

Title: Pedagogy, curriculum and special education: a case study in China

Acknowledgements: Thanks go to the principal, participating staff and students of Ningbo Damin School. Explicit permission has been given to identify the school in this article.

Abstract

This study uses a conceptual framework devised by Norwich and Lewis in the UK in 2007 to examine the education of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in China. Norwich and Lewis, whose expressed intention was to offer 'a starting point for setting out a coherent and common framework of teaching that is inclusive' (2005, p. 219), called for research to further develop their work. In that spirit, this article reports an exploratory case study of pedagogy in a Chinese special school analysed using Norwich and Lewis's conceptual framework. The example of practice in China provides a platform for reflection and challenge to existing theories and practices in other contexts, but also a chance to reflect upon the utility of the framework itself. In this regard, the authors suggest that Norwich and Lewis's conceptual framework provides a helpful lens for analysing inclusive pedagogic practice but that teachers' self-knowledge about their own expectations of students needs to feature more centrally.

Key words: pedagogy, curriculum, special educational needs, severe learning difficulties, China

Introduction

Pedagogy can be defined narrowly in terms of how students are taught or more broadly, as it is in this article, to consider the students themselves, their learning, the teaching and curriculum (Alexander, 2004). In relation to pedagogy for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), the work of Norwich and Lewis (2007) has been highly influential in the West, stemming as it does from a study that considered whether students with a range of learning differences needed distinct kinds of teaching to learn the same content as pupils without learning difficulties. The current study seeks to build on Norwich and Lewis's work by employing their conceptual framework to analyse pedagogic practice in a Chinese special school. The authors' aim in doing this is both to contribute to detailed discussions of SEND pedagogic practice and to test out the wider utility of the conceptual framework itself.

In their research, Lewis and Norwich asked fourteen UK 'leading workers' within identified fields to "subject to critical review possible claims, about the nature, role, and extent of specialisation in teaching children and young people with a range of special educational needs" (A Lewis & Norwich, 2005, p. 13). The project covered the following areas: deafness, deafblind, visual impairment, autistic spectrum disorder, emotional and behaviour difficulties, attention deficit / hyperactivity disorder, Downs Syndrome, profound and multiple learning difficulties, moderate learning difficulties, severe learning difficulties, speech, language and communication needs, dyspraxia, dyslexia and low attainers. The findings from the research suggested that there was limited support from the leading workers for pedagogic specialisation. This conclusion led to the proposal of a conceptual framework that would have "general relevance to preparing teachers to work with those with special education needs in mainstream and separate settings" (A Lewis & Norwich, 2005, p. 219). It was argued this framework might be adopted as "a starting point for setting out a coherent and common framework of teaching that is inclusive, while making it possible for differences in degree of intensity, attention and deliberateness in teaching to be recognized" (ibid p. 219). Lewis and Norwich acknowledged the "serious dearth of research evidence" (ibid p. 215) and called for: (a) further research and development work to identify the strands or

dimensions where teaching might need to be intensified and (b) analysis of teaching strategies for a diverse range of learners. They argued that it is “unlikely that teaching standards that are relevant to pupils along the full continuum of need can be established without a more evidence-based and conceptual approach to their construction” (ibid p. 219). This paper aims to contribute to this last area of research.

Lewis and Norwich’s conceptual framework explores the complex relationship between teachers’ knowledge, the curriculum and pedagogical strategies. With regard to knowledge, Norwich and Lewis (2007) suggest that teachers require knowledge about the curriculum, learning and learners, but that it is knowledge about the individual child that is important, rather than knowledge about specific categories of impairment. They suggest that teacher education should include the study of child development and the psychology of learning and promote a holistic approach. This view, which has led to an increasing focus on ‘inclusive pedagogy’ in a range of countries (Lani Florian & Kristine Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Linklater, 2010), is supported by commentators like Rix and Sheehy (2014, p. 471), who suggest that pedagogic approaches are accessible to all practitioners who “do not require extensive training or deep knowledge of individual impairment characteristics”. Such views have obvious implications for both initial teacher education and continuing professional development. For example, historically there has not been specialist initial training for SEND teachers in the UK (Hodkinson, 2010), which Mintz and Wyse (2015) suggest is partly due to the influence of the Lewis and Norwich (2005) study and their central argument that there is limited evidence for a special needs specific pedagogy. Mintz and Wyse (2015) take issue with this, arguing that teachers would benefit from increased psychological knowledge about child development and impairment specific pedagogies, asserting, in effect, that there is evidence of a need for special pedagogy.

