

The impact of a special school placement on self-perceptions of confidence and competence among prospective PE teachers

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1 **Title**

2 The impact of a special school placement on self-perceptions of confidence and competence
3 among prospective PE teachers

4

5 **Abstract**

6 School-based placements are often used as a way of preparing prospective teachers for the
7 demands of their future role. However, little is known about the impact of such situated
8 learning experiences on prospective PE teachers' confidence and competence. To the best of
9 our knowledge, this article is the first of its kind to explore prospective teachers' views of,
10 and experiences within, special schools in order to identify the experiential mechanisms that
11 shape self-perceptions of competence and confidence when teaching pupils with special
12 educational needs and disabilities in PE. Thirty-two final year undergraduate students
13 participated in focus group interviews and were selected on the basis that they: (1) were
14 studying a Special Educational Needs and Disability in PE undergraduate module; (2) aspired
15 to be a PE teacher; and (3) had attended a six-week placement in a special school. All focus
16 group transcripts were subjected to open, axial and selective coding in order to identify
17 themes and sub-themes. The theme that emerged from the analysis were: impact of placement
18 role on confidence and competence, impact of knowing *pupils' needs and capabilities*;
19 conceptualising confidence and perceptions of its development; and conceptualising
20 competence and perceptions of its development. These have been used to structure the
21 findings and discussion section of the article.

22

23 **Key words**

24 Physical Education; Special Schools; Special Educational Needs and Disabilities; Teacher
25 Education; School Placements.

26

27 **Introduction**

28 The English government is making attempts to improve the quality of teaching and leadership
29 in state-funded schools, partly through devolving responsibility to schools to lead and
30 manage teacher training (DfE, 2013). Of the 1,224 physical education (PE) teacher training

31 places allocated for the 2015-2016 academic year in England, the majority were school
32 (n=720) rather than university (n=504) led (National College for Teaching and Leadership,
33 2016). One outcome of the changing landscape of teacher education is that the majority of
34 those who aspire to enter the PE teaching profession undergo a non-qualified teacher status
35 (QTS) undergraduate PE degree before a one-year school-centred initial teacher training
36 (SCITT) placement at a government-approved school (DfE, 2014a). Therefore, onus is on
37 universities (and schools) to ensure that aspiring PE teachers, many of whom will be studying
38 a 'relevant' undergraduate degree which does not confer QTS, have the knowledge, skills,
39 experience and confidence to create an educational culture that: (1) promotes the spiritual,
40 moral, cultural, mental and physical development of all pupils; and (2) prepares all pupils for
41 the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life (DfE, 2014b). However, much
42 of the available research relating to PE teacher training emphasises a perceived failure –
43 expressed mainly by the teachers themselves – of the British Government to develop
44 educational policies to ensure that teachers are provided with training that enables them to
45 teach pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in PE (Vickerman,
46 2007; Vickerman and Coates, 2009). This concern is not unique to Britain, nor PE. For
47 example, research conducted in Australia and Canada (see Sharma and Sokal, 2015) and
48 South Africa and Finland (see Savolainen et al., 2012) suggests that teachers need more
49 appropriate training on inclusion and teaching pupils with SEND in general, while studies in
50 the United States (US) (see Casebolt and Hodge, 2010) and Brazil (see Haegele et al., 2016)
51 argue the same for PE teachers in particular.

52

53 While much of the research focuses on the inclusion of pupils with SEND in mainstream PE,
54 empirical data gathered does not account for the variability of context in which PE teachers
55 train. Morley, Bailey and Tan et al. (2005), for instance, used geographical location, gender

56 and teaching experience as variables to purposively select in-service teachers, but did not
57 explore the influence of school-based placement opportunities on teachers' perceptions of
58 inclusion in mainstream school PE. Similarly, Smith and Green (2004) analysed PE teacher
59 perceptions of their training but only as one of many themes to emerge germane to teaching
60 pupils with SEND in PE. While Vickerman (2007) refers to the university context in which
61 PE teachers are trained, the research is from the perspective of teacher training providers and,
62 therefore, does not analyse the school-based experiential mechanisms that might shape PE
63 teacher perceptions of teaching pupils with SEND. Similarly, Haegele et al. (2016) examined
64 the impact of a two-day professional development workshop on the attitudes of Brazilian PE
65 teachers toward the inclusion of pupils with disabilities. Again, teachers did not get the
66 opportunity to work 'hands on' with pupils with SEND. Instead, focus was cast on
67 knowledge of laws, definitions and terminology relating to disability, and activity
68 modification.

