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The SENCO as a leader of professional learning for inclusive practice.

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1. Introduction

This chapter explores the theory and practice of professional development for inclusive practice. The SENCO's remit to 'inspire inclusive practice' (Wharton, Codina, Middleton and Esposito, 2019, p16) through leading teacher learning and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is theoretically framed within *epistemologies of difference* and *ontologies of change* so that the challenges of this remit are treated with the depth they demand. The chapter defends *practice inquiry* for transformational teacher development towards inclusion. Using the example of Lesson Study, it explores Practice Inquiry as a form of CPD of value to SENCOs. A core argument in the chapter is that Practice Inquiry has the capacity to loosen unhelpful, obdurate paradigms of learning difficulty with positive consequences for practice. The purpose of the chapter is to provide a meaningful framework for SENCOs to theorise their CPD remit and how it might be implemented to make inclusion more enduringly manifest in the classroom.

2. 'To know' and 'to be' for inclusive practice: ontological and epistemological approaches to difficulty in learning

In order to theorise about the role of the SENCO as a leader of professional learning for inclusive practice, it is important to begin with some clarification of terms. What is meant by the term ontology in the construct *ontologies of change* and what is meant by the term epistemology in the construct *epistemologies of differences*? Though these terms are abstract, they can be explained quite simply. Ontology means the study of existence. Ontological study focusses on what it means to exist and what is in the world. Ontology asks about the material of reality and how this material can be labelled and classified. To support further explanation, we will consider two broad ontological positions on the nature of reality, *constructionism* and *objectivism*. Constructionism models reality as fluid and temporary. Reality is co-constructed

by social actors who reproduce knowledge in the form of ‘regimes of truth’ bonded to the political and cultural fetters of their time (Foucault, 1973). For example, this position on reality would demand that we observe the concepts ‘disability’ or ‘autism’ or even, ‘special educational needs’ as temporary realities which emerge through service to dominant ideas or systems in society. Timini (2011, p5) adopts a constructionist ontology to describe autism as,

a catch-all metaphor for a disparate range of behaviours that suggest a lack of the type of social and emotional competences thought to be necessary for societies dominated by neo-liberal, economic and political foundations.¹

Here, Timini is presenting autism, not as a stable or objective reality, but as an artefact of capitalism where individuals who do not present as the ‘ideal’ worker, are separated out to be dealt with in a system that cannot integrate them. From this viewpoint, ‘disability’, ‘autism’ and ‘Special Educational Needs’ are revealed as illusions of truth when they are viewed outside their contemporary milieu. In contrast, the ontological position of objectivism identifies realities (including social phenomena) as stable and absolute. Reality exists independently of social actors being independent of their influence. From the ontological position of objectivism, autism (or disability or SEND) have not been *brought into existence* to serve the purpose of dominant social actors but *discovered to exist* by an objective method, one that is scientific, rational and replicable. To add further illustration, we can imagine a conversation between a child and an adult. The child asks, ‘Does autism exist?’ and the adult adopts a constructionist ontology to respond, ‘Well, the answer to your question is a bit complicated because even though we have the word, ‘autism’ and we use it a lot, autism is different for everyone so your autism is very, very individual and special.’ With the child’s repetition of the question, the next response is, ‘Well it is an interesting question because some people say that the word autism won’t be around for ever because, in the future, being autistic won’t be seen as something different that needs a special name and there might come a time when people who are not autistic have a label instead because they don’t fit as well as people who are autistic.’ After the twentieth iteration of the question, ‘But does autism exist?’ the adult is exasperated to the point of responding, ‘Yes it does exist’ to which the child says ‘Why?’ and the adults says, ‘Because it just *does*, okay?’ At this point, perhaps out of having many other things to do, the adult adopts an objectivist position. Of course, it is unfair to present objectivist positions as the last resort or as the easy way out because much hard-won

¹ Timini, S. (2011). *The myth of autism*. London: McMillan, p.5.

