Exploring the impact of Visual Impairment Awareness Training: Phenomenographic Research with PGCE Secondary Art & Design Trainees

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Abstract

Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) secondary art and design trainees participated in visual impairment awareness training (VIAT), prior to facilitating an art education project for visually impaired (VI) pupils. This was designed to better prepare them for working with a range of learners. A phenomenographic methodology and research approach was adopted – to capture key data relevant to learning, gaining knowledge and understanding in education settings. This contributed to knowledge in the field, highlighting the shift in trainees perspectives towards working with VI pupils, as a consequence of participation in VIAT. Existing literature recognises that VIAT provides an understanding of VI but cannot replicate everyday experiences. The findings as part of this study indicate that initially an empathy response was evoked, as trainees were apprehensive about working with VI pupils. Following VIAT, trainees gained a superficial overview of VI. Having gained experience, an advocacy response was evoked as trainees felt more comfortable asking pupils how their needs could be met.

Keywords: Teacher training; visual impairment; art & design; phenomenography; EDI

Introduction

This paper explores PGCE secondary art and design trainees experiences of engaging in Visual Impairment Awareness Training (VIAT), prior to facilitating an art project for visually impaired (VI) pupils as part of trainees training and development. Findings of the Newly Qualified Teachers' Annual Survey 2016 (NCTL, 2016) indicates PGCE trainees are often less secure in their ability to develop appropriate learning opportunities for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); often this is due to time constraints on PGCE courses

in order to cover that needs to be addressed in relation to SEND (Carter, 2015). The expectation is that trainees should gain experience of – and become better prepared for – providing appropriate support to pupils with SEND (Coates et al., 2020; DfE, 2021). There is no compulsory requirement to undertake SEND placements. This is at the discretion of ITT providers. Typically PGCE tutors at English universities are aware that working with VI pupils is a challenge for trainees, and something that they are nervous of doing. Furthermore, mainstream teaching practice placements, with large class sizes and staff to pupil ratios, would not necessarily provide the most

appropriate guidance in working with pupils with SEND more broadly. Participation in VIAT prior to facilitating the art project as part of this study, was aimed at equipping trainee teachers (at a small English University) with the necessary skills to support pupils' needs in the classroom. The research contributes to existing research in the field, and highlights the impact of SEND experiences for ITT and teaching practice. The VIAT session and the impact of the project had a lasting and positive impact on the participating trainee teachers.

Research Aims & Objectives

In England, a common route to becoming a teacher is successful completion of a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) (DfE, 2021) offered by universities. This is undertaken following completion of an undergraduate degree. Trainees must be provided with adequate time to engage with academic study and school-based placements (DfE, 2021), to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to teach in primary or secondary schools. A PGCE involves substantial chunks of teaching experience via school placements, in conjunction with studying theoretical and pedagogic aspects through university-based study. Programmes generally take one year to complete (DfE, 2021).

The objective of this research is to examine PGCE trainees perceptions of the VIAT that they participated in as part of their ITT course. The aim is to understand the extent to which participation in the VIAT enabled the development of appropriate teaching skills and practice. To ascertain this, I facilitated an art education project for VI pupils and ITT trainees. As I followed the PGCE trainees' journeys, I examined the impact of the project on their professional development as teachers; and the extent to which these skills will be carried forward as they embark upon their teaching careers.

Importantly, these aims and objectives are informed by my own personal experiences and values, along with the recognition that art education can provide opportunities to understand one's own practice and identity (Penketh, 2014). As a VI individual and education practitioner I am well informed and knowledgeable about VIAT and art

education; often, and in my experience, there seems to be a lack of understanding regarding reasonable adjustments and adaptations to facilitate VI pupil/student access to learning.

As such, the research produced here grows out of an existing body of literature surrounding VIAT, and recognises that when VIAT is utilised within ITT it is a potentially contentious topic. However, it is not my intention to debate whether VIAT is, or should be, universally taught in-depth, but to enter into – and hopefully generate – more critical discussion on VIAT.

Exploring the Impact of VIAT in Teaching Practice

VIAT is designed for those working with VI people and aims to replicate an experience (Flowers, et al., 2007; McKenney, 2018; Maher et al., 2021). It cannot offer a genuine replication, but if delivered effectively can provide a partial perspective, of what it may be like to live with VI (Titchkosky et al., 2019). Through practical and experiential approaches an appreciation of the challenges associated with VI may be experienced, thereby a snapshot is provided. This can offer pedagogic opportunities to support planning and the delivery of lessons (Flowers, et al., 2007; Maher et al., 2021).