69

70 In this respect, Coates (2012) has argued that prospective teachers need to gain hands on
71 experience teaching pupils with SEND as a way of ensuring that newly qualified teachers
72 (NQTs) enter teaching prepared, with the necessary skills to confidently deliver inclusive PE
73 lessons. These claims have led to calls for trainee PE teachers to experience teaching in
74 special schools as a way of increasing their knowledge, skills and confidence to teach pupils
75 with SEND (Maher, 2016a). Thus, a key limitation of teacher education programmes and
76 research relating to training PE teachers to become inclusive educators, is that too few
77 prospective teachers gain experience supporting pupils with SEND in a special school
78 context, and that there is to our knowledge no research that has explored the impact of a
79 special school placement on aspiring teachers' self-perceptions of their competence and
80 confidence when it comes to teaching pupils with SEND in PE. An understanding of the

81 influence of context and mechanisms will further enhance approaches to PE teacher
82 education. If we have a better sense of the experiences that influence self-perceptions of
83 confidence and competence vis-à-vis teaching pupils with SEND, teacher educators and
84 special school placement facilitators can plan more appropriate learning experiences for
85 prospective teachers. In this regard, we hypothesise that providing a placement opportunity
86 allowing aspiring PE teachers to teach pupils with SEND will enhance their self-perceptions
87 of competence and confidence in relation to teaching these pupils. Hence, the research aims
88 to explore university student views of, and experiences within, special schools in order to
89 identify the experiential mechanisms that shape self-perceptions of competence and
90 confidence with respect to the teaching of pupils with SEND. Focus has been cast on the
91 perspectives of prospective teachers who are studying an undergraduate degree relevant to a
92 career in teaching because research by Vickerman (2007) and Vickerman and Coates (2012)
93 suggests that these students may not gain the knowledge, skills and experiences to become
94 inclusive PE teachers during their initial teacher education (ITE).

95

96 Research relating to teacher conceptualisations of their competence in special education
97 draws attention to the importance of lessons that are well-paced, and teacher directed
98 pedagogy (Brownell, Sindelar and Kiely et al., 2010). Pupil achievement, measured against
99 performance criteria, is said to be a key indicator of teacher competence (Rink, 2013).
100 According to Norwich and Lewis (2005), this focus is problematic because it assumes that
101 what works for most pupils will work for all pupils when, in fact, pupils with SEND can have
102 diverse learning needs requiring individual, tailored pedagogical strategies. Sharma and Skol
103 (2015) are two of a number of academics that have endeavoured to examine the impact of a
104 teacher education course on teachers' self-efficacy towards inclusion. This research,
105 however, is tied to notions of teacher concerns and, thus, focuses mainly on teacher beliefs

106 about inclusion. Moreover, it does not focus on PE specifically which is noteworthy given
107 that, as they suggest, teacher efficacy is subject-specific, contextual and situational (Sharma
108 and Skol, 2015). In other words, the established ideologies, traditions, rituals and experiences
109 of PE may impact differently on teachers' self-perceptions of competence in that subject than
110 those in classroom-based learning environments. Little is said in the academic literature, to
111 our knowledge at least, about how prospective PE teachers conceptualise competence vis-à-
112 vis inclusive teaching, or how a placement in a special school can influence self-perception of
113 competence.

114

115 Conceptualisations of self-confidence are much more difficult to find, particularly in
116 educational literature. It is not uncommon to come across PE research purporting to focus on
117 teachers' confidence (e.g. Morgan and Bourke, 2008) while making little attempt to define it,
118 especially from the perspective of the group discussing it – usually pre- or in-service
119 teachers. This may be because notions of self-confidence are often entangled with
120 conceptualisations of self-esteem and self-concept, which creates confusing and often
121 contradictory messages (Ferkany 2008). Thus, this research endeavours to explore how
122 prospective PE teachers conceptualise confidence and, again, how placement in a special
123 school can influence teacher self-perceptions of confidence in relation to their role as
124 inclusive educators. Interestingly, there does seem to be a relationship between confidence
125 and competence in that the former is said to relate to an individual's belief of self, and the
126 impression they have of their competence in a specific domain, context or situation
127 (MacLellan, 2014). It could therefore be argued that competent teachers should be confident
128 teachers, and vis-a-versa.

129

130 **Methodology**

131 Philosophical position

132 The philosophical assumptions underpinning the study were those of a relativist ontology
133 concomitant with subjectivist and constructionist epistemology. For qualitative researchers
134 working with such assumptions, multifaceted, constructed realities are said to exist and the
135 process of inquiry involves interpreting the interpretations of others (Sparkes and Smith,
136 2014). That is, we sought to interpret prospective students' interpretations of the experiences
137 that influenced their self-perceptions of confidence and competence. In this respect, we agree
138 with Sparkes and Smith (2014: 12) who suggest that that purpose of such research 'is to focus
139 on the way in which people construct their meanings of a given phenomenon, seeking to
140 expand the understanding of the phenomenon through the individual case'. To continue this
141 line of thinking, it is important to note that it was our intention to avoid drawing on
142 established theories relating to confidence, self-esteem, competence, or self-efficacy to frame
143 the research because the research was more inductive in that we wanted to explore the ways
144 in which confidence and competence were socially constructed through the placement
145 experience. Here, the onus was more on how prospective teacher conceptualise confidence
146 and competence, and how those concepts are influenced in a specific educational context.

