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# Are SEND children different?

**Monique  
Nowers**



It's a truism in education to say that all children are different, and of course they are. Each child is a precious, unique individual with their own set of characteristics, experiences and perspectives.

At the same time, we are also hard-wired to notice difference. When we meet someone for the first time, we don't think about the myriad ways that they are the *same* as everyone else; we are *drawn* to the differences. This is exaggerated when the person is an outlier in some way – very tall, short etc. – and, in education that attention falls on our pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

What is so often lost, however, and what many involved in education often fail to appreciate, or account for, is the extent to which all children are inherently the same. In fact, *all* children are, in almost every way that we can think of that relates to school and learning, far more similar than they are different. Unfortunately, the consequences of such distorted thinking (i.e. the exaggeration of difference) are significant, and it's our most disadvantaged, framed as 'different', pupils who are the most negatively affected.

In schools, "all children are different" is often phrased as "children learn in different ways". This is well-meaning; however, it is hard to think of a more pernicious idea in education.

Fundamentally, all children learn in the same way. What *is* different for each child are the barriers they may face to accessing that learning *as presented to them*. This might seem a small, even meaningless distinction. However, in reality, the implications are huge. To understand why, we will need to bear several concepts in mind.

First, all traits/characteristics, from height and weight to working memory and processing speed, for example, occur on a continuum and relative strengths and weaknesses are normally distributed as per the bell-shaped probability curve (Figure 1, opposite).

As mentioned, we tend to notice the outliers. For example, a teacher may be aware of the tallest/shortest children in a class but may not notice (in terms of height) the children who are only relatively tall/short. The children all have more or less of the quality that makes them tall/short, but we usually only notice the extremes.

Second, it is important to note that this idea of trait continuums includes learning difficulties. For example, dyslexia: children who struggle to learn to read are *not qualitatively different* from those who find it easy, they just have less/more of whichever cognitive traits facilitate learning to read. The same goes for other traits, for example, executive function, working memory, processing speed, organisation skills and so on.

A related, yet less obvious, corollary is that for every child in your class who has, for example, such poor working memory that we *notice* their difficulty, there will likely be several more who are struggling nearly as much

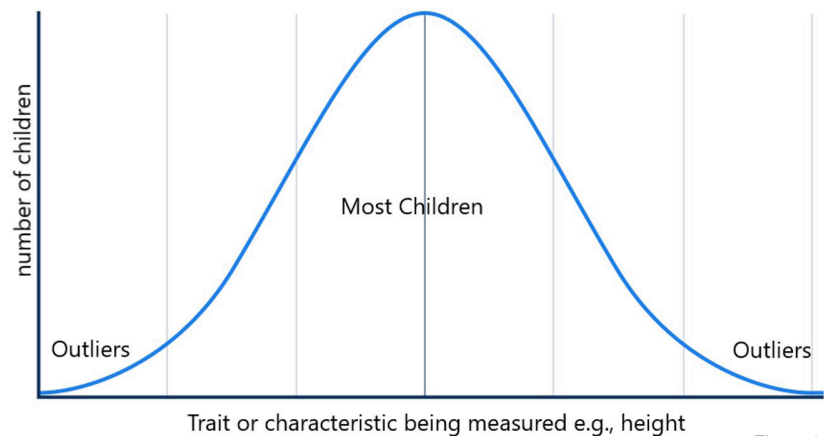


Figure 1

Vulnerability to Imperfect Teaching

as that one child but who haven't come to your attention. We will come back to this later.

The next part uses terminology that some may instinctively dislike. It is not my intention to upset or provoke, however, so a little kind forbearance on your part may be required.

I find it most useful to consider all learning-related traits as amalgamated into one continuum, which I think of as a 'vulnerability to imperfect teaching' or the 'ability to learn despite imperfect teaching'. This owes much to Siegfried Engelmann who used the term 'faultless' teaching. Please don't overthink either word. Of course, I understand that few – if any – things in this world could be described as perfect or faultless, that beauty often lies in imperfection and that for some a tendency towards perfectionism can be utterly disabling. It is just the word that most accurately and thus usefully captures my meaning here. Neither should you think that it blames teachers; there are many reasons out of the control of the individual teacher as to why teaching may be ineffective or 'imperfect'. The idea is simply to allow that any teaching can be made better or more effective.