Views about the curriculum in special schools are also polarised. The dilemma about whether or not to provide the same curriculum for all learners is described by Norwich (2008): on the one hand, not offering the same learning experiences may result in children with special educational needs being regarded as a separate lower status group and potentially denied equality of opportunities, whilst on the other hand providing the same learning experiences to all may result in reduced opportunities to access learning that is relevant to their specific needs. Ware (2014) illustrates this dilemma by tracing the changes in the curriculum offered to learners with severe learning difficulties (SLD) after the 1974 Education Act in England. The curriculum for these students was initially different to the mainstream curriculum and combined functional approaches, which focused on teaching the skills and knowledge perceived as necessary to function effectively after leaving school, with developmental approaches where students followed the same stages of learning as their typically developing peers, but more slowly. The functional approach was based on the belief that children with learning difficulties needed something different, whilst the developmental approach was based on a belief that children with learning difficulties were delayed rather than different. However in 1988 a National Curriculum was introduced, which provided all learners with the entitlement to a ‘broad and balanced curriculum’. Guidance on how to teach this curriculum to all learners led to the introduction of attainment targets that were increasingly broken down into smaller steps and the introduction of scales describing the very small steps deemed to be appropriate for students operating below the first level. Ware’s 2014 work acknowledges the lack of research on curriculum access and outcomes for students with SLD, but reports that teachers questioned the relevance of this national curriculum for all learners. Although the breadth of learning opportunities for students with SLD increased through their entitlement to access to a wider range of subjects, the reductionist, narrow measures of attainment inherent in the national curriculum were viewed as reinforcing the marginalization of students who might never

achieve nationally prescribed norms (Wedell, 2008) with “no recognition that the curriculum or assessment processes are inappropriate to cater for the diverse range of learners’ needs” (Glazzard, 2013, p. 185). Black and Lawson (2016) suggest that such debates about the curriculum betoken a lack of clarity about the whole purpose of education for students with SLD.

With regard to teaching strategies, Lewis and Norwich (2005) conclude that impairment specific pedagogy was advisable for two groups of students (autistic spectrum disorder and attention deficit / hyperactivity disorder). They argue that the majority of students’ needs are met through the adaptation of general teaching strategies catering for differences through “degrees of deliberateness and intensity of teaching” (A Lewis & Norwich, 2005, p. 214). Porter (2005) reviewed the evidence in relation to learners with SLD and suggested that generic teaching strategies included visual cues, modelling, prompting and self-monitoring. She also noted that the focus on student difficulties “led, until recently, to limited expectations in a number of key areas, notably core skills of numeracy and literacy” (Porter, 2005, p. 61). A scoping study exploring teaching strategies and approaches used to support students with SEND (Davis & Florian, 2004) pointed towards some strategies in relation to supporting cognition and learning (e.g. comprehensive teaching of reading, procedural facilitators, the classroom as a whole learning environment). They concluded that asking questions about separate special education pedagogy was unhelpful, and recommended a focus on developing a pedagogy that is inclusive of all learners and responds to individual differences. Similarly Rix and Sheehy (2014) note a distinct lack of evidence for ‘special’ pedagogies in their review of provision for children with SEND.

In 2007, Norwich and Lewis proposed that despite a lack of evidence to support ‘SEN-specific teaching’ it is important to “capture the appropriateness of more intensive and explicit teaching for children with different patterns and degrees of learning difficulties” (p. 131). They describe continua of pedagogic strategies that range from low to high intensity adaptations for individual learners. For example, opportunities to practise a skill to achieve mastery might be few (low intensity adaptations) or numerous and varied (high intensity adaptations). Their conceptual framework uses a ‘commonality-differentiation’ dimension where commonality refers to the pedagogy that is needed by all learners and differentiation to the pedagogy that is needed by either specific groups (impairment specific pedagogy) or individuals (Norwich & Lewis, 2007).

The brief review above indicates that there are recurring questions about each aspect of the teaching framework: do children with SEND require the same or a different curriculum? Do they require general or impairment specific teaching strategies and teachers with generic or specialist knowledge? The professional literature and policy in England, where Lewis and Norwich’s framework was developed, predominantly advocate access to a common broad balanced curriculum; application of general teaching strategies personalised to meet the needs of individuals and generic rather specialist approaches to initial teacher education. Using Lewis and Norwich’s framework to examine practice with students with SLD in a very different educational context – at Ningbo Damin School in the Zhejiang Province of China – offers an opportunity to reframe and reflect on these important issues through a different lens.