147 Method

148 Focus groups were conducted with university students after a special school placement
149 experience. This form of interviewing was used because it enabled students to articulate and
150 negotiate meaning through a dynamic process of interaction (Elias, 1978). Moreover, the
151 interview format meant that students could make sense of their individual and shared
152 placement experiences through discussing them among themselves as a community of
153 practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The lives of university students are not separate and self-

154 contained, so focus groups go some way to replicate the interdependent relational ties that
155 bind these individuals together in everyday life (Elias, 1978). Here, collective perceptions are
156 as significant – if not more significant – than an individual’s perceptions because meaning
157 and the interpretation of experiences are often pursued and realised through negotiation
158 (Bryman, 2012). Nonetheless, it was important that the focus group facilitator promoted full
159 and active engagement of all participants, and fielded questions to individual participants
160 when required, to ensure that voices were not lost. While it was important for the students to
161 lead the discussion and explore issues relevant to their experiences of placement, an interview
162 guide was developed to ensure that the data generated was in keeping with the aim and
163 purpose of the research (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). The interview guide allowed for the
164 exploration of perceptions of students following their special school placement in terms of
165 competence and confidence, as well as providing the opportunity for them to offer any
166 emerging perspectives outside of these a priori themes. Below is a sample of interview
167 questions:

- 168 • What roles did you have whilst on placement?
- 169 • What does being a confidence teacher of pupils with SEND involve?
- 170 • How did the placement experience influence your confidence to teach pupils with
171 SEND?
- 172 • What does being a competent teacher of pupils with SEND involve?
- 173 • How did the placement experience influence your competence to teach pupils with
174 SEND?

175

176 Participants and procedure

177 The university students targeted for recruitment to the study were those studying a level six
178 (final year) module, entitled ‘special educational needs and disability in physical education’
179 as part of a three-year BA (Hons) Physical Education degree. Lectures, seminars and
180 practical activities were used to prepare the students for six, half-day, placement
181 opportunities over a consecutive six-week period at a special school in the North of England.
182 The aims of the module were to: (1) develop knowledge and understanding of special
183 educational needs and disability; (2) apply effective planning, performing, analysis and
184 reflection processes in developing inclusive learning activities in PE; and (3) reflect critically
185 on SEND teaching experiences that may impact on future personal and professional
186 development.

187

188 The special schools involved in the module varied in relation to their organisational structure
189 and operational mechanisms. Moreover, the specific needs and capabilities of the pupils who
190 attended the special schools were extremely diverse but generally related to those pupils who
191 have learning needs stemming from physical, cognitive, sensory, communicative and/or
192 behavioural difficulties (DfE/DoH, 2015). Some of the schools had a large number of pupils
193 with Profound Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD), whilst others had specialist support
194 for children with sensory impairments. The module had been running for over a decade, as a
195 direct result of the findings of a city-wide research project [reference removed to ensure
196 anonymity], and was created in an attempt to ensure that aspiring PE teachers have the
197 knowledge, skills, practical experience and confidence to teach pupils with SEND.

198

199 A total of 32 university students participated in one focus group each with three to five
200 participants per group. Participants were selected on the basis that they: (1) were studying the

201 SEND in PE module; (2) were aspiring PE teachers (i.e. they expressed a desire to pursue a
202 career in teaching after their undergraduate studies); and (3) had attended a six-week
203 placement in a special school in the North of England. This would be considered a small-
204 scale study, thus meaning that generalisations could not and should not be made.
205 Nonetheless, the data generated from these participant adds to the ever-growing body of
206 knowledge relating to the training of (PE) teachers for inclusion. Recruitment of participants
207 involved a two phase process. Firstly, part of a lecture was used to explain the aim and
208 purpose of the research to all students studying the SEND in PE module (n=78), and to ask
209 for their involvement. Then, one week later, a 'thank you' and reminder email was sent to
210 each of the 78 students. Dillman (2007) suggests that researchers often yield far greater
211 response rates when a multiple contact approach is used. While no attempt was made to gain
212 an even gender split, 17 females and 15 males participated in the focus groups.

213

214 A team of four researchers met at regular intervals prior to the focus groups to discuss the
215 interview format and to clarify any ambiguities with the proposed questions and interview
216 structure, helping to ensure a degree of consistency across focus groups. Focus groups lasted
217 between 50 and 60 minutes and took place in classrooms at the university. Each member of
218 each focus group had attended the same school during placement, which meant they could
219 negotiate meaning through discussing their shared experiences (Elias, 1978). The British
220 Educational Research Association's (BERA, 2011) ethical guidelines were followed and
221 approval was gained through the university's Research Ethics Committee. Before the start of
222 each focus group, participants were given an information letter and consent form to sign and
223 date. They were reminded that participation was voluntary, confidential, that they could
224 withdraw from the interview for any or no reason with all the data generated from them being
225 removed, and that withdrawal would have no adverse impact on their subsequent studies. The

226 access to, and sharing of, data was confined to the research team and managed in accordance
227 with the Data Protection Act (Stationary Office, 1998). All focus group interviews were tape-
228 recorded and transcribed verbatim by a third party. Transcripts were anonymised through the
229 use of pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The researchers then listened to each of the
230 interview tapes in order to (1) scrutinise the transcripts to verify their accuracy; and (2)
231 immerse themselves in the data in order to get a better sense of the key issues (Bryman,
232 2012).