knowledge about learning difficulty has emerged from objectivism and positivist research. It is also fair to say that objectivist or interpretivist positions on autism can serve as false dualities when applied to the real world and its complexities. For example, some individuals signified by autism may need the additional educational and social care support that often depends on a diagnosis that is perceived as objective. Additionally, objective acknowledgement of impairment is experienced as affirming and helpful for some people. When it comes down to it, the real world is rife with political struggle and objectivist approaches can deliver certainties in ways that can be used to claim recognition and influence. However, such certainties are equally likely to be unhelpful because they can confirm an illusion of generality which in the case of autism, may lead to assumptions being made about an individual learner that are neither true nor helpful. With all of this complexity recognised, what is epistemology and how does it relate to ontologies and the issue of inclusive practice?

Epistemology is the study of knowledge, what knowledge is, what it means to 'know,' how we know and how we can come to know more. For these reasons, epistemology is a matter of special relevance to a SENCO who is leading professional development for inclusion, because these are processes centred on knowledge. A *positivist epistemology* emerges from an ontologically objectivist position. This means that the aim is to investigate social phenomena so that generalisable truths can be discovered and put to use. Positivist studies adopt a scientific method to test hypotheses through control of variables. An example of this would be the diagnostic criteria for autism in, for example, the Fifth Diagnostic Statistical Manual (American Psychological Association, 2015). Through standardised testing and clinical observations, a set of agreed criteria are developed and then used to form a 'reliable' diagnosis of a condition that exists. However, it would be argued by a constructionist, that the diagnosis itself, is a subjective interpretation of a presenting reality. For constructionist ontologies, knowledge is framed as perception and what we know is a consequence of our subjective experiences of the world. For this reason, constructionists investigate reality through using a broadly *interpretivist* approach, with an interest in how social actors construct their world and experience it. There is interest in the specific case over the general one. When applied to the design of inclusive pedagogy, a teacher situated in a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology may start by asking, 'How does Georgia see the world, how do I teach Georgia and how is this going to operate in this classroom and school at this time?' Whereas, a teacher who adopts an objectivist ontology and a positivist

epistemology to disability may begin with the general question, ‘How do I teach a learner diagnosed with autism like Georgia and what does the evidence say about effective teaching of this group?’ Both questions can yield useful ways forward and to be clear, this chapter does not argue for the elimination of one and the retention of the other since such dualism might not be helpful (Lewis and Norwich, 2005). Rather, in what follows, it argues that a constructivist, interpretivist pedagogic paradigm, if foregrounded, is more likely to result in inclusive practice. It offers this argument because it is relevant to how a SENCO might approach professional learning for inclusion, and the types of learning processes they might choose.

3. Epistemologies of Difference and professional learning for inclusion.

To support the claim that when a constructionist, interpretive paradigm is our starting position, inclusive practice is more likely, we turn to insights from research. Jordan, Schwartz and McGhie Richmond (2009) present the findings of a large-scale, Canadian research and development project, ‘Supporting Effective Teaching.’ The authors use the idea of *epistemologies of difference* to explore teacher readiness for inclusive practice and how this readiness might be enhanced through teacher preparation and development programmes. The concept *epistemologies of difference* refers to the mental maps or schemata that teachers use to understand learning difficulty and their relationship to it as practitioners. To identify types of schemata among 32 elementary teachers, Jordan et al. (ibid.) used an epistemological scale called the *pathognomic-interventionist (P-I) scale* and applied this to their analysis of open-ended interviews where teachers narrated the stories of two students with SENDs that they had worked with. The interviews were transcribed and coded by multiple independent scorers to identify what epistemological positions on learning difficulty were being adopted - interventionist, pathognomic or somewhere in between. They combined this with third-party classroom observation schedules to understand the relationship between epistemologies of difference and actions in the classroom. They found that where teachers were operating a pathognomic paradigm, they were likely to construct learning difficulty as organic and individualised with an ‘inside-the-learner’ locus. This linked, schematically, to an assumption that difficulties in learning are caused by impairment and that impairment is absolute and fixed and hence, beyond the thrall of social actors (such as the teachers) or social systems (such as curricula). In this way, a *pathognomic epistemology for learning difficulty* is influenced by an objectivist, positivist paradigm. In practice, this translates to ‘Georgia is having difficulty learning because of her autism’ with autism perceived as unreachable and