The paper is therefore organised in the following way. It begins by contextualising the study: firstly by providing a brief overview of the recent development of special education in China and then by providing information about the school in which the case study was conducted. After the research design, it then moves on to apply Lewis and Norwich’s framework to discuss curriculum, approaches to teaching and finally aspects of teacher knowledge.

The development of special education in China

There has been a growth in support for special education in China since the Deng Xiaoping era (1979-1997); indeed, Deng's first son, Deng Pufang, founded and became the chairman of the China Disabled Persons' Federation and led the formation of the Chinese Rehabilitation and Research Association for the Mentally Disabled. When the current leader Xi Jinping, called by some Deng Xiaoping's heir (Chen, 2014), came to power in 2012, China had already experienced three decades of double digit growth. These economic achievements enabled the government to invest in special education, and plans were designed and operationalised at national, provincial and municipal levels.

A national policy document, *The Three-year-plan for the Promotion of Special Education (2014-2016)* was drawn up by the Ministry of Education in early 2014. As a central government plan, it set out the main tasks for the development of special education in the next three years at a national level but also proposed specific strategies and suggested administrative bodies to be responsible for implementation. In response to this national three-year-plan, thirty provinces had introduced local plans for developing special education by 2015 (Huang, 2015). Zhejiang, in which the current study took place, was one of these provinces.

Although some scholars claim that the focus of the development of special education in China has moved from the enrollment rate to teaching quality (Deng & Su, 2011; Peng, 2015), it is clear that the government still attaches high importance to the enrollment rate. According to Ding (2016), there were 80 thousand children with disabilities (hearing impairments, visual impairments and mentally retardation) who did not receive the nine-year's of education compulsory in China, and this figure was judged to be a conservative estimate. Nevertheless, the enrollment rate for children with disabilities has increased significantly over the last three decades, with nearly 72% enrollment in 2012 (Peng, 2015). Compared with a mainstream school enrollment rate of nearly 98%, however, this figure is still low. Therefore, both the national plan and the provincial plans set targets for school enrollment. In the national plan, the target of compulsory education school enrollment for children with visual impairments, hearing impairments and mental retardation was 90% or above. Zhejiang's provincial plan set a minimum target of 95%.

Although inclusive education is promoted at the national level, children with severe learning difficulties (SLD) are supposed, according to *The 2010 National Plan for Medium-Long Term Education Reform and Development*, to have opportunities to be enrolled in special schools. This plan set a target that by 2020 there should be one special education school in each city or county with a population of 300,000 or above (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012). Financially, to support special education, the national plan stipulates that no less than 6,000RMB per year shall be allocated to each child who studies in a special school. In Zhejiang, children with disabilities are entitled to free accommodation and free school lunch during their nine years of compulsory education, and children who were born in Zhejiang can continue having these benefits including free tuition and free accommodation for higher education. To improve teaching quality, pre-service and in-service training for special education teachers are now offered. Special education teachers have social and institutional benefits (housing, pension, medical care, etc.) equivalent to government civil servants. Alongside this, research into special education studies is officially promoted to encourage the reform of strategy and of practice.

From the perspective of central policy-making, therefore, and, in many areas, at the local level of school practice, special education in China has improved in scale and quality (Deng & Zhu, 2016; Spe-edu, 2018).

Research Design

Case study school

Internationally, students with severe learning difficulties (SLD) are typically classified according to measures of IQ and described as having an intellectual disability. The students attending Ningbo Damin School are reported as having an IQ between 20-50 with 50 being regarded as 'quite high'. The school is in the Haishu district of Ningbo in Zhejiang Province in eastern China. It was originally established in 1987 to provide free education for nine years to children with hearing impairments and subsequently, from 1997, to children with intellectual impairments. It currently caters for approximately 100 school-aged students and six pre-school children. The students have a range of intellectual impairments including autism and Downs Syndrome and are grouped by age into eleven classes. There are twenty-nine teachers (including the principal who is classed as a specialist teacher), eleven of these are home teachers (class teachers) and eighteen are subject teachers. Each lesson has two teachers, one teaching and the other supporting. The school moved to a new purpose-built building in February 2014. Education for all the students from pre-school to secondary is government funded. The aim is for 100 per cent of students to be employed when they leave the school. Currently approximately 80 per cent achieve employment. It is worth noting, in contrast, that a 2013 report from The Department for Work and Pensions in the UK indicates 79% of people with severe learning difficulties (SLD) have never worked (DWP, 2013).