233

234 Data analysis

235 Each researcher analysed all the focus group interview transcripts independently. Before
236 doing so, the research team met to discuss and agree on a strategy to ensure a degree of
237 consistency across the analysis. The first step of the agreed strategy required all researchers
238 to perform open coding, which involved manually giving labels to sections of the text
239 identified as being of salience to the social realities of university students (Saldana, 2009).
240 Next, axial coding was undertaken by all researchers to identify relationships between open
241 codes. By systematically filtering and ordering data in this manner, a degree of rigour was
242 achieved because analysis occurred across all data, not just those compatible with dominant
243 ideologies and assumptions of any one of the researchers (Seale, 2010). All axial codes were
244 then sent to the lead researcher who selectively removed duplicates and those least
245 prominent, before collating the remaining codes. Consideration was then given to similarities,
246 differences, connections and patterns within and between the codes offered by each
247 researcher. This was akin to a process of constant comparison (Bryman, 2012), with the
248 remaining codes grouped together to form the themes and hierarchal subthemes presented
249 below in Figure 1, which were used to structure the findings and discussion.

250 INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

251

252 **Findings and Discussion**

253 Impact of placement role on confidence and competence

254 A prominent theme within focus group discussions related to the role of students while on
255 placement, and the impact of role on self-perceptions of confidence and competence. Debs
256 (FG2), for instance, explained: ‘our group was working in the pool with class three, and they
257 were, like, two or three on the P scale, so, like, in the water... we were doing really basic
258 things with them, like, they just like swimming on their back or kicking their legs or, like,
259 blowing bubbles in the water’. When asked about his role, Caleb (FG2) suggested that it was
260 transitional: ‘I was with... level 6 on the P scale... the first week, we just observed. I just had
261 a child and just held his hand throughout the activities, quite simple activities, but by the
262 end... we were leading the sessions’. To clarify, P-Scales are ‘performance attainment targets
263 and performance descriptors for pupils aged 5-16 with special educational needs (SEN) who
264 are working below the standard of the national curriculum tests and assessments’ (DfE,
265 2017:3).

266

267 Taylor (FG7) went to greater lengths to explain her role whilst on placement:

268 The first week, the teacher did dance because that’s what the kids had been doing
269 before we came in, so she wanted to keep the routine the same. We just joined in,
270 tried to get the kids to move with us, and the next week we got the equipment out and
271 were doing kind of target practices... from week two onwards, we were teaching as a
272 group.

273

274 While it appears that students found themselves in different learning environments (e.g. the
275 pool and sports hall), supporting pupils with a range of needs and capabilities, what did seem
276 consistent from focus group discussions was their evolving role during the special school
277 placement. All students began placement as observers of PE lessons. When the students (and
278 teachers) felt sufficiently confident and competent, teachers allowed students to assist the
279 delivery of PE lessons and then, as a final stage of this transitional role, students took sole
280 responsibility for the delivery of PE lessons. This form of legitimate peripheral participation,
281 wherein the students as newcomers gradually gained in experience (Lave and Wenger, 1991),
282 was said to be meaningful and of value to the students. Despite not being asked directly
283 during focus group discussions, students did highlight the usefulness of roles and transition
284 between them, particularly when discussing the impact of lesson observations: ‘So we did a
285 lot of, like, observation within the lessons. The first couple of weeks, it was really good for us
286 because we didn’t really know what we were doing; it was nice to see a different side of it
287 and see what the teacher would prefer’ (Noah FG3). Similarly, Jennifer (FG3) explained:

288 For the first two weeks I was with the same child. I also observed one week, so I
289 didn’t get in the pool and that was interesting because you got to see how other people
290 work with their child and see how the actual teaching assistants worked with their
291 child one-to-one.

292

293 This form of situated learning is often thought to be extremely beneficial to prospective
294 teachers – who were part of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) among
295 themselves and within the school – especially when it is guided by experienced others
296 (Vygotsky, 1978) such as qualified teachers, because it can build confidence and promote
297 reflective thinking (Weller, 2009). Therefore, it is argued that special school-based learning
298 experiences should involve prospective teachers observing lessons, supporting the delivery of
299 lessons together with an experienced teacher, and then delivering lessons as this has been
300 found to impact positively on self-perceptions of competence and confidence.

301

302 Impact of knowing Pupils' needs and capabilities

303 Understanding the needs and capabilities of pupils, especially those with SEND, can be
304 difficult given that disabilities and learning needs can be diverse, multi-layered and subject to
305 change over time. This point was acknowledged in comments made by Charlotte (FG 2):
306 'there's a wider range of special needs, so you don't know... like, every child's different and
307 you don't know what you're working with'. Recent UK governmental policy has
308 endeavoured to capture and convey the complexity of the needs of pupils with SEND
309 (DfE/DoH, 2015). Whilst acknowledging that the 'categorisation' of children with SEND is
310 perhaps an effective way of knowledge transmission, it is problematic to attempt to place
311 pupils with SEND in categories of convenience because they are not a homogenous group.
312 Rather, they have diverse and complex needs and capabilities, like all pupils. It could also be
313 argued that needs-based approaches are rooted in medical-orientated (Finkelstein, 2001) ways
314 of teaching pupils with SEND. Nonetheless, if teachers are to meet the expectations laid out
315 in the National Curriculum Inclusion Statement (DfE, 2014b) and Teachers' Standards (DfE,
316 2011) they must know the needs of pupils before they can develop pedagogical strategies to
317 respond to them.

