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<**CT**>**'Topographical teaching':** A metaphor for professional practice with learners with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties

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<A>Introduction

It has been noted that research into inclusive education has tended to overlook considerations around teaching students with severe learning difficulties and/or profound and multiple learning difficulties (SPMLD) (e.g. Colley, 2020). This paper outlines research findings that were obtained as part of a wider study involving the analysis of professional dilemmas encountered by teachers working with either or both of these two groups of learners.

The study interacted with the 'craft knowledge' of participating teachers. Hagger and McIntyre (2006) define craft knowledge as 'all the complex, largely tacit knowledge that informs the contextualised professional judgements made by individual teachers in their everyday practice' (p. 34). Craft knowledge has been highlighted as distinct from other forms of teacher knowledge by being cultivated over time and through experience (e.g. Florian and Graham, 2014).

The study therefore broadly aimed to explore the relationship between craft knowledge and other forms of knowledge for working with students with SPMLD, such as knowledge of 'separate and distinct' pedagogies (Imray and Hinchcliffe, 2012, p. 150) for working with these students.

<A>Method

Twenty-four stories related to the teaching of students with SPMLD were analysed to address the research question 'What is inclusive practice for learners with severe and profound and multiple learning difficulties?'. Each of these stories was based on a professional dilemma.

Although 'severe learning difficulties' (SLD) and 'profound and multiple learning difficulties' (PMLD) are two distinct terms for classifying special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) within the English school system, the umbrella phrase SPMLD has been used in multiple contexts (e.g. Imray and Hinchcliffe, 2012; Lacey et al., 2015; Colley, 2020). One reason for this may be that in some schools the numbers of learners with PMLD can be so small that it is actually not possible to create a viable teaching group exclusively for learners with this label. It has also been acknowledged that while separate definitions of SLD and PMLD have been outlined by the Department for Education, they are both exceptionally diverse groups (Male, 2015), which can overlap (Colley, 2020).

Stories included in the analysis involved at least one student with either the SLD or PMLD label. When recruiting teachers, an exclusive focus on mainstream schools was avoided. This was because one possible reason for the absence of students with SPMLD from research into inclusive education, as described by Colley, may be its focus on mainstream schooling for all, therefore leading to studies involving only those attending mainstream settings. In the context of England, however, the majority of the approximately 45,000 school students who have SLD or PMLD as their identified primary need are educated within specialist settings (DfE, 2024), making it necessary to interact with specialist settings when starting to consider inclusive practice with these learners.

The majority of the stories in the study were crafted as part of a highly qualitative methodological approach, which involved story-sharing dialogues with teachers, transcription of these dialogues and the (re)drafting of narratives emerging from them. Each story was given a title, which was a question that captured the dilemma within it. Examples included 'What does inclusion look like for a learner with complex medical needs who is self-isolating?' and 'If they're making beans and toast with us, are they learning?'.

The stories were analysed, utilising the approaches proposed by Van Manen (2016) in his *Phenomenology of Practice*. Phenomenological research is concerned with articulating lived experience(s) of the phenomenon under investigation. Van Manen's approaches are underpinned by processes for interpretation and reflection. The stories were therefore discussed at conferences to enable interaction with multiple perspectives. At a session at Liepaja University in Latvia, for example (7 June 2022), groups of teachers were asked to look at the story titles and discuss the following:

- <BL>Which dilemmas interest you?
- Which remind you of dilemmas that you have experienced yourself?
- Do you have any advice or insight for the teacher(s) experiencing the dilemma?
- How might you sort the dilemmas into categories?</BL>

All discussions were logged and the research therefore involved having a 'conversation with the situation' (Schon, 1991, p. 76) within each story.

<A>Analysis of the stories

Conversations with the situation within each story enabled the study to arrive at the metaphor of 'topography' for representing inclusive pedagogical practice with learners with SPMLD. In geology and art history, the term 'topography' refers to the arrangement of the forms and features of an area (National Gallery, nd) – for example, through maps or landscape paintings (Medyńska-Gulij, 2021).

Examples of a 'topographical' pedagogical perspective can be found in stories shared by 'Stephanie'. In one of Stephanie's stories, 'How should we be assessing the progress of learners in our special school?', she articulates a commitment to exploring the hidden contour lines that resided beneath the surface of the classroom:

<Q>'We had been using this commercial software package to assess our pupils. It was one of those online things where teachers had to click on a box for each standard that a pupil had achieved, and then it calculated what level they were on. This did not provide an authentic picture of learning across the school. For example, there were teachers who tried to be really honest with their reporting. Their learners were shown to not be making any progress because not enough boxes within the system had been ticked. This was often in spite of us knowing that the pupil had made enormous progress with us, which was frustrating. There were also those teachers that saw that the algorithm said that that child had to make three points of progress, so they over-supported the child to produce those three pieces of work that they would need to tick a particular box. The system then "showed" that "progress" had been made, but it was not authentic.'