Fundamentally, in fact, the idea is an incredibly positive one for both children and teachers, i.e., that all children can learn and that all can be taught. The pivotal issue is that they all have more/less of whatever qualities enable a child to learn in the absence of perfectly clear, specific and unambiguous instruction. So, what is different for each child isn't how they learn but the barriers they may face to accessing that learning as presented to them. This might seem a

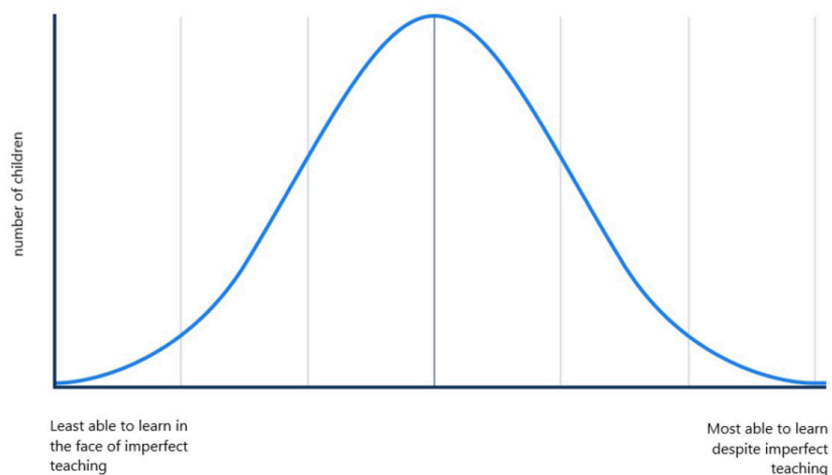


Figure 2

small, even meaningless, distinction. However the implications are huge (Figure 2, above).

The key point of this continuum is that those at the extreme left, the least able to learn in the face of imperfect teaching, do not need to learn something different, nor do they learn differently. What they need is for whatever is being taught to be taught 'better' (i.e., more faultlessly or perfectly).

In practice, teaching more effectively usually means:

- 1 breaking content down into more attainable steps
- 2 presenting each step clearly and unambiguously
- 3 giving sufficient time and practice to each child.

A graphic posted by Dan Willingham (Figure 3, next page) neatly illustrates the concept (like Dan before me, I have tried to identify the original artist but to no avail).

Again, we are back to using height as an example. The rungs need to be accessible to all who need to use the

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Figure 3

ladder. Space them too far apart and we will exclude people. Spacing them closer together might take more work and resources, but the ladder is then accessible to everyone. The people who could manage the large gaps are not disadvantaged, indeed many who might have coped with larger gaps will likely make faster, surer progress.

If we apply this ladder analogy to the continuum (Figure 4), we can see that the most vulnerable need smaller steps while the least vulnerable can *cope* with larger gaps. It is important to note that the ‘more able’ do not *need* the larger gaps, it is simply that they can manage

*despite them.*

What this means is that when a child doesn’t understand, the responsibility is placed on the teaching and not the child. This way of thinking comes naturally to me, but my perspective as a tutor plays into that. If my pupil doesn’t understand something, I interpret that as my having failed to teach it effectively. I may have misjudged their grasp of any required prior learning for example, or not worked through enough examples, or not broken it down sufficiently, etc.

In a classroom situation, however, the dynamic is quite different. If one teaches something to a class of 30 and

it seems that at least 27 children ‘got it’ then it is easy to see why one might be tempted, even if only unconsciously, to see the reason for the three (or even two or just one) not understanding as lying with them. This is problem number one.

Problem two is that while one might think 27 or 28 out of 30 ain’t bad, for every child that the teacher realises didn’t understand something, the bell curve strongly suggests there may be 2 or 3 more who also didn’t understand but somehow evaded notice, several more who barely grasped it and perhaps many who broadly got it but with misconceptions that will cause problems later.

The good news is, however, just as we teach our pupils to learn from their ‘mistakes’, understanding what prevented each child from learning is *our* opportunity to learn how to make our teaching more inclusive, more ‘faultless’ and better for everyone. To illustrate, if we think back to my example of noticing a child having poor working memory, any improvements we make to our teaching to accommodate the needs of that child will also benefit many others in the class. If you read anything by Siegfried Engelmann you will discover that the incredibly successful and inclusive curriculums he and his colleagues wrote were honed through wide testing and learning from failure. If lessons failed to teach *all* children, they were redesigned in light of that failure to become more inclusive.