318

319 For the student participants, there was a general perception prior to the placement that the
320 'abilities' of special school pupils would be limited. Debs (FG 2), for example, expected a
321 pupil with a visual impairment to be able to do very little in a PE context. This led her to feel
322 'really scared because I literally did not have a clue what to expect or what it was going to be
323 like' (Debs FG 2). It appears, therefore, that the module lectures, seminar and practical
324 activities that students were exposed to prior to their school placement did not sufficiently

325 prepare Debs for the placement experience. More perhaps needs to be done before placement
326 to expose prospective teachers to a range of SEND, perhaps through videos, pupil narratives,
327 and simulation as a form of embodied pedagogy (see Sparkes et al. in press) to inform
328 expectations. Nevertheless, as a result of the placement experience, there was a general
329 consensus that student perceptions of the needs and capabilities of the pupils had changed: 'I
330 found that they [the pupils] were a lot more capable than you give them credit for before'
331 (Jim FG 1). Unfortunately, it was beyond the scope of this research to explore how these
332 negative perceptions were constructed, or indeed how these related to the students' self-
333 perceptions of confidence and competence. Regardless, it is important to note again that the
334 findings support research conducted by Avramadis and Norwich (2002), which claims that
335 exposure increases awareness of and attitudes towards pupils with SEND. This is not to say,
336 of course, that those teachers who have positive attitudes towards teaching pupils with SEND
337 will have the confidence and competence to be inclusive pedagogues.

338

339 Observing pupils with SEND in a PE context was identified as being of particular use when it
340 came to gaining a better understanding of needs and capabilities, especially in relation to
341 lesson planning: 'if we'd have planned without watching their ability, we might have planned
342 like too high for them, so they'd be demoralised' (Indie FG1). One finding of particular
343 interest was that some students considered the observation episodes of more value than the
344 teaching episodes when it came to understanding the needs and capabilities of the pupils: 'As
345 good as the teaching was, I think I learnt just as much by observing as I did teaching' (Kate
346 FG6). This finding further reinforces the need for an evolving role dynamic to be adopted
347 within this situated learning environment. The importance of understanding the needs and
348 capabilities of pupils with SEND in PE in order to plan and deliver inclusive and meaningful
349 learning experiences has been suggested elsewhere (Maher, 2016a). While focus was often

350 cast on observing the pupils, equal emphasis was placed on the importance of observing
351 teacher pedagogy for mimicry purposes: 'I would have been much more competent if I'd
352 observed first and then gone into the pool, because I would have been able to put into practice
353 what I'd seen, and I think that would have made me more competent to go in and get hands-
354 on' (Jennifer FG3). Interestingly, there was no mention again of prospective teachers drawing
355 upon the knowledge, skills and experiences gained from lecture, seminar or practical
356 activities. This does not mean, of course, that these wider learning experiences were not
357 beneficial or impactful. It does, however, suggest a need to explore how much of the work
358 done to prepare prospective teachers for the special school placement was washed out
359 (Zeichner and Tabachnick, 1981).

360

361 Having access to pupil information and learning targets was identified as being particularly
362 helpful when it came to increasing student knowledge and understanding of the needs and
363 capabilities of pupils. George (FG 5), for instance, explained: 'when we went in to the school,
364 we got a little paragraph next to each child's name, saying what they can and can't do. That
365 allowed us to be more competent in knowing what to do with them'. Roman (FG6) was one
366 of a number of students who shared George's view: 'when you get more information such as
367 the documents the school gives you, you can really become more competent in your
368 understanding of how to approach and apply yourself to that and do the best you can'. While
369 Maher (2013) has been critical of the appropriateness of statements of SEN and other forms
370 of information to mainstream school PE teachers because of the lack of PE-specific
371 information, guidance and learning targets, the students in this research have been largely
372 unanimous in their praise of pupil information. Some students did express concern about the
373 potential of being 'overloaded' and 'overwhelmed' (Jennifer FG3) with information. Future
374 research may be needed to explore what general and subject-specific (PE) information is

375 required for better understanding children's needs and capabilities and how this relates to the
376 development of the competence and confidence of prospective teachers. What is interesting
377 in this respect is the link between knowledge of pupil needs and self-perceptions of teacher
378 competence because, to the best of our knowledge, this is rarely mentioned in academic
379 literature. For many, the lesson pace and pedagogical strategies are key indicators of teacher
380 effectiveness (Brownell, Sindelar and Kiely et al., 2010). Classroom management and
381 behaviour management (Haydn, 2010), and pupil attainment (Rink 2013) are also often
382 mentioned in this regard, the latter of which is perhaps unsurprising given the impact of neo-
383 liberal ideology on education.

384

385 Conceptualising confidence and perceptions of its development

386 Student notions of confidence were defined according to their own perceived ability to
387 support pupils with SEND. For many, it was about the belief they had in themselves to
388 complete a specific task (focus groups 1, 2 and 3), which appears tied to outcome-orientated
389 pedagogies and the concept of self-efficacy. For Bandura (1982), the higher the perceived
390 self-efficacy the higher the performance accomplishments. A typical comment was that
391 'confidence is the belief you have to deliver' (Josh FG8). This was expanded on by students
392 who related a definition of confidence to specific incidences, such as the one below in a
393 hydrotherapy pool:

394 I think confidence can sometimes be related to having the ability and knowledge but I
395 think it shouldn't always be related to that because we had a sense of confidence
396 when we were in the pool, but we didn't necessarily know what we were doing. So we
397 just needed to make sure that we would stay calm, step back and do things in the way
398 we were told instead of needing that knowledge straight away (Jasmine FG5).

