Contents

Introduction

In my first village school, the only things that mattered were whether we were girls or boys and whether we lived in private houses as opposed to those belonging to the council. Children who were slow at their work were accepted and given less to do than the rest. Certainly none of our families originated from outside of the UK and there were 28 little white faces in my first class. Times change and so do circumstances. Recently, I worked in a North London school with literally '57 varieties' of different ethnic groups to sort and service!

Gone, also, are the times when we might occasionally sit and dream at our desks. There is work to do and up to 125 public tests looming in the distance. No longer do afternoons exist for pond dipping and maypole dancing, which are *my* favourite memories of school! My first exam was the eleven-plus and passing it was a miracle because there was certainly no pressure to perform in our learning establishment. Life was for living, not working. Fun came before facts!

Today, education is a very sophisticated and stressful business both for students and staff. The child of a friend of mine, who is exceedingly bright, wet the bed for three months before her Key Stage 2 tests. She was terrified of not making her expected grade. According to the national children's mental health charity Young Minds, up to 40 per cent of young people in inner cities have emotional and behavioural problems. There is a price to pay for making children achieve.

Nevertheless, the world of today demands more knowledge and skills of its citizens than it probably did in the past. Jobs are more *people-* than *product*-centred, as technology has largely removed labour-intensive operations. We need high levels of inter- and intrapersonal skills to cope. The workplace suggests that these are being neglected in the present drive for children to learn facts and pass tests.

This book looks at the many issues facing educators with their classes full of children from diverse backgrounds, displaying different characteristics and having varying personal and academic needs. With a policy of inclusion, we are now discouraged from grouping children according to abilities, requiring fresh teaching and learning approaches to cope with fast and slow learners. Dip between the covers here to find handy information and top tips that I hope will make your life easier and your students' study less stressful. If the agony of learning is reduced and the pleasure of teaching increased by just one small fraction, we shall have made a start in climbing the ladder of success!

Whether you are a teacher, teaching assistant, school counsellor, social worker, therapist, psychologist or other educator, provided that you have an interest in making education work, this book is for you. I have enjoyed researching and writing it, so hopefully you will gain pleasure and benefit from reading and reflecting on the content.

Rosemary Sage

Chapter One

What is difference?

Overview

Although they may be required to follow an externally prescribed curriculum with a 'one size fits all' philosophy, schools now embrace greater differences among students and staff than ever before. In order to cope successfully with such diversity, we need more knowledge and understanding of educational and social processes to act as a platform on which to build a wider range of personal skills to support learning. This chapter reflects on issues of diversity and educational provision as a background for dealing with learning differences and difficulties.

◆ Introduction

When my son was six and his sister seven, I took them canoeing for the first time. Luke leaped into his boat and shot across the lake before Helen had steadied her craft and stepped gingerly inside. Neither child had been taught to canoe but what a difference there was in their performance! Children bring to learning such varying interests, aptitudes, personalities and backgrounds, even in the same family, that supporting their various needs remains the educator's greatest challenge.

This book unpacks the many issues, faced on a daily basis, by those involved in education. It does so with the aim of reflecting more carefully on the process so that we can provide worthwhile experiences for all our students. In the chapters that follow, we look at features such as personality, intelligence, styles of learning, teaching and communicating, social class, gender, race, learning difficulties, views and values. We do so within the context of a rapidly changing and diverse society with two particular dimensions that have implications for those working with youngsters.

◆ The first of these dimensions is **ethnic background**. Fifty years ago, the non-white population of Britain was probably less than 50,000 (Peach, 1982). Now, at least 11 per cent of children in our schools overall have an ethnic background other than British and approaching 8 per cent have English as their second language (DfEE/QCA, 1999).

◆ The second dimension is **family pattern**. Fewer people now spend their childhood with biological parents and siblings in a traditional nuclear family. Recently, the Office for National Statistics (2003) announced that nearly half the children in England and Wales are not being brought up in a traditional family. In 1997, 22 per cent of children were born into non-married cohabiting unions compared with 2 per cent in 1977. Nearly one in four children is brought up in a lone-parent family, a figure that has doubled since the 1980s. More than one in four children will see their parents divorced before they reach the age of 16. More than one in ten dependent children live in a step-family, a rise from the one in 14 stated by Haskey (1996). Predictions are that serial marriage will become the norm in Britain in the next decade and more families will go through separation and restructuring than will stay together. Gay and lesbian families present a challenging new format for society because they differ from the heterosexual tradition (O'Donnell, 1999). Schools are confused about acknowledging diverse family types. Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988) stipulated that homosexuality, as a family relationship, should not be promoted whereas government guidance says that this should not prevent objective discussion of the topic.

In addition, it is common for both parents to be in paid employment (Ferri and Smith, 1996) but an increasing number of lone carers find it difficult to get and keep jobs. Parents with disabled children are particularly under pressure (Beresford, 1995).

TASK: Find out family patterns in your class and evaluate what this means for planning and organizing teaching.

EXAMPLE: Mark's Year 3 class included one child from a same-sex family, seven from lone-parent homes as well as nine from step-families, meaning that half the class were in non-standard living patterns. He ensured that resource materials presented varieties of family type, and made time to discuss differences and similarities in living, so children could learn to appreciate diversity.