The opportunity to explore pedagogy in China was facilitated by two years of visits and collaborative information sharing between the researchers and Madam Liu, the school's principal. The school is well regarded locally and nationally as offering high quality education and leading the way in terms of developing pedagogy for children with SLD.

Ethical considerations

It was important to build upon the previous relationship that had been established between the researchers and Madam Liu in order to establish a dialogue that was informative for both parties. Ethical considerations led to the employment of a bilingual Chinese researcher with skills in interviewing and interpreting. The Chinese researcher provided advice about appropriate language and phraseology contained in the participant information and consent forms and the phrasing of questions and areas for discussion to take account of the cultural context. In this way an open dialogue with an emphasis on reciprocity and respect for differences and contextual influences was facilitated.

Consultations with the participants, regarding the content of any reports that were intended to be made public, were conducted via the Chinese researcher to ensure they would not pose risks to the participants or undermine the relationships that had developed over time.

Data collection and analysis

As an exploratory case study multiple sources of data were used, including interviews with Madam Liu, three teachers and a group of students. Formal observations of nine lessons and informal observation of other lessons and of general practice throughout the school day were conducted over two days and recorded using photographs, videos and field notes taken by the researchers.

As noted above, the conceptual framework developed by Norwich and Lewis (2007) was used to analyse the data in relation to the curriculum, teaching strategies employed and teachers' knowledge of learning, learners and the curriculum.

Findings

Curriculum

Five out of nine lessons observed were focused on life skills (washing socks, washing jeans, cooking stir-fry and using an ATM). Other lessons involved naming items in the classroom (basic language skills), identifying plants in the park (science focus), flying a kite (science focus), practising for a performance of drumming and dancing (music and dance) and large ball skills (physical education). Literacy skills were taught in most lessons and there was an expectation that all students could and would learn to speak out in a group situation, read and write. The principal emphasis was on the importance of teaching life skills:

We have this life skills curriculum in every day practice so it is basically everyday life and language ... numerical mathematics ... music, arts and PE. ... based on the Chinese national standards of primary education but combined with the local context. That is why we have dialect lessons and also we teach computer skills. (Madam Liu Interview)

The principal explained that the curriculum developed by the teachers specifically to support children with SLD is shared with other schools:

We have created our course curriculum ... these are our own materials ... the teachers make these ... more than 200 schools ... in other cities in China buy this school's books. (Madam Liu interview)

The curriculum is focused on developing skills viewed as being essential in enabling students to support themselves and contribute to the community, as illustrated by this quotation from one teacher:

I want to see after nine years how my kids can look after themselves so they won't become a burden for their family and society, that is what I want. (Teacher 1 interview)

During lunchtime, students brought food they had cooked to share with others, helped to serve food, cleared away dishes and cleaned up. There was an expectation that they would contribute towards the general day to day cleaning tasks around the school.

When asked about the subjects they like to study, five older verbal students mentioned gardening, arranging flowers, Chinese language lessons, washing cars, cooking (stir fry, biscuits, cake), singing, dancing, art and music. They all said they expected and wanted to gain employment when they left school but were not sure what that would be.

Teaching strategies

There is an emphasis on students' learning taking place in the local community, which Madam Liu describes as an 'ecological' approach to curriculum delivery:

We put them in an ecological environment ... what they really need is not the classroom mock life, we want to get the real first hand life experience ... five work days we divide them into ten half days. In each week seven half days are putting the students in the community and these are meticulously planned according to their curriculum. (Madam Liu interview)

This emphasis on learning in the community was referred to by teachers as working in an 'open' or 'community' school, which was in contrast to their previous experience of working in a 'closed' special school. Discussions related to the students accessing the local environment suggest that communication and social skills were reinforced in this context:

Twenty years ago students stayed in the school all the time and now after Madam Liu came here we adopted this community engagement approach. This has two impacts on the students, it broadens their view and their personality becomes more communicative. (Teacher 3 interview)

Learning in the local community is also aimed at increasing acceptance and belonging:

Our approach is that the school has to be proactive, so you get to the society and then get the children to talk with the citizens. First is to get recognition and then they understand us and after they accept us and eventually they support us. (Madam Liu interview)

The way in which the students are encouraged to engage with learning in the community is described as having three levels:

The youngest children basically play and experience, just see the world under protection. The middle level students get to know what things are. The higher level students get to use, to operate, for example, do shopping and go to the bank and withdraw money. (Madam Liu interview)

Parents are expected to continue practising of skills in the home environment:

There are four half days in the weekend and then we encourage the parents to take the students to practise outside the school using what they have learnt from the school. (Madam Liu interview)

Learning from the community is reinforced in the classroom environment. In two of the lessons observed the teachers were using materials (pictures of plants and a video of students using an ATM) from their visits the previous day.