During practical VIAT activities, participants can engage in activities such as trying on simulation glasses for a time-limited period (French, 1992;) an eye condition Scullion, 1996). Participants are required to wear simulation glasses, known as Sim-specs, which temporarily obscure sight (Silverman, 2015; Silverman et al., 2015), simulating a limited range of eye conditions (Ates et al., 2015), including central and peripheral vision loss (Juniat et al., 2019). Blindfolds can also be used to temporarily remove the majority of a participants' visual input (Kappan, 1994; Maher et al., 2021). This may mimic the effects of becoming blind (Silverman, 2015; Silverman et al., 2015) as they are reported to 'reliably simulate the symptoms of common ocular conditions' (Juniat, et al, 2019, p.1), providing participants with a limited insight into the everyday lives of VI learners.

While wearing simulation glasses, participants undertake a range of tasks in the learning environment (Morris, 1976; Kappan, 1994;

McClelland et al., 2018; McKenney, 2018). Sessions are designed to employ a range of appropriate active learning experiences (Silverman, 2015; Silverman et al., 2015), involving simple tasks, such as pouring a jug of cold water into a glass, eating a small meal, or completing an orientation activity, such as moving from one side of a table to another (French, 1992; Kappan, 1994). These activities can be difficult for participants to perform while wearing blindfolds or simulation glasses. However, participants may benefit from practising a range of experiences and developing transferrable skills, which can then be put into practice during subsequent careers. In essence, the purpose of the training can have positive impacts on 'pedagogical approaches and strategies' (Herold & Dandolo, 2009, p.79), which can then be further developed when practitioners work with VI people.

Participation in VIAT may improve participants attitudes and empathy towards VI pupils (French, 1992; Colwell, 2012; Silverman, 2015; Silverman et al., 2015; Cone & Cone. 2016; McKenney, 2018; Juniat et al., 2019; Maher et al., 2021). In addition, VIAT contributes towards improving communication skills in the school environment. However, participants must also hold realistic expectations (Wilson & Alcorn, 1969) and be aware that such activities can only offer partial representations of everyday experiences (Cone & Cone, 2016; McKenney, 2018). When this is highlighted, participants are generally accepting (Aballea & Tsuchyia, 2007; McKenney, 2018), and may become more receptive in making adaptations during their teaching practice (Cone & Cone, 2016), which meets the needs of (Maher et al., 2021) pupils with whom they work.

Importantly, VIAT is largely 'outsider-driven' (Silverman, 2015; Silverman et al., 2015) in which sighted people seek an experience of VI. The authenticity and efficacy of VIAT can be questioned when those with VI are not involved in the planning and delivery of sessions (Maher et al., 2021). Those with VI, insiders (Silverman, 2015; Silverman et al., 2015) have concerns such training does not represent the full experience and could be biased (Silverman, 2015; Silverman et al., 2015). Therefore, it is necessary to employ several approaches to learning about VI, rather than relying on VIAT alone.

VIAT has the potential to be demeaning and disrespectful (Vernon, 1990; Kiger, 1992) creating "stereotypical" attitudes towards those with VI (French, 1992, p.260). Participants may be of the opinion they know what it is like to be blind (Silverman, 2015; Silverman et al., 2015). The use of blindfolds can mimic the effects of becoming blind, rather than several years' experience (Silverman, 2015; Silverman et al., 2015). VIAT cannot replicate the nuances and long-term coping mechanisms (Vernon, 1990; Scullion, 1996; Silverman, 2015; Silverman et al., 2015) acquired over a lifetime (Vernon, 1990; French, 1992; Smart, 2001; Kappan, 1994; Burgstahler & Doe, 2014). Thus, a 'false impression' is experienced, and only some of the effects of being temporarily blind (French, 1992, p.260). During VIAT, the 'initial trauma' (Silverman, 2015, np) and onset of blindness is simulated (French, 1992), giving a 'distorted impression' of the experiences of VI, leading to some emotional discomfort (Herbert, 2000; Burgstahler & Doe, 2014; Silverman, 2015). In addition, the 'psychological makeup' of participants, means they recognise this only as a temporary situation and accept it is not the same as living with VI (Vernon, 1990; Kappan, 1994). This situation is 'escapable' (Silverman, 2015, np), participants can remove their blindfolds or simulation glasses at any given moment (French, 1992; Silverman, 2015; Silverman et al., 2015) returning to their fully sighted status (French, 1992) and continuing with their lives. Thus, VIAT provides a temporary experience.