intransigent even in the face of pedagogic efforts to impact it. Jordan et al. (2006) found that teachers who operated a pathognomic epistemology had lower self-efficacy for working with pupils with special needs. Consequently, they were less likely to take responsibility for learners with SEND, frequently referring them for support outside the classroom or expecting parents to do the necessary catch up work outside school. They were also less likely to collaborate with parents and other professionals. When looking at the link between a pathognomic paradigm and practice, this paradigm was related to a preference for transmission styles of teaching, more use of tests as the basis of assessment, less ownership for children and less interaction between the teacher and children with SENDs. Less effective use of lesson time and less engagement with learning among pupils were also more likely where teachers held a pathognomic perspective.

In contrast, where teachers enacted *interventionist epistemology of difference*, they assumed that impairment was fluid and that learning potential was transformable, translating in practice to ‘Georgia is having difficulty in learning because of the teaching approach, the curriculum and her experience of the classroom’. Such schemata construct models of reality such that social actors (like teachers) and social systems (like classrooms, schools and curricula) influence learning abilities in ways that can *include impairment that then transcend it*. This logic then promotes formative assessment as an essential tool for inclusion (Florian and Beaton, 2018). Jordan et al. (2009) found that where teachers took an interventionist perspective, they were more likely to collaborate with others, more likely to use continuous formative assessment as a shaper for their planning, more likely to use constructivist teaching approaches, more likely to give their pupils responsibilities and more likely to spend time with children with SENDs engaging in deeper learning interactions. They also used lesson time more efficiently and had better learning outcomes. Characteristic was the tendency to take responsibility for all learners and to feel stronger self-efficacy for teaching learners with SENDs. The researchers concluded that an interventionist epistemology was associated with more effective teaching generally and with more effective inclusive teaching for SEND because of its fluidity and assumption of transformability. They propose that models of teacher learning should be targeted at promoting an interventionist epistemology of difference noting that it is very challenging to shift teachers from pathognomic schemata for learning difficulty. This signals a key challenge for SENCOs given that their remit involves supporting the classroom teachers in taking responsibility for pedagogy and outcomes for SEND.

The class or subject teacher should remain responsible for working with the child on a daily basis. Here the interventions involve group or one-to-one teaching away from the main class or subject teacher, they should still retain responsibility for the pupil.’

DfE and DoH, 2015, p101

Our argument so far, suggests that supporting the class teacher in being more inclusive is not simply a matter of developing practice but also demands some attention to attitude change. The idea that inclusive practice demands the kind of fluidity of thought and action present in an interventionist epistemology is promoted in wider research. This is explored in what follows.

4. Ontologies of change and professional learning for inclusion.

Researchers have sought to understand why some schools are more inclusive than others and the findings of such studies cast light on the place of professional learning in this dynamic. They can alert us to matters of ethos and change management that are of importance to the SENCO remit for leading learning. In what follows, we will abridge the findings of several important studies spanning 2001 to 2017 to find patterns of interest to the theme of professional learning for inclusion.