The specific teaching strategies observed during the lessons would be classed as high intensity on Norwich and Lewis (2007) continua (Table 1).

Table 1: Pedagogic strategies observed at Damin School (adapted from Norwich & Lewis 2007, p. 132)

There was a high degree of commonality in the format and structure of different lessons, which often began with a 'warm up' exercise such as copying rhythmic hand movements. This was followed by a visual presentation (pictures or videos of the activity accompanied by a spoken and written description), which the students were encouraged to read either as a group, in pairs or individually. The writing (two word characters, phrases or paragraphs) was broken down into stages, which were either sequenced by the teacher or the students (depending on age). The students were then required to point to pictures and/or match words and/or phrases to the corresponding pictures or stages by pointing to the relevant script and reading the characters. Phrases had key words missing which the students were expected to identify by selecting the appropriate word from a range of options. This was typically conducted as a group activity (involving up to ten students). Towards the end of each lesson students were required to complete an individual task, which was differentiated to accommodate

different learning needs within the class group. The student's response to the individual task was used to judge their level of understanding and each student received a reward for effort. Within this lesson structure there was also additional support for some students, provided by the supporting teacher, such as gentle physical guidance and prompting, verbal prompting and simplified individual tasks. Therefore within each lesson there was a high degree of adaptation to meet the needs of individual students.

There was always a visual element to the delivery of the lesson (watching), followed by verbal exchanges (listening and answering questions), literacy (reading and writing) and doing (e.g. cooking, washing). The use of these different modes provided numerous opportunities to practise ensuring a high degree of repetition. There were consistent rewards for effort and opportunities to transfer and generalise learning in different environments (community, school, home). The individual task at the end of each lesson provided frequent assessment of students' understanding as well as an assessment of the effectiveness of the method of delivery.

The high degree of similarity in format and structure of lessons was referred to by one teacher as helping to establish good habits of learning so that as the students got older they knew what to expect and were ready and able to respond to increasing levels of challenge. For example, in the literacy element of the lesson, younger students were supported to point to words and pictures and match words to pictures, whereas older students were reading paragraphs from textbooks.

Teacher knowledge of learning, learners and curriculum

Knowledge of learning

A teacher at Ningbo Damin School described their initial training as involving approaches to teaching typically developing children, as well as some specialist input, as illustrated by this description:

Special children psychology and certain types like autism and Downs ... the pedagogy to teach certain children. (Teacher 1)

This implies a belief in specialist knowledge and impairment specific approaches and is reinforced by reference to gaining understanding from specialists in other countries:

Our teachers' team is more specialised [than mainstream] ... teachers study in Japan at the University of Tsukuba. They have a special school and they have a lot of autistic study and autistic children so we send teachers there to study and we study teaching and management so we can include in our own way using their method to adapt to our school. (Teacher 3 interview)

Despite this emphasis on impairment specific knowledge there is also recognition of individual differences and needs:

We are hoping that we can get more potential from the autistic children ... their communication skills generally... but then individually they are all very different, each individual has a distinct need for support. (Madam Liu interview)

In terms of on-going professional development there is a strong emphasis on learning from each other within the school, as well as sharing their practice with others outside the school. Once appointed, teachers are allocated mentors from within the staff team:

We have a mentoring scheme so people like me and the deputy principal and director of teaching, we are all specially designated qualified teachers so we help young people

to develop their skills then they can help younger people so we have this chain of personal mentoring. (Madam Liu interview)

There is also a tradition of sharing practice through demonstration lessons where teachers observe and are observed by their peers. This happens on a regular basis between teachers in the school and also when there are visitors to the school:

So internally there are one or two [demonstration lessons] in a term and externally they could be any time ... visitors, if they would like to see, we will just let them see. (Teacher 1 interview)

These 'public' lessons, which may be observed by many adults, are described by one of the teachers as follows:

The first point is teaching skill ... to see if the teacher has implemented the theory in their practice. Another one is to see the student's interaction with the teacher. Then the last one, also the most important one, is the result of the class ... if the students have mastered the things the teacher has taught them ... so the last practice is also for the teacher to know who has mastered how much. (Teacher 1 interview)