Overview of the Art Education Project & Phenomenographic Methodology

The Headteacher at a specialist school for VI in the Northwest of England invited PGCE trainees into school as part of their training, to facilitate an art project for pupils. A small intake of trainees on the art and design ITT programme at one university meant this opportunity was bespoke to the course. The project involved a small group of secondary VI pupils. Trainees extended a project started by the school in relation to World War II. During the planning process, trainees recognised the importance of providing a rich sensory experience, including an element of sculpture/installation-based work (Ball & Dowdall,

2019), offering a fully tactile experience. Trainees decided ModRoc parachutes would offer an interesting material for pupils to work with. Pupils created their parachutes decorating them with images that they associated with war, e.g. poppies/ camouflage. Pupils were also given an opportunity to write poems in response to a soundscape based on the War, which were then hung from the parachutes in the form of an installation. The educators indicated how working in collaboration with the trainees, developed pupils' knowledge and understanding of

what they have been taught in class throughout the term, thus bringing 'learning to life'.

Figure 1 – PGCE trainees supporting pupils' participation in the project

Figure 2 – Pupils painting their ModRoc parachutes

This research adopts a phenomenographic approach – a qualitative methodology in its own right, encompassing the whole research, from deciding upon research questions, through to the

representation of findings[1]. Qualitative research within education adopts a range of forms and can be conducted in many education-related settings (Bogdan & Bikklen, 1997). The research is descriptive, and data takes the form of words rather than numbers (Bogdan & Bikklen, 1997), which is the case with qualitative research, to capture the perspectives of participants. Phenomenography is broad in methodology thus, data can be "collected more generally" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p.129), providing freedom in terms of methods. Data collection is informed by the research aims and objectives. As the phenomenographic approach is concerned with identifying and understanding specific research questions relevant to learning, gaining knowledge and understanding in education settings (Marton & Booth, 1997), it focuses on experiences from the perspective of groups of people – in this case, PGCE trainees. Adopting this approach demonstrates a representation of the complexity of experiences in the education setting, producing beneficial conclusions, surrounding perspectives of participating in VIAT in relation to its impact on teaching practice.

There are variations in how this research methodology is approached, as such, I implement Bowden and Walsh's 'developmental phenomenography', as this enables research to be undertaken with the purpose of using outcomes to create change for participants – along with learning about teaching VI pupils (2000, p.3). A phenomenographic approach enables the experience of PGCE trainees to be tracked over the one-year period of the PGCE course, highlighting a shift in perspectives on their journey to become a teacher. Phenomenographic approaches are concerned with 'qualitatively different and interrelated ways in which the phenomenon or the situation is experienced or understood' (Marton, 1994, p.4427). The phenomenon is the way trainees experience teaching VI pupils, following participation in VIAT.

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[1] The origins of phenomenography can be attributed to the work of Marton, one of the key proponents of this research specialisation. An early definition indicates ' 'phenomenography is a research method adapted for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive and understand various aspects of, and phenomena, in the world around them' (Marton, 1986, p.31).

A key feature of the phenomenographic approach is *categories of experience*, which best depict variation between participants and describe how the phenomenon is experienced (Marton & Booth, 1997). Trainees experiences, gained through focus group transcripts, are categorised into two distinct but interrelated categories (Marton, 1986; Orgill, 2012) most appropriate in allowing their experiences to be heard. PGCE trainees understandings of the phenomenon and situation are inextricably linked. Some of these preliminary categories were expected within the data. Each category contains sub-categories, reflecting the ways trainees' perspectives developed. These categories are the researchers own interpretation of the data and may be different should others analyse the data. The raw data contained in the focus group transcripts represents the phenomenon in its basic form. By refining and modifying these categories (empathy/ advocacy), the role of the researcher was to reach categories, best representing the variation in experiences of the phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997; Han & Ellis, 2019), This process involved alternating between developing categories, while checking these developments were coherent with the original transcripts. To arrive at the categories, I read and re-read the data transcripts, mapping out extracts of data, using the floor as a spatial representation. The messiness of this approach resonated with my own art education – developing creatively to explore and understand my educational journey. The categories are 'a description on the collective level, and in that sense, individual voices are not heard' (Marton & Booth, 1997, p.114) and are not an 'exhaustive system' (Marton & Booth, 1997, p.125). The terms employed to define the categories already exist and are extended as a result of trainees experiences. The categories are empathy and advocacy which can be summarised as:

- Empathy – PGCE trainees engaging in and then putting VIAT into practice in art education.