In the UK context, if we see all children, particularly those with SEN, as ‘learning differently’ we might not appreciate the full, positive impact of adopting a Quality First Teaching (QFT) approach, for example. Instead, we might see the demands of QFT as an unwelcome, added burden just to accommodate one child that we

Most vulnerable  
to imperfect teaching

Least vulnerable  
to imperfect teaching



Need smaller steps  
to access learning

Can manage with larger  
steps/cope with gaps

Figure 4

probably don't feel equipped to help. Multiply that perceived burden by several children and we can appreciate why teachers feel overwhelmed. This is a great shame as this means that teachers are less likely to make the changes that would not only benefit that child and their peers but, should they learn from and maintain them, also benefit future pupils.

As an example, let's apply this concept to the teaching of reading, in particular decoding. Teaching phonic knowledge in a clear and systematic way is merely putting in the smaller steps that were previously missing in a whole language/balanced literacy approach, i.e., moving to the left on my continuum. Mainstream programs will try to pick a 'sweet spot', towards the left of the continuum with as many steps and as much repetition as needed by most children. What then of the children who are still struggling? Should they learn something different? No, they just need even better teaching and/or more time and practice. This might 'look' different and consist of different activities not needed by the majority. However, the content and purpose remain the same.

For example, some aspects of Ann Sullivan's excellent *Phonics for Pupils with Special Educational Needs* program (designed with the needs of special school pupils in mind) might look quite different to the phonics program used in mainstream schools. In reality, however, the goals and the content are the same, it is simply that Ann has broken everything down into the even smaller steps required by some of the pupils in special schools, the extreme outliers on the left of my continuum. They might be completely nonverbal for example, but they are not learning something different or in a different way – they are learning the same thing in the same way just in smaller, even clearer steps.

Some of you may be persuaded and might even think this is obvious. Sadly, however, the way of thinking I present here is radically different to the status quo in most education systems. We need only consider a 2021 comment from a representative of a balanced-literacy/whole-word publishing giant who, upset at increasing demands for

children to be taught reading more explicitly, publicly complained that she was 'very sad that we've turned the entire education system upside down for 20% of the kids'. Imagine being comfortable with, in effect, writing off 20% of all children. And I don't mean just the individual who wrote this; she was merely articulating the implicit, accepted outcome of most approaches to teaching and education more widely.

When we place too much emphasis on differences (even with the best of intentions), we also risk lowering expectations and limiting potential outcomes. It's simply a fact of life that some children will encounter greater difficulty achieving certain objectives than others. The problem is that the attainment of certain goals, such as functional literacy, can significantly impact a child's entire life experience, and we must be careful not to diminish their motivation or our expectation for them to succeed. By labelling certain children as 'different' and failing to recognise or acknowledge the extent to which they *can* be included, we marginalise them and compromise their future prospects.

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't be making accommodations for SEN children, *quite the opposite*. But these accommodations should be about smaller steps in, and improved teaching of, the same curriculum *or* making adaptations to the environment so that the child can access the teaching. For example, if we aren't able (for whatever reason) to keep the classroom environment quiet and calm enough for a noise-sensitive pupil to tolerate, then we may need to make some other accommodation for that (such as allowing noise-cancelling headphones, etc).

Ultimately the point is this: when we misconceive children with SEN as being *qualitatively* different in terms of learning, we risk making decisions that will not only limit the educational opportunities/outcomes for *that* child but will limit our opportunity to improve learning/outcomes for every other child that we teach.

Perversely, one reason that people reject the notion that children are more

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similar than different is that they think this idea means advocating teaching in a way that only suits the most able. They couldn't be more wrong. In fact, I believe that the notion that we should try to teach to each child's perceived individual differences helps perpetuate an educational system in which only the most able flourish.

SEN children are the canaries in the coal mine of the education system, succumbing not to foul air, but instead are the first casualties of less-than-optimal teaching. How many canaries are we prepared to continue to lose?

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*This article originally appeared on the author's blog, [How to Teach Reading](#).*

*Monique Nowers [[@GovTutor](#) on Twitter] is a specialist reading/dyslexia tutor with over 20 years of experience in teaching reading and spelling to children and adults.*