Madam Liu emphasises the importance of self-improvement and referred to these open lessons as a competition between the teachers:

We motivate them by competitions of their teaching ... we try to give them a sense that you can always get better. (Madam Liu interview)

Knowledge of learners

Once appointed the focus appears to be on ensuring new teachers' understanding of the school's ethos, which places a strong emphasis on caring as well as teaching:

When the new teachers come here we focus on telling them how we must have this focus – our motto downstairs, we have a big stone it says 'constant love' so that is our basic qualification and I believe that constant love is a human basic ... So for each young teacher ... they become a home teacher of one class. So they are a teacher but also like a parent ... they are like parenting the children and teaching the children. (Madam Liu interview)

This implies teachers are expected to develop an in depth knowledge of each individual student in terms of their social and emotional wellbeing as well as their learning needs. This is supported by the views of one of the teachers:

Honestly we care more for the students and we put more effort in the students than other people who work in the mainstream schools. Because we really just care more. (Teacher 3 interview)

Knowledge of curriculum

It is suggested that teachers need more detailed knowledge of the community, curriculum and specific activities they are teaching than those in mainstream schools:

We really compare with mainstream teachers apart from academic knowledge. We need a lot of different knowledge to teach the children about life so we need to know all the routes. We have to be geographically savvy and we need to know all the bus routes and we also need to do a lot of everyday stuff like cooking, shopping ... the teachers who teach cooking ... we need to teach western cuisine, we need to learn it first and then the teacher ... of tailoring and sewing ... learn first and practise really well and teach the students. (Teacher 2 interview)

It is also suggested that teachers at the school have developed and will continue to develop curriculum materials by adding to the text books developed and produced by the school:

They establish their curriculum and then they can create new things to add into the curriculum, make their contribution and we try to cultivate their ownership and pride of working for special education. (Madam Liu interview)

Overview of findings

The practice observed at Ningbo Damin School is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of practice at Ningbo Damin School

Discussion

Before considering the implications of these findings several limitations need to be considered. As with any case study the findings cannot be generalised. The practice observed at Ningbo Damin School is not representative of special needs education across China, which has received criticism on the grounds of human rights (HRW, 2013). Despite recent developments, educational provision particularly for children with intellectual impairments in China has historically been of low priority (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Merry & Wei, 1998). Nationally there are reported to be only a few universities that have undergraduate and post graduate programmes in special education, and these recruit low numbers of students due to “the traditionally low regard for a career in teaching students with special educational needs” (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012, p. 120).

The degree to which the practice observed was representative also raises issues of validity and reliability. Limitations associated with interview bias particularly considering the difference in culture between the researchers and the participants, the use of an interpreter (although professionally trained) and possible loss or distortion of meaning that can occur with translation also need to be acknowledged. However triangulation between data sources and the freedom to go anywhere in the school unaccompanied during the two hour lunch break, talk to anybody (students and staff) as well as the willingness of participants to share their experiences offers a degree of comfort about the authenticity of the findings.

It is therefore suggested that this exploratory case study provides a rare insight into an approach to teaching that raises important questions about special needs pedagogy, which will now be discussed in relation to the curriculum, teaching strategies and teacher knowledge. At a theoretical level the extent to which the conceptual framework adopted from the work of Norwich and Lewis (2007) has supported this analysis will also be considered.

Curriculum

As Kelly (2009) suggests, the curriculum attempts to match the needs of learners with those of the society to fulfill the aims of education. This raises important questions about the purpose of education for learners with SLD and the capacity of a curriculum to ensure that young people have the opportunity to develop skills that will allow for successful preparation for adulthood, wellbeing, and life-long learning.

Kelly suggests that when planning a curriculum “we should be looking not only for a balance of educational experiences for each individual but ... also be aiming for a balanced response to ... the needs of the individual for both personal and vocational

preparation” (Kelly, 2009, p. 251). ‘Entitlement’ to access the same learning opportunities as typically developing peers appears misplaced when advocating for a curriculum that prescribes the same content for all, which “must inevitably lead to the alienation and disaffection of some pupils” (Kelly, 2009, p. 258) and perhaps increased marginalization of disadvantaged groups (Wedell, 2008).

Whether we agree with a greater focus on life skills and vocational training or not, perhaps greater preparation for life (Pring, 2004) is needed throughout a student’s time at school as opposed to relying on narrowly focused attainment targets in every subject. Black and Lawson (2016, p. 17) suggest that even when a vocational post 16 resource is made available, the stepping stone to paid employment might need to be reconfigured as “a bridge to life after school”.