- Advocacy – developing teaching practice as a result of participation in VIAT.

The different experiences in relation to the phenomenon may be beneficial to trainees when considering career choices upon completion of the PGCE course. It may also be valuable to ITT providers designing course content around SEND to ensure PGCE trainees are equipped with the necessary skills when embarking upon their careers. When adopting a phenomenographic approach, a brief definition is given of each category, followed by the data analysis, short extracts of data are provided and a brief explanation.

Researcher Positionality, Sample Group & Ethics

Continually striving to ensure personal perceptions do not influence the research is important (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Nevertheless, education research can never be completely value-free or fully eliminate researcher bias (Greenbank, 2003; Basit, 2010; Holmes, 2020). As a researcher with VI and other conditions, my own personal and professional experiences of art and education inevitably underpin – and to a large extent have influenced – the development of this project and the associated training delivered to the teachers on this project, in an attempt to positively influence the beginning of their careers, specifically in relation to working with VI pupils.

The participants that opted to take part in this art-based project consisted of 22 PGCE secondary art and design trainees (3 male and 19 female), all were enrolled on an ITT course at a small university in the Northwest of England. The PGCE secondary art and design cohort at this university recruits a small number of students at each year, as such, a purposive sampling approach was utilised (Denscombe, 2010) – as the small cohort of potential participants already existed. I was signposted to the PGCE secondary art and design tutor via my head of department. As part of their training and development, trainees could participate in VIAT before facilitating an art project. Trainees were recruited at their initial university-based session at the beginning of the academic year. I was mindful that the small sample size could be problematic in terms of bias. However, the research was designed specifically to explore trainees experiences on one PGCE course at one university when working with VI pupils.

Prior to recruiting potential participants for the research, I completed the university Research Ethics and Governance course and a research ethics application. As trainees were working with VI pupils, who could be considered a vulnerable group, they were required to adhere to the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. Age-appropriate research information sheets were provided to trainees and pupils, outlining the purpose of the research, and details on the actual and potential use of the research data was made available (BERA, 2018; GDPR, 2018). Prior to undertaking the VIAT session, trainees were briefed on the ethical issues associated with this training, in that whilst it cannot provide a general overview of common eye conditions, it cannot fully replicate the lived-experiences of those with VI (Barney, 2012; Titchkosky, et al 2019). Trainees and pupils gave voluntary informed consent prior to engaging in the research (BERA, 2018).

Collection & Analysis of Data: Empathy & Advocacy

Twenty-two PGCE trainees took part in one semi-structured focus group upon completion of the VIAT-based art project, then one semi-structured focus group at the end of the PGCE course; each focus group lasted approximately ninety minutes. The sessions were scheduled to take place when trainees were attending their university-based sessions. The nature of the PGCE course meant that it would otherwise have been difficult to bring all trainees together, due to undertaking teaching practice placements. The PGCE tutor chose not to be present for any of the focus groups.

It was vital to create an environment in which PGCE trainees felt comfortable (Kitzinger, 1994, 1995; Krueger & Casey, 2009) to expand upon their responses (Akerlind, 2005). I was guided by trainees discussion and responses, when asking semi-structured prompt questions (Bloor, et al., 2001; Denscombe, 2010). It was necessary to be unobtrusive, listen openly and provide minimum intervention, while remaining non-judgemental (Karger, 1987). The first focus group centred on the preparation, planning. And methods employed when working with VI pupils. The focus group on completion of the PGCE course centred around

trainees reflections on their teaching practice and ways they developed as teachers, drawing on the impact of participation in VIAT when facilitating the art project and considering subsequent teaching practice placements and careers.

A VIAT session was organised and facilitated by staff and pupils at the specialist school for VI and other needs. VIAT could have an impact on trainees teaching practice, supporting pupils in the classroom during their future teaching practice placements and careers. The purpose was to provide PGCE trainees with an overview of common eye conditions. Trainees gained experience of appropriate sighted guiding techniques when working with VI pupils. Sighted guiding enables people with VI to move through an environment safely with the assistance of a guide. There are many ways to guide people and trainees were reminded of the importance of asking people about their preferences first (RNIB, 2022). Trainees were informed, generally the person being guided holds the guide's arm lightly above the elbow and follows one-half step behind (RNIB, 2022).