It is against a background of constantly shifting circumstances that children are educated, so we need to define the terms that describe difference, such as gender, race, social class, culture, ethnicity, disability, special educational needs and special/additional needs. The list below includes comments about problems associated with using these terms, as they are often a focus for debate and dissension.

◆ **Gender** is the male or female classification according to the physical attributes of each. Male/female stereotypes often dictate how boys and girls are treated and are frustrating for many children.

◆ **Race** is a biological concept, classifying people by common origin and broadly similar physical features. It is a word that throws up typical stereotypes and false assumptions.

◆ **Social class** defines families on the basis of parent occupation according to the Registrar General's classification. There has been some blurring of the categories over recent decades with the general shift away from industrial work and towards service occupations, and with more school leavers now entering higher education.

◆ **Culture** encompasses the traditions and lifestyle shared by members of a society, including their ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. The term assumes an unjustified high level of homogeneity and cohesion among its members.

◆ **Ethnicity** reflects membership of a distinctive social group. Distinguishing features include physical appearance, language, religious beliefs and practices, national allegiance, family structure and occupation (Thomas, 1994). The term fixes on particular aspects of identity and ignores others that might be important. Children from mixed marriages and those living in countries where they are not native often have difficulties with identity.

◆ **Disability** describes an impairment that renders a person less able to perform 'normally'. The term assumes a person- rather than a situation-centred approach. For example, wheelchair users may be viewed as having mobility problems but equally could be seen as being hampered by inappropriate building design.

◆ **Special educational needs (SEN)** is a term signifying that a child has a learning difficulty calling for particular provision. Learning difficulties are those beyond the average for the child's age and may result from disabilities (Education Act, 1996, section 312). In practice, the term can be divisive, as such children become subject to the SEN Code of Practice arrangements that set them apart from their peers (DfES, 2001).

◆ **Special/additional needs** defines a child from a social group whose circumstances or background are different from most of the school population. Language, culture, overt racism and socio-economic disadvantage are identified as special/additional needs without any implication that individual students may have learning difficulties in the same sense as SEN (Robson, 1989). The term is frequently confused with SEN, resulting in low expectations of this group of students and confusion in planning support.

TASK: Take a child in your class and locate the number of diverse groups to which she or he belongs, using the categories above. Which ones produce difficulties for the child?

EXAMPLE: Mina was an Anglo-Indian twelve year old with speech problems due to partial hearing. Her English father had died and her grandparents cared for her while her mother worked to support Mina and her brother. There was considerable tension among the grandparents due to differences in cultural rearing patterns. Speech problems produced most difficulty for Mina, closely followed by emotional insecurity due to family tensions. Mina gained useful support at school from her learning mentor, with whom she had opportunities to discuss feelings and needs. She received weekly help from a teacher for the hearing impaired and made great progress as a result of belonging to a Communication Opportunity Group, which helped her develop thinking and interaction skills to make the most of her abilities.

In modern society, people have complex identities and multiple roles, so labels can be misleading. Discrimination against minority groups can often be detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour. For example, in 1972, West Indian children represented only 1 per cent of students in mainstream schools, but nearly 5 per cent of those in special schools for the educationally subnormal (Tomlinson, 1984). They continue to be over-represented in schools for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties (Inner London Education Authority, 1984) and those excluded from education (Bourne and co-workers, 1995).

Such findings reflect a diverse society, varying in uneven ways across a range of dimensions. For example, a random count of children on the special needs register at three Leicester schools finds a distribution of 17, 34 and 45 per cent. Boys far outnumber girls in schools for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties but by a smaller amount in special provision for hearing or learning problems (Riddell, 1996). Similarly, children from working-class backgrounds are over-represented in schools for moderate learning difficulties but not in those for severe problems. In highlighting these issues, the intention is to promote a more reflective and integrated approach to management, so enhancing learning for all students within a range of educational contexts. This is the aim and the challenge!

TASK: What are the percentages of different groups in your class? What particular group demands most attention and how would you plan for it?

> **EXAMPLE:** Sue had a Year 8 class of 35, with 18 English children, four Japanese, ten Indian and three from Somalia. The latter group had only recently arrived in England and, although the children were very bright, they had considerable language problems. Their needs were met in a twice-weekly Communication Opportunity Group led by a teaching assistant where they joined nine other students. This gave them opportunities to learn to think and express themselves in a format where they were coached in appropriate interactive behaviour.

In meeting such aims and challenges, we have to examine our present educational system and the range of people who support it. Three philosophies have influenced teaching arrangements.

- ◆ **Segregation**: an approach based on the belief that students are best educated with others of similar ability. We witness this in the grammar school tradition and ability groupings in classes. Main tenets are *subject teaching, selection* and *standards of attainment.*

- ◆ **Integration**: an approach whereby children have a right to be educated alongside their peers, implemented when children in special provision were shifted into mixed ability, mainstream settings after the 1981 Education Act. Principles are *individualized learning* and *identification of special needs.*