When considering the dilemma about whether or not to provide the same curriculum for all learners (Norwich, 2008), relevance of the curriculum to learners’ needs might need to take priority over commonality. If given the same opportunity as the teachers at Ningbo Damin School to develop their own curriculum, what might educators of students with SLD in other parts of the world identify as important? Would there be greater emphasis on flexibility, an earlier focus on skills for life and higher expectations and consistent opportunities to develop literacy skills?

Teaching strategies

During classroom observations at Ningbo Damin School the specific strategies summarised in Table 1 illustrate how teachers accommodated the needs of different learners. These accommodations do not appear to be impairment specific as they are not distinctly different from typical approaches used in general teaching. However the degree of intensity with which a particular approach was employed was high at a group and individual level, in line with the findings of Norwich and Lewis (2007).

The degree of lesson structure at Ningbo Damin School and the extent to which this was replicated suggests a level of intensity that differs from approaches the researchers had observed elsewhere except, perhaps, for attempts at consistent lesson structure that were introduced as part of the national literacy and numeracy strategies in England. Anecdotal feedback from discussion with teachers in the UK about the case study findings suggests they would be concerned about the lack of flexibility and opportunities to be creative and respond, for example, to child initiated learning. The question to be considered here relates to what the high degree of repetitive structure is supporting. It may, for example, increase students’ sense of security in knowing what is expected and therefore confidence in being able to respond and demonstrate their abilities. Clearly further research into this aspect of pedagogy would be of interest.

A highly significant aspect of the teaching strategies at Ningbo Damin School was the extent to which learning took place in community settings, in highly structured and regularly replicated formats. Seven half days a week were spent learning in community settings. The reported benefits of this in terms of students’ ability to interact with members of the public, learn skills in the real world and gain acceptance from the local community clearly point towards the importance of more detailed investigations into this approach.

Teacher knowledge

Whilst one of the teachers at Ningbo Damin School reported access to specialist initial training it is unclear to what extent this was available or had been accessed by all the teachers at the school, especially older members of staff. So the question of whether

teachers possess specialist or generic knowledge when they begin working at the school is unclear.

It could be argued that the teachers at Ningbo Damin School do have specialist knowledge in comparison to their mainstream peers because of their pastoral role, access to mentoring, involvement in frequent specialist 'public' lessons and contributions to curriculum development. The question of whether teachers need impairment specific knowledge (Mintz & Wyse, 2015) is unclear, as whilst there appears to be an emphasis on learning about autism, for example, the teaching strategies observed over an admittedly fairly short period were used with all the students, regardless of their specific impairments.

The opportunities to observe and be routinely observed by colleagues through the system of providing demonstration lessons, as well as ongoing mentoring from more experienced members of staff, are of interest in terms of professional development. This contrasts with systems where the majority of practising teachers do not get regular opportunities to observe each other despite being observed themselves by senior leaders and visiting inspectors. While there has been some exploration of increasing opportunities for shared practice elsewhere, for example, through the introduction of lesson study (Norwich & Jones, 2014) in relation to children with moderate learning difficulties in mainstream schools, further exploration of this method of professional development in relation to teaching students with SEND and SLD might offer guidance for future policy and practice.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework proposed by Norwich and Lewis (2007) has provided a logical and coherent structure to examine aspects of pedagogy. There are however, findings related to expectations that are not as prominent in this framework as they appear to be in the practice observed. Whilst teacher knowledge is discussed in relation to four aspects: the nature of the SEND group, teacher self-knowledge, psychology of learning and curriculum and pedagogic strategies (ibid p. 141-142) the specific impact of teacher expectations is not explicitly highlighted. It is suggested that the addition of this focus would enable a greater consideration of the impact this has on pedagogy.

At a fundamental level there appeared to be very clear, explicit expectations at Ningbo Damin School that reflected the belief that the purpose of education in China and for this group of students was to provide them with the skills to support themselves and contribute to the community. Aligned to this was the expectation that educating the students in the community would increase their acceptance and belonging within that community. Teachers were expected to adopt the core principle of 'constant love' supporting the emotional wellbeing of students whilst implementing a curriculum that embedded the expectation that the students could and would learn literacy and life skills. This is in contrast to Porter's (2005) finding of low expectations in key areas of the curriculum and the implication that low expectations typically result in poor performance (Jussim & Harber, 2005). Although Emerson and Dearden (2013) argue the importance of high expectations when working with children with severe communication impairments and promoting a pedagogy that includes providing access to literacy-based activities at an early stage, the limited amount of research into teaching literacy to students with SLD (Browder et al., 2006) suggests that historically expectations and access to literacy learning for people with intellectual disabilities have been limited (Klewer, Biklen, & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2006).