VIAT is the process of demonstrating insight into pupils' unique perspectives, putting VIAT into practice as part of art education means that empathy can be evoked by initiating PGCE trainees into the lived experience of VI learners. In the context of this research, an empathic trainee is likely to become more receptive to the needs of VI pupils, gaining a greater understanding of their perspectives and experiences. This includes the ways in which skills learnt can be adapted and put into practice when considering future teaching practice placements and careers.

Empathy was initially evoked by trainees gaining an understanding of pupils' perspectives when discussing their experiences on being sight-guided. Trainees subsequently recognised that they could never truly gain an insight into pupils' lived experiences; as such, they began to critically reflect on aspects of their own teaching approaches in relation to VIAT. Trainees questioned the ways in which pupils were affected by different eye conditions. Lastly, trainees reflected on how they might put this knowledge and associated skills into practice.

PGCE trainee reflections on engaging with VIAT demonstrated an emergence of empathic responses; for example, by gaining an understanding on how best to sight-guide VI pupils, one participant commented:

So the first day was learning about the school, learning how to get like, we experienced what it was like to guided sight, we learnt all of that, it was more of an orientation. Oh yeah, we had those glasses that helped imitate some of them (PGCE trainee 2).

The first day in the VI specialist school provided an 'overview' of the school. Trainees were invited to wear simulation glasses representing common eye conditions. Once trainees had learnt how to sight-guide pupils, the feelings evoked by participation in VIAT represented a shift in perspective. Trainees began to consider how pupils may feel:

I think that experience [VI training] was to kind of make us feel comfortable, I think and to put across this idea that it must be scary if you're completely 100% blind (PGCE trainee 12).

Trainees expected to feel reassured once they understood how to sight-guide pupils. Instead, VIAT led them to imagine that such scenarios are likely to be a 'scary' for someone who is blind. Trainees then gained a brief insight into the perspective of VI pupils, along with the varied and different eye conditions that effect their sight. Trainees then started to explore different ways in adapting and implementing the skills that they had started to learn into practice as part of the art project. Trainees went through a process of questioning, in order to enhance their understanding, such as what was meant by '30% vision', the extent to which this might impact pupils' learning. As one participant stated:

What is 30%, is it like covering one eye? We need more about different eye conditions and how they were affected… But then it [VIAT] led us to believe that if you're VI then you're completely 100% blind, didn't it? I found that it was quite false in some ways it puts expectations on the people that can see, it makes them think […], putting blindfolds on people it's not always real. It's a false impression of what we're going to be going into. […] there were

definitely things that I will take from it, just like approaching them and touching them on the elbow and not being afraid to do that (PGCE trainee 15).

To trainees, VIAT implied having a complete lack of sight, which was fear inducing. Importantly, further clarification was required in terms of understanding the wide range of eye conditions and the impact of VI on pupils. As the conversation progressed, trainees considered different eye conditions; as a result the VIAT was able to clarify and correct many misperceptions. It was highlighted how VIAT can create a false representation, and that unrealistic expectations can be placed upon those who are sighted. During some parts of the VIAT sessions only blindfolds were used to simulate VI. The misperceptions of VIAT held by trainees were discussed further regarding the use of blindfolds:

They didn't use simulation goggles; it was just the blindfolds. I think that just made me feel really disconcerted as a personal experience seeing what it would be like to be blind. Just to put a blindfold on us for 2 minutes while we walk around a room and then for us to take it off again, I think that's really disrespectful […] …it's just like rude and insensitive. I think it's quite false in the sense that we're trying to create […] VI which obviously we can't do, wearing the blindfold doesn't really compare to the actual experience. But I think for me personally having not had any experience with people who are VI, it made me then feel going into [...] [VI specialist school], I could take one of the student's arms and say, I'm [...] [PGCE trainee name], introduce myself, come with me and get them settled (PGCE trainee 19).

