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

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Abstract

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

Key words

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Methodology

Philosophical position

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

Method

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

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

- What roles did you have whilst on placement?
- What does being a confidence teacher of pupils with SEND involve?
- How did the placement experience influence your confidence to teach pupils with SEND?
- What does being a competent teacher of pupils with SEND involve?
- How did the placement experience influence your competence to teach pupils with SEND?

Participants and procedure

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

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

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

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

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

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

Data analysis

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

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Findings and Discussion

Impact of placement role on confidence and competence

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

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

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

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

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

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

Impact of knowing Pupils' needs and capabilities

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conceptualising confidence and perceptions of its development

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conceptualising competence and perceptions of its development

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion and recommendations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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