The most prominent differences are the curriculum and teacher knowledge. Teaching strategies appear to be common across the two contexts (Norwich & Lewis, 2007);

however, what is noticeably different is the intensity of adaptations, the consistent lesson structure and the amount of learning in community settings.

Conclusion

This paper has applied the conceptual framework proposed by Lewis and Norwich (2007) to examine the literature while observing practice in a special school in China. The example of what might be considered very effective practice in terms of outcomes for students with SLD observed at Ningbo Damin School has raised challenging questions that have important implications for policy and practice. It is suggested that the emphasis on entitlement to the same common curriculum as all learners appears to have led to a loss of focus on the purpose of education, particularly for students with SEND and SLD. If the aim of education is to prepare for life during and after school (Pring, 2004), then questions need to be asked about the relevance of shared curricula for all learners. The commonality-difference dilemma (Norwich, 2008) is not being resolved by reductionist approaches to teaching and assessing the achievement of centrally determined, finely graded attainment targets.

Exploring teaching strategies to identify degrees of intensification (Ann Lewis & Norwich, 2001) provides helpful descriptions of what accommodations for learners with SEND and SLD actually involve. Specifying how generic teaching approaches are applied to this group of learners negates the need for identifying impairment specific approaches and argues for an acknowledgement that the strategies used by teachers in the classroom at Ningbo Damin School could be applied in any setting. It would clearly be of interest to make specific comparisons between these approaches and those used by teachers of students with similar needs in other schools. Further research might also focus on the degree to which students with SLD benefit from learning in the community and through a consistent approach to lesson structure.

The question of whether teachers of children with SLD need to be specialists and have specialist knowledge (Mintz & Wyse, 2015) is also important as it has implications for initial teacher training (ITT) and professional development (see for example, the ITT programme for SEND in the University of Cumbria, UK). Whilst the teachers at Ningbo Damin School clearly have specialist knowledge, it is argued that this is gained through experience and the approaches to supporting and sharing practice. In principle, if teachers were provided with the information about how to intensify generic strategies to accommodate different learners, there would not be a need for specialist impairment specific training. However, practising teachers might benefit greatly from support to develop their skills through, for example, regular sharing of practice with their peers.

Teachers do need to be aware of how their expectations impact on the opportunities they provide for students to learn. It is suggested that this aspect of teacher knowledge should be more prominent in conceptual frameworks that examine pedagogical approaches to teaching children with learning difficulties.

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Table 1: Pedagogic strategies observed at Damin School (adapted from Norwich & Lewis 2007, p. 132)

<i>Pedagogic strategies</i>	<i>High intensity</i>
Lesson and task structure	Similar format/sequence in most lessons involving: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual observation • Verbal description • Naming stages of an activity • Sequencing stages of an activity • Pointing to objects/pictures/words • Matching objects/pictures to words/phrases • Reading words/phrases/paragraphs • Writing words/phrases/paragraphs
Examples to learn concepts (watching, doing, speaking, listening, reading, writing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community activity • Classroom activity • Objects/videos/photos • Demonstration/modelling by staff and students • Reading and writing words/phrases/paragraphs
Practice to achieve mastery and opportunities for transfer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copying/imitation • Repetition: in group, pairs, individually • Repetition in different settings: community, school, home
Task-linked feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbal and physical prompts • Reward for effort
Checking for preparedness for the next stage of learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual task at the end of each lesson to check student understanding

Table 2: Summary of practice at Ningbo Damin School

	Ningbo Damin School
Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School developed curriculum • Text books specific to children with learning difficulties / intellectual impairment used by 200+ schools • Emphasis on life skills and vocational training • Emphasis on basic skills e.g. literacy in most lessons observed (speaking, listening, reading and writing)
Teaching strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community engagement (7/10 lessons) • Common strategies, high intensity • Consistent lesson structure • Rewards for effort
Teacher knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialist teacher training including psychology and impairment specific pedagogy • Induction and continuous mentoring • Expected to contribute to developing curriculum materials • Regular 'public' lessons observed by managers and peers