While VIAT can be perceived as a negative way to demonstrate an understanding of VI, the project illustrated that it is still possible for trainees to take into consideration pupils' perspectives. Despite having no prior 'experience' of working with VI pupils, it was possible for the participants to develop – at least some – understanding of their perspectives. Furthermore, the initial skills and knowledge were put into practice by the trainees when they started to personally introduce themselves to the VI pupils, demonstrating a receptiveness towards meeting their pupils' needs.

Moving from empathy to advocacy, it was vital that the PGCE trainees sight-guided and developed interactions with the VI pupils. With their awareness of different eye conditions, trainees started to put the skills learnt during VIAT into practice, developing working relationships with pupils, to successfully engage them in lessons.

Advocacy manifested in the ways that each of the participants started to develop their own teaching practice in response to the VIAT. An educator demonstrates advocacy by being (or becoming) more receptive to making their lessons accessible and responsive to the different needs of each pupil. Advocacy involves upholding effective communication skills to ensure successful learning opportunities take place for all pupils. In essence, advocacy facilitates a positive impact in relation to trainee teachers' practice.

The categories of *empathy* and *advocacy* were developed and used by me as the researcher to shed light on the data that emerged, along with tracking the journey of PGCE trainees following VIAT over the one-year period of the PGCE course. Importantly, the categories are the researchers own interpretation of the data when using a phenomenographic approach; this may of course be interpreted differently should any other researcher engage with and analyse the data. Initially, empathy was manifest as trainees were apprehensive about the idea of working with VI pupils. However, experiences of participation in VIAT, prior to facilitating an art education project for VI pupils, enabled trainees to move through the empathy response. This can be beneficial to trainees development by providing a superficial overview of VI. It cannot replicate genuine experiences of living with VI. Having gained experience, trainees demonstrated advocacy, beginning to feel more comfortable asking pupils about how their needs can be met. There was an improvement in trainees communication strategies. Engaging in VIAT and SEND opportunities during ITT can be beneficial to trainees development when working with pupils with a range of needs. Therefore, a priority for broader ITT delivery is ensuring trainees can plan for the needs of all pupils, instead of SEND being regarded as a separate aspect. The benefit of providing VIAT and SEND opportunities during ITT must not be underestimated, it can be transformational in terms of teaching practice and career choices. Thus, the research could potentially have an impact, contributing to the development of teachers at the beginning of their careers.

Developing as a Teacher

This section focuses upon PGCE trainee reflections at the point of completing their PGCE course, and the ways that they anticipate developing as teachers, and the ways in which their attitudes have started to change. Further demonstrating advocacy-based responses, the PGCE practitioners started to consider ways by which they might become more professional in the classroom. Trainees began to highlight various ways in which their practice had already started to change in relation to their teaching placements:

Yeah it has made me feel more comfortable to ask them [pupil] about what help they need...just ask them… well what do you need help with? (PGCE trainee 9).

Trainees started to recognise that it is appropriate to discuss with pupils how their needs might best be met. That it is important to ask pupils about whether they require any help or support. Trainees mentioned they now feel capable of adapting their teaching environments accordingly:

To be fair though... that [VIAT] has kind of like helped us be more professional as well as being able to adapt ourselves really quickly… it was a blessing in disguise (PGCE trainee 1).

This opportunity assisted trainees in becoming 'more professional'. An important factor was learning to adapt quickly to a range of different environments. Participants also demonstrated that they had also started to think differently in relation to job applications:

I think I'm more open to applying for jobs like that, like originally I would have been quite...under prepared…but seeing as how we have done that, it opened up doors and actually maybe that's something I could have gone and did. (PGCE trainee 3).

Trainees were able to consider applying for jobs in SEND schools, while recalling, previously that they would have felt underprepared for such work, thus becoming more receptive to different teaching opportunities. Importantly, trainees had also started to critique the language and terminology used in relation to VI pupils:

I didn't want to offend anyone or step on anyone's toes but then instantly working with the kids and painting with them within two seconds I was like right ok, what can you see, what can you not see? Tell me so that I can work with you (PGCE trainee 12).

Initially, trainees were cautious about not offending pupils. Once working with pupils, they were able to ask questions to establish what they could see. This meant trainees were able to provide appropriate support to pupils. Consequently, initial anxieties about supporting VI pupils were overcome. Trainees explained how they were able to make a difference when working with pupils in terms of how they communicated:

I guess it's like ask them what can they see, what can they hear, pushing those boundaries and getting away from the negative things, to get an insight of what she or he can do usually works. But I do notice because we're new to it, you come along and you're pushing those boundaries and trying to get the best out of those kids (PGCE trainee 22).