399

400 It is interesting to note that while Jasmine identifies a relationship between knowledge of
401 activity and confidence, she also argues that her ability to learn from the teacher and
402 intuitively respond to the needs of the pupils gave her confidence in what was an unfamiliar
403 teaching environment. Here, the importance of the support received from experienced
404 teachers during placement becomes obvious. In general, comments relating to ‘knowledge’
405 focused mainly on knowing the needs of the pupils (see Theme 2). Interestingly, there was no
406 mention of knowledge of school culture, learning outcomes, curriculum, pedagogies, support
407 staff, facilities or equipment. This is notable given that all have been identified as important
408 for inclusive teaching (Vickerman, 2007), and that they were integral to the undergraduate
409 studies of these prospective teachers. Again, there is perhaps a need to explore how much of
410 what is taught in preparation for the school placement is used during placement. Nonetheless,
411 while a pupil-centred, needs-based, view of pupils may at first seem desirable, it is arguably
412 underpinned by an individual understanding of SEND (Finkelstein, 2001) because it
413 emphasises what the pupils cannot do and, therefore, need in order to ‘access’ learning
414 experiences. Admittedly, an understanding of pupil need is crucial, as has been suggested
415 earlier, but so too is knowledge of curriculum content and appropriate pedagogies because
416 these influence the teaching and learning experiences of pupils (with SEND) (Tsangaridou,
417 2005). Thus, future research that explores the impact of placement in a special school on
418 knowledge of curriculum content and pedagogy is required.

419

420 According to Jade (FG4) and Brian (FG4), a highly structured and repetitive learning
421 environment, and the development of a trusting relationship with the pupils, were seen to
422 increase knowledge and confidence:

423 After we’d got the first week out of the way, a lot more of us knew what we were
424 doing. I think due to the fact that they [teacher] didn’t change much each week we got

425 into the routine as well as the children were in the routine, so we kind of got more
426 stuck in, which made it easier for us and we felt more comfortable being there, so
427 confidence goes up (Jade FG4).

428

429 My confidence was low before the placement because I had very little experience.
430 But, as the weeks go on, you start to get a relationship with the children and I think
431 that, in itself, makes you more competent. You know what they're capable of so
432 you're more like ... yes, you've got a better relationship ... it boosts your confidence
433 (Brian FG4)

434

435 First, these findings support those offered by Richards (2010) who suggested that the
436 development of a strong, personal and trusting relationship with pupils with SEND can
437 increase the confidence of prospective teachers. It is reasonable to argue, therefore, that when
438 teachers are inducted into new school environments time should be dedicated to developing
439 relationships with pupils in order to increase teacher confidence. Given that the teacher-pupil
440 ratio is less in special schools than in mainstream, there should be ample opportunity for one-
441 on-one teacher-pupil interaction. A second point worthy of note was the preference for highly
442 structured, organised and repetitive learning environments. It is not uncommon for those new
443 to teaching to desire prescription and familiarity as these can offer comfort and security to
444 those lacking knowledge, experience and confidence. However, given that learning
445 environments in PE can be more dynamic and interactive than classroom-based subjects
446 (Maher, 2016a), inexperienced teachers may find it difficult to organise and structure learning
447 experiences.

448

449 Specific incidents which students were encouraged to reflect on helped develop confidence.
450 For instance, Gail (FG 1) explained:

451 She [a pupil] didn't speak any English. So, the first week, for safety reasons, they
452 have to link a teacher, or an assistant, with a pupil to walk them down to the pool, and

453 when the pupil was asked to hold my hand, she burst out crying and hid behind the
454 teacher and didn't want to be anywhere near me. That's quite a daunting prospect, this
455 little kid crying at your feet.

456

457 Gail (FG 1) continued by discussing how she had attempted to develop the relationship she
458 was forming with the pupil, and how this developing relationship was influencing the
459 perception she had of her own confidence:

460 I had made a conscious effort to be more approachable and attentive and just trying to
461 make conversation. I feel my confidence developed through being within that
462 situation. By the end of it, she [the pupil] literally leapt at me and held my hand, and
463 then we're in the pool and she wouldn't let go of me. I feel more confident from that
464 experience.

465

466 This comments draw attention back to the importance of (prospective) teachers actively
467 endeavouring to develop strong, supportive, and trusting relationships with pupils as a way of
468 increasing self-perceptions of confidence.