In another story shared from Stephanie, titled *'Is it necessary for children to be creating art in an art lesson?'*, students engage in learning activities in which she can see clear value. Instead of creating artwork, however, the lesson focuses on engaging in problem-solving to open tubes of paint. This prompts Stephanie to rethink the overall purpose of provision for the school's pupils with SPMLD and ask questions around what ultimately matters in relation to the 'bigger picture' of preparing them for greater independence in adult life.

In the same way as a topographical artist or cartographer closely studies the environment that they are representing, the topographical teacher is a student of their pupils and co-constructs learning experiences accordingly, as outlined in **Table 1**.

<TC>Table 1: Topographical practices in art, cartography and education

	THE TOPOGRAPHICAL	THE TOPOGRAPHICAL	THE TOPOGRAPHICAL
	ARTIST	CARTOGRAPHER	TEACHER
OBSERVATION	Carefully observes a	Observes and captures the	Observes learner responses
	landscape to create a valid	objective features of a	to teaching in order to
	representation of it	landscape (e.g. through	inform planning
		photographs and sketches)	
		to enable an accurate	
		representation of a place	
CAPTURING	Captures geological	Takes appropriate	Uses formative assessment
ر کار	features of a place, such as	measurements to ensure	to gain insight into their
	terrain and vegetation	that physical features are	learners and effectively
		represented accurately on a	elicit misconceptions,
		map	barriers to learning and/or
			effective strategies
CONSIDERING	Contextualises any human	Explores what is beneath	Considers the 'bigger
'THE BIGGER	or animal subjects within	the surface of the land, to	picture' beyond the
PICTURE'	the broader landscape	represent geological	immediate lesson or
• ^^	within which they are	features on a map that are	upcoming assessment –
Ť	situated	not immediately observable	how might learners be best
-			prepared for their long-term
			future?

ENGAGING	Largely bases their work on	Creates a map that is highly	Teaches the actual learners
WITH REALITY	observed realities, rather	informative and offers	within their classroom
	than on the content of their	insight into a terrain	rather than fictional ones
(?Q	imagination		that are imagined in relation
			to diagnoses or perceived
			ability groups
BEING	Responds to the sublime	Considers how factors such	Pays attention to
RESPONSIVE	and/or untamed dimension	as coastal erosion or	topographical shifts within
	of the natural world	tectonic activity have	their classroom and adapts
		changed the terrain and	their practice accordingly –
		captures this	what seems to be 'working'
			in one moment may be
			ineffective in the next
BEING	Channels their personal	Continually makes creative	Shapes their own inclusive
CREATIVE	creativity to represent	decisions on how to	practice creatively rather
	landscapes from their	communicate complex	than following a pre-defined
	unique perspective in order	information clearly	formula
	to create an original piece		
	of artwork		

<A>Discussion and conclusion

It is possibly through craft knowledge, topographical teaching and specialist pedagogies working together, therefore, that we can most effectively develop classroom practices to support the learning of students with SPMLD. Without working alongside topographical teaching, the exercise of craft knowledge, for example, can fall into the trap acknowledged by Black-Hawkins and Florian (2012) of becoming based on superstition, entrenching misconceptions and therefore reproducing ineffective and exclusive practices. Although craft knowledge is itself based on reflection on experience, topographical teaching arguably has an even stronger empirical basis, by requiring continual and more robust interaction with the landscape of the classroom.

Advocacy for specialist SEND pedagogies for teaching students with SPMLD has accompanied points similar to those articulated by 'Stephanie' within her stories (e.g. Imray, 2013). However, a preoccupation with maintaining fidelity to such specialist pedagogies can arguably start to revolve around hypothetical or imagined 'SLD students', rather than the actual students with the label 'SLD' that reside in actual classrooms. Beyond specialist knowledge of the 'separate and distinct' pedagogies for which Imray and Hinchcliffe advocate (2012), topographical teaching requires 'knowledge' of approaches to 'noticing' (Mason, 2002) what is going on for learners. This may include knowledge of formative assessment strategies, questioning techniques and/or methods of close observation. Rather than being SPMLD-specific, such skills are universal and underpin all high-quality teaching.

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