they have in their mind and not be hampered by the mechanics of putting it all on paper, often using far better vocabulary that they are able to spell. In fact, their work reflects their intellect not their difficulties, like everyone else without the difficulties, and in this way they are given the right and the means to express it.

Class discussions and question sessions can be a nightmare. It is often very hard for those with special needs to participate in a class situation, for those with poor self-confidence and fear of getting things wrong and being laughed at, but I would encourage the learners I worked with to participate as much as possible. To avoid embarrassment I would suggest they put ideas to me first to check if they were relevant to the topic before raising their hand appropriately and speaking when asked. This advice was not always taken, but I would praise the child for having the courage to take part and a good teacher would do the same. The sense of achievement gained from “getting it right” and contributing to class discussion is immeasurable. It also helps their peers to see that they are a valuable member of the class too, with ideas and imagination and so much more to offer than many realised, and this has often surprised their teacher too.

### **Organisation**

One of the problems faced by those with special needs is an inability to organise personal possessions. Forgetting essential books or equipment can lead to reprimands and possible punishment by class teachers. In order to prevent this and promote independent organisational skills, I would encourage the use of pictorial timetables and planning charts. These can be made appropriate to the age and needs of the child by incorporating their personal interests and appropriate colourful clipart. Visual learners particularly benefit from this sensory input. With help they can make them themselves and if it proves successful, this will promote self-esteem and stop them getting into trouble for something that is, after all, not their fault, but another symptom of their difficulties. These can be made a portable size to fit into a pencil case to help with planning their school day, as the concept of time, and sequencing events can be another problem area. Multiplication squares can also be reduced to pocket size for use in class with the teacher’s permission, (as well as calculators in science class), to avoid embarrassment and lessening the stress of another area of particular difficulty to those with special needs and which can still promote panic in grown men, as no matter how they try, some will never learn their tables.

### **Social Skills and Behaviour**

Many of the pupils I have worked with had difficult behaviour, social skills and anger management problems. The only solution I can advise is patience, reminding them what is acceptable behaviour and letting them know that if they behave inappropriately there are consequences. Lead by example, always be polite and courteous and try not to raise your voice even under extreme provocation. The children I worked with knew they had gone too far when my voice became very quiet. Those who have difficult home backgrounds are so used to being shouted at that it has no effect whatsoever; I tried to make them feel secure and let them know that it was their behaviour I didn’t like but I still liked them. Positive reinforcement helps too, praising them when they behave well, speak politely, or go a whole lesson without shouting out an answer etc. If you come across defiance, stand your ground calmly and politely. If they become aggressive to another pupil, inform the class teacher and remove them from the situation if possible and give them time to calm down. Let them see that you disapprove but that you will help them get through this because you know it isn’t how they want to be.

If possible speak to them about this after class when the child is away from his classmates. Embarrassing them in front of their peers is, I feel, unnecessary and unforgivable. Teachers should always be informed of any lapses in behaviour as they can reflect an underlying cause, problems with work, or at home or even bullying. Uncharacteristic outbursts are especially telling. In all cases I have found a quiet word in confidence will work better; even the worst behaved child will take it to heart if told calmly and without fuss, tell them if they have upset you, tell them you are surprised that they would, you thought you worked well together etc. If they tell you they don't agree then you need to know and put it right. Always try to remember that inside even the worst shouting, spitting, verbally abusive, physically aggressive, foul-mouthed youngster, there is a child who wants to be liked. Behaviour is a symptom not a life sentence. Put aside your pride, get past your anger and put the child first. You may be their only hope to change, the person who sees them as a child, not a problem.

### **Concluding**

Just as all children are different, children's difficulties can manifest themselves in a variety of ways, and it is necessary to encourage them to develop various strategies that suit them as an individual, to enable them to cope with these problems daily. No matter how much support is given to a child they need to be able to work alone at some point, where their difficulties allow, at home as much as in unsupported lessons, so promoting independence and confidence is of vital importance. These special children often experience failure, have poor self-esteem, may feel worthless and that they will never achieve anything. I always praised as much as possible, their effort and attitude to the work, no matter what the result, or that they remembered to bring in a book, had a new pencil, even that they "look smart this morning". Praise is paramount and costs nothing.

Special Needs cannot be cured. No one can wave a magic wand and take it all away. But with the right sort of support and encouragement, the children we work with can acquire strategies to help them to cope with the problems they face. This will, in turn, promote confidence, allowing them to learn and achieve to the capacity of their intelligence and determination, and not be limited in their enjoyment of life by their learning difficulties. Academic achievement isn't everything. A happy well adjusted child who comes out of school laughing at the end of the day, clutching a stickman they drew alone for the first time, will have gained more than a child who has it all at the touch of their fingertips and a sackful of qualifications. That is true achievement. I have seen both and I know where true happiness lies.

Special Needs Support Assistants need three main qualities: patience, an open mind and a sense of humour. If you have these, you are prepared for anything. It also helps to have a thick skin, the negotiating skills of a United Nations envoy, a readiness to use bribery and blackmail, knowledge of all current trends in music, TV programmes and video games and even be prepared to stand on your head! (They are, in fact, many of the attributes familiar to many parents, especially those of a child with special needs.) But most needed is a willingness to support, in all ways.

It may not be the best-paid job in the world, but I learned as much from the children I was blessed to work with as they did from me; the memories and the laughter, the tears and the joy in the simplest of achievements, the anger and frustration and the feelings of inadequacy. And that was just from me...

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