469

470 Conceptualising competence and perceptions of its development

471 During focus groups, students often endeavoured to define competence. Indie (FG1), for
472 example, suggested: 'competence is being able to deal with the environment that you're in
473 effectively', with Gail (FG1) adding: 'it's [competence] your ability to react to a certain
474 situation and perform effectively within whatever that dictates'. While the views of Indie and
475 Gail are perhaps teacher-focused, Charlotte's conceptualisation was more pupil-centred in
476 that emphasis was placed on pupil achievement: 'I think it's just getting the kids to achieve
477 something. Like, so if they were on, like, the lower P scales, it's getting them to be able to
478 run or be able to get a ball in a hoop rather than a net'. Placing the pupil at the centre of
479 discussions about competence is perhaps useful because it goes some way to reinforcing the

480 view that (special) education should be concerned more with pupils learning than teachers
481 teaching. This is in keeping with research suggesting that pupil-centred teaching and learning
482 is a key indicator of effective teaching (see, for example, Rogers, Lyon and Tausch, 2014). At
483 present, most research that focuses on teacher competence in special education draws
484 attention to the importance of well-paced, teacher-directed lessons (Brownell, Sindelar and
485 Kiely et al., 2010) with little mention of the impact on pupil progress and engagement. This is
486 of particular importance given that prospective teachers must set suitable learning activities
487 that challenge and stretch all pupils, including those with SEND (DfE, 2014b).

488

489 At times, when defining competence, students' knowledge and the impact that it has on
490 children's learning seemed tied: 'Knowledge of the subject, knowledge of the pupils'
491 (Jennifer FG3). 'They [a competent teacher] know the pupils, because they know the
492 subjects, they know what environment to put the pupils in that's best for learning' (Alex
493 FG3). 'I think they've got to have knowledge of the disability...' (Kate FG5). So, while
494 conceptualisations of confidence (see Theme 3) equated 'knowledge' to pupil needs,
495 discussions about competence also encapsulated knowledge of content and knowledge of the
496 physical learning environment. Given that corporeal practices such as PE are often taught in
497 contexts that are very different from a classroom, it is perhaps even more important that
498 prospective teachers have a sound knowledge and understanding of the challenged posed by
499 the learning environment (Maher, 2016b) if they are to provide more meaningful and
500 engaging learning experiences for pupils with SEND.

501

502 Receiving positive reactions from pupils gave the students the perception that they were
503 becoming more competent in their role. The immediacy of the environment with the strain

504 caused by unfamiliarity and not knowing what to do or how to behave came through when
505 discussing confidence (see Theme 3) and came through clearly again when the conversation
506 turned to competence:

507 When we first got introduced to the children, I got asked if I wanted to hold one of the
508 girls when she was swimming. I was like, you actually want me to hold her?
509 Obviously, all the teachers were doing that and I thought we were just going to sit in
510 the pool and kind of watch. So that was very daunting for me. But as I got used to her
511 and how she reacted to me, and vice versa, my competence grew in relation to my
512 knowledge of how she is and what her abilities are (Jasmine FG5)

513

514 Acquiring knowledge also played an integral role in students' self-perceptions of
515 competence, with the ability to communicate being pivotal in participants' growing sense of
516 competence. The interdependency of teacher ability and the student achieving certain
517 outcomes as a result of an intervention was once again prominent in participants'
518 perspectives of competence and incidents that affected the development of it:

519 Competence-wise, a person who's not used to special schools might think they're not
520 competent and can't communicate, when actually, if you just take the time to observe,
521 you can say they actually are performing very well and communicating but in a
522 different way to the norm (Gail FG1).

523

524 The first week that we were in the school, it was a bit daunting not knowing any sign
525 language, especially when the kids were trying to communicate with you. Even just
526 trying to say good morning was very difficult but then I think after experiencing it in
527 the school and the sign language lecture that we had, I felt a lot more competent to
528 actually be able to communicate with the children, and I think it helped me to build
529 more of a relationship with them (Jim FG1).

530

531 While attempts were made by university staff to better prepare students for the placement by
532 providing a 'communication workshop' which focused on the use of sign language and
533 Makaton in order to facilitate interaction between students and pupils, it was evident that one
534 tokenistic workshop was not enough. In this respect, it is worth noting that for teachers in
535 research conducted by MacBlain and Purdy (2011), difficulties communicating with pupils

536 was identified as having the most negative impact on their confidence. This is one of many
537 examples linking competence and confidence. Indeed, there was an overwhelming sense that
538 the development of competence and confidence during the placement were interrelated. This
539 was perhaps one of the largest areas of growth for students in the way that they understood
540 the symbiotic relationship between competence and confidence and how their personal
541 growth could be most affected by these concepts. Nathan (FG4), for instance, claimed: 'I'd
542 say there is a definite correlation between the two'. Jasmine echoed this view by suggesting:
543 'As competence goes up, your confidence comes up with it, as well' (Jasmine FG5). Jason
544 expanded this purview, thus:

545 I think they [competence and confidence] go hand in hand. As you get more
546 competent, you get more confident because you know you're doing the right things.
547 For instance, when we first went into the school, I was very quiet and just observed
548 everything, taking it in but by the end, I took the initiative more, which is obviously
549 important, but I wouldn't be doing that if wasn't confident in my ability to know that
550 you're doing the right thing (Jason FG1).

551

552 The relationship between levels of competence and confidence may seem intuitive. However,
553 it is only proper to mention that the findings offered here only hinted at a perceived
554 relationship between the two, from the perspective of university students. While research in
555 other fields has systematically endeavoured to establish a correlative relationship between
556 competence and confidence (see, for example, Morgan and Cleave-Hogg, 2002) that was not
557 the purpose of this study.