Corbett (2001) provides an important account of the ‘inclusive school’ in her study of Harbinger primary school in London. Her proposal of ‘Connected Pedagogy’ presents a model of teaching that is fluid, social-constructivist, participatory and informed by continuous collaborative learning by practitioners who are connected to each other and their community. Researchers from Canada (Villa and Thousand 2005 and 2017) and Sautner (2018) identify similar phenomena to include flexible models of support and grouping and a shared belief that all learners can learn, are of value and can make a contribution to the school community. This is supported by Black-Hawkins, Florian and Rouse 2007; 2017) who offer a *Framework for Participation* as a basis for understanding how change and professional development must be centred on the pursuit of maximal participation for all through unrelenting attention to who is in and who is out to ensure inclusion. All of the studies propose a fluid ontology for change and development in recognising that at the heart of the inclusive school, is an endless cycle of learning catalysed by the challenge of teaching diverse students, a population that is infinitely diverse and infinitely transforming (Darling-Hammond, 2006). The essential place of relationships is also emphasised

Above all, relationships – among students, among staff and between staff and students are at the heart of understanding and developing inclusion in school. This is not to promote a naïve or sentimental approach but to acknowledge that teaching and learning take place within the context of human relationships.

Florian, Black-Hawkins and Rouse, 2007, p3

With this emphasis on human relationships, Florian, Black-Hawkins and Rouse (2017) settle on a constructionist ontology for change, one that frames reality as subjective and socially constructed through the interaction of social actors with social systems. This notion is also supported by Clark, Dyson and Millward (2020) who argue that the project of educating all students within a common framework is inevitably problematic and cannot be resolved through the discovery of general, transferable, ‘off-the-shelf’ solutions. Inclusive outcomes are the outcome of a constant dialectic where the needs of one group must be balanced (or traded) against the needs of another in a complex social and political space. In this sense then, any conception of a learning culture for inclusion demands acceptance of dilemma and imperfection. Where professional learning is set within a constructivist ontology to frame inclusive practice as a process rather than an end goal, teachers are more likely to embrace its challenges than to settle in the refuge of pathognomic paradigms (Robinson, 2015). With this understood, what forms of CPD may create the right conditions for fluid professional learning in pursuit of interpretivist, interventionist models epistemologies of learning difficulty? Consideration of this practical question for SENCOs and leaders of inclusion follows.

5. Practice Inquiry as an opportunity for a pedagogic turn towards more fluid models of learning difficulty

Pantic and Florian (2015) ask us to recognise teachers as complex agents of change who operate in highly contextualised ways to imagine alternative practices or to maintain the status quo. In this way, teachers, ‘cannot simply be regulated to do things differently’ (Pantic and Florian, 2015, p.337). The challenge of transforming *epistemologies of difference* must be met with more collaborative, participatory, contextualised and practice-oriented forms of professional learning than those associated with performance management. Wharton et al. (2019) summarise a range of approaches that the SENCO can deploy when leading CPD to include coaching, mentoring, joint planning, co-teaching and lesson study. All of these involve working together in context to bring about transformations of practice. In what

follows, we take the specific case of Lesson Study to explore how it can be implemented and why it is a good vehicle for loosening the grip of pathognomic epistemologies through attitude change within a constructivist ontology of change.

Firstly, it is important to note that an authentic version of lesson study does not focus on teaching competence and so does not serve as a tool for performance management. Lesson study, in authentic form, focusses on the learning of specific pupils in specific contexts. Where there is support for this approach by Senior Leaders (both philosophically and operationally), it has been found to strengthen three pathways to learning improvement; teachers' pedagogic knowledge, teachers' commitment to pedagogic improvement through a learning community and developments to the quality of learning resources (Dudley, 2014). Lesson Study is a form of systematic inquiry that can unravel assumptions about pupils with SEND and their impairment label, which is an important vehicle for inclusive practice. Assumptions drawn from labels 'can lead to teaching that is poorly pitched' (Norwich and Jones, 2014, p30) because of subliminal categorisation and too much dependence on pre-formed, impairment specific pedagogic programmes. Most importantly, Lesson Study's evidence-based approach means that teachers see learners with SENDs with fresh eyes to develop more nuanced schemata about their needs and capabilities (Dudley, 2014) to challenge pathognomic epistemologies of difference.