558

559 Conclusion and recommendations

560 This research sought to explore university student views of, and experiences within, special
561 schools in order to identify experiences that shaped self-perceptions of competence and

562 confidence when it comes to the teaching of pupils with SEND. While students found
563 themselves in diverse and sometimes unfamiliar learning environments, supporting pupils
564 with a range of needs and capabilities, what did seem consistent was how the placement
565 experience was structured. All students observed, supported and led PE lessons. This
566 approach was deemed to impact positively on students' confidence and, thus, can be used as a
567 role identity transitional model to ease prospective teachers into and through challenging
568 learning environments such as special school placements. It is important to note, however,
569 that transition through the 'stages' of the model must be supported by and negotiated with an
570 experienced teacher (Vygotsky, 1978) and linked to prospective teacher self-perceptions of
571 competence and confidence vis-à-vis teaching pupils with SEND.

572

573 Understanding the needs and capabilities of pupils with SEND was found to be important but
574 difficult to achieve given that disabilities and learning needs can be diverse and subject to
575 change over time. Courses that aim to prepare prospective PE teachers for a special school
576 placement must at least attempt to increase knowledge and understanding of the needs and
577 capabilities of the pupils that students will be supporting. Exposure to relevant academic
578 research may be one way of doing this. However, the reading of pupil narratives, video
579 footage of pupils with SEND and simulation as a form of embodied pedagogy in action (see
580 Sparkes et al., in press) may also be beneficial in this respect. Once prospective teachers are
581 placed in special schools, observing pupils and teachers, concomitant with pupil information
582 in the form of individual education plans and learning targets, have been found to impact
583 positively on prospective teachers' confidence in this respect. Therefore, it is recommended
584 that prospective teachers receive such information as part of an induction to the school
585 providing, as Maher (2013) argues, that the information is relevant and can be applied to a PE
586 context.

587

588 Student notions of confidence were defined according to their own perceived ability to
589 support pupils with SEND. Confidence often increased when students were equipped with the
590 appropriate 'knowledge' of the needs and capabilities of the pupils, rather than curriculum
591 content or pedagogy. This can be achieved through access to pupil information, observations
592 and discussions with pupils, teachers and teaching assistants. While an understanding of pupil
593 need is important, so too is knowledge of content and appropriate pedagogies if prospective
594 and in-service (PE) teachers are to have the knowledge and skills to provide meaningful
595 learning experiences for pupils with SEND (Vickerman, 2007). A highly structured and
596 repetitive learning environment, and the development of a supportive and trusting
597 relationship with the pupils, was also seen to increase knowledge and confidence of students.
598 Therefore, it is argued that when prospective teachers are inducted into a special school, time
599 should be dedicated to developing relationships with the pupils in order to increase
600 prospective teacher 'knowledge' and confidence. Given that the teacher-pupil ratio is less in
601 special schools than in mainstream, there should be ample opportunity for one-on-one
602 teacher-pupil interaction.

603

604 Students often placed the pupils at the centre of discussions about competence. This is
605 significant because it reinforces the view that (special) education should be concerned more
606 with pupils learning than teachers teaching. What is absent from the field is research that
607 explores the social construction and embodiment of effective teaching from the perspective of
608 PE teachers generally, and those working in special schools particularly. When defining
609 competence, students' knowledge and the impact that it has on children's learning seemed
610 tied. Therefore, while conceptualisations of confidence equated to 'knowledge' of pupil

611 needs only, discussions about competence involved knowledge of content and knowledge of
612 the physical learning environment. Although attempt was made by university staff to better
613 prepare students for the placement by providing a ‘communication workshop’, it was evident
614 that one tokenistic workshop was not sufficient. Given that students emphasised the
615 importance of developing a strong relationship with pupils, more time should have been
616 dedicated to developing the non-verbal communication skills of students as this seemed to act
617 as a barrier, initially at least, to the development of student-pupil relationships. Perhaps
618 surprisingly, this was the only connection made by students between lecture and seminar
619 content, practical activities, and school placement experiences. This raises questions about
620 whether the module content, which aimed to prepare students for a special school placement,
621 can be transferred to a more authentic situated learning experience. Therefore, future research
622 is needed to analyse how best to prepare students for a special school placement, and which
623 aspects of a module actually transfer to an applied setting to avoid it being washed out during
624 teacher occupational socialisation (Zeichner and Tabachnick, 1981).

625

626 One of the largest areas of growth for students related to the way that they understood the
627 relationship between competence and confidence. Future research may need to examine this
628 relationship in depth because it did not come through strongly enough in this research.
629 Specific focus may need to be cast on exploring whether the relationship between prospective
630 teachers’ confidence and competence is hierarchical, sequential or symbiotic. Whilst the
631 recommendations offered here should not be consider as panaceas to the challenges
632 associated with preparing prospective PE teachers for a career teaching pupils with SEND, it
633 is hoped that they will contribute to the ever-growing body of knowledge relating to this very
634 important topic. The extent to which these recommendations can be transferred from an
635 undergraduate course to teacher education programmes that confer QTS remains to be seen.

636

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