To offer further insight into the opportunities that Lesson Study offers, it is important to review its methodology. Though there are many ways that it can unfold, key steps in the methodology, as it can be applied to SEND (and all learners), are as follows:

- A teaching team review the learning, participation and progress of one or more learners with SEND in a specific learning context (e.g. a subject area), identifying an area of practice that needs improvement in order to improve the learners' experience.
- After using this process to identify an area for improvement, the collaborating team seek expertise on the area from research literature, practitioner literature, experts local to them and experts within the school (perhaps other teachers who have completed a Lesson Study in a similar area).
- Having collated and reflected on this area, the teaching team plan a lesson collaboratively, to improve the learning experience and progress of the pupil/group of pupils. The plan includes an account of what the pupil(s) will do or achieve at

different stages of the lesson. For example, it might be that a pupil will, ‘initiate and learning interaction with another pupil’ or that the pupil will ‘model the concept of friction through mark making’ at a specific stage of the lesson (e.g. in the plenary, in an independent activity).

- One member of the collaborating team will teach the lesson, while the others observe, recording their observations systematically on a pre-agreed format that tracks the pupil(s)’ responses at each stage of the planned lesson. The recordings focus on what the pupil does/does not do, what the pupil learns/does not learn at various stages of the learning experience. The aim is to observe whether the pupil does experience the positive gains intended in the planning (e.g. to progress, social inclusion, depth of learning).
- As soon as possible after the lesson, the team pool their multiple perspectives to understand the flow of learning and teaching such that they can form hypotheses about effective inclusive practices for the focus pupil(s) in this context. This is repeated over a short sequence of two or three lessons, with different configurations of teacher/observer to include co-teaching. The teaching team commit to the pedagogic transformations for inclusion that have emerged as most promising for the specific pupil(s). Ideally, these hypotheses also take account of the pupil(s)’ own reflections on the learning sequence.

An essential feature of this approach is that it is collaborative. It also supports teachers in using contextualised approaches to assessment of the pupil(s)’ strengths and weaknesses such that they might override assumption. As a process, lesson study brings in different perspectives to enable biases or absolute conceptions to be challenged. This also contributes to a deeper, more nuanced view of a learner such that, ‘a teacher can discern learning needs more accurately’ (Norwich and Jones, 2014) and in ways that transcend deterministic views of impairment. The approach has also supported more risk-taking and imagination because teachers feel less threatened within its collegiate, collaborative milieu (Robinson, 2017). For these reasons, Lesson Study offers an opportunity for deep professional learning and can be a scaffold for developing interventionist epistemologies of difference because it challenges fixed ideas about learning difficulty and reveals the way social actors and systems influence the pupils’ experience of school.

However, an approach like lesson study has several challenges since it relies on the support of Senior Leaders, not least because it demands changes to staff workloads and timetables. The challenge for SENCOs here is not underestimated because deep professional learning for inclusion demands a shift from the workshop or inset approach to understanding SENDs (e.g. development days about autism or dyslexia) to one of situated learning synchronous with the core business of the school during a school day. However, where teacher learning is seen as parallel core business, the SENCO will be able to design and implement forms of professional learning that are more likely to bring about lasting change for inclusion.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored *epistemologies of difference* and *ontologies of change* as mediators in professional development for inclusion. Its purpose was to offer a theoretical framework for understanding the principles and purposes of professional learning for inclusion. Within this framework, the deconstruction of a pathognomic epistemology of learning difference was presented as a key target for the CPD that SENCOs may enact within their remit. The chapter has offered a nuanced model for teacher development for inclusion by emphasising the fluidity of pedagogy and the fluidity of impairment. It is a call for CPD rooted in practice but formed through intellectual engagement with the philosophy of difference and philosophy of change. It calls for less dependence on generalisable certainties and more focus on what is specific and unique, and in so doing, models teachers as expert enquirers who can find solutions to the challenges of inclusion in their own hands, hearts and minds. The challenge for leaders of inclusion is to build the ethos and strategies for CPD that allow them to do so.

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