By asking pupils what they could see and hear, it was possible to challenge them, moving away from 'negative' aspects. This assisted trainees in establishing what pupils could do. Trainees felt they could challenge pupils in terms of their capabilities, helping them achieve to the best of their ability. Trainees talked about shaping their interactions with pupils, giving consideration to language and terminology:

Hmmm... asking students if there is anything that you can help them with and not being afraid to, offend anyone. At first we were all a bit concerned we might say something to offend someone. Like using the terms visually impaired or do you see what I mean? And things like that, you were just

always very aware of the way you were approaching things (PGCE trainee 6).

It was important for Trainees to communicate with pupils, ascertaining how their needs could be met, it was not insensitive to ask questions about the type of support pupils required. There was a conscious awareness of the appropriate use of terminology to employ and trainees began to understand it was acceptable to use visual terms. As the discussion continued, further consideration was given to the ways trainees were able to construct their interactions with pupils:

I think we learnt quite quickly when you're talking to someone who is blind or visually impaired that actually I think the language used, it's often on the blind person's terms. But I've noticed we definitely adapt to the environment we're working in (PGCE trainee 18).

An insight was gained into how to interact with VI pupils and trainees recognised they must be willing to adopt the pupils' language and terminology. Trainees had to shift their thinking towards the environment in which they were working. Trainees highlighted how they were now able to start discussion with pupils. By speaking to pupils, an understanding could be gained of how to support them and become a 'bit of an expert' in terms of their needs.:

The more you ask you sort of end up becoming a bit of an expert in that pupil and what that pupil needs (PGCE trainee 13).

A key aspect trainees took from the art project was realising they could not be an 'expert' in all disabilities. Trainees recognised the importance of being open minded, asking pupils how their needs could be supported, as this could put pupils at ease. It was essential to ensure pupils could achieve the objective of the lessons. For this to happen, trainees should ask pupils about the help they require to achieve. The conversation concluded with one of the trainees highlighting the importance of the art project:

One of the main things I took from the VIAT and art project, I can't pretend I am an expert and know everything about every single... disability, it is better to go in there with an open mind and ask

how you can help and they can achieve what you want them to, as long as you can put the help in, you just have to ask them what the help is that they want (PGCE trainee 15).

Discussion of Findings: Empathy & Advocacy

The data analysis began by demonstrating the ways in which empathy manifests when engaging with VI pupils, and then putting this into VIAT practice. This was followed by demonstrating how advocacy manifested by participants developing their teaching practices and effective communication strategies.

The data analysed in relation to the category of 'empathy' shed important light on the existing literature. One of the important findings in this paper then, relates to the ways in which the VIAT created greater self-assurance and understanding of VI and how to sight-guide pupils. Further echoing and contributing to the literature, the VIAT provided pedagogic learning experiences, created new knowledge and awareness, and subsequently increased empathy (Quicke, 1985; Flower, et al, 2007). Conversely, as recognised by the literature, the project could have generated the opposite effect, by creating negative feelings and perceptions surrounding VI, and even confusing VI with total blindness (Silverman, 2015: Silverman, et al., 2015). Contributing constructively the existing body of literature, my research highlights that trainees gained important (albeit superficial) understandings of how it must feel to experience restricted vision. A comment made by one of the research participants, that the VIAT is 'disrespectful towards pupils', demonstrates that VIAT may not necessarily have a positive impact for all of those involved.

Despite mixed views regarding VIAT, it is possible that the skills gained during VIAT could be put into practice. While VIAT cannot replicate the everyday experiences VI (Silverman, 2015; Silverman, et al., 2015), it can raise awareness and understanding (McKenney, 2018; Juniat, et al., 2019), providing a learning opportunity on planning and delivering lessons for VI pupils (Maher, et al., 2021). This research illuminates the literature, by demonstrating that trainees' perspectives develop when working with VI pupils. By moving beyond the negative aspects associated with VIAT, it may be possible to initiate

conversations, offer sight-guided assistance, and support participation in various learning and pedagogic tasks. This demonstrates, regardless of variation in perceptions of engaging in VIAT, that when such opportunities are available, an appreciation of VI and how to appropriately sighted guide is gained.

The way that my research highlights 'advocacy' further supports and captures ways in which trainees can 'adapt' their teaching practice in response to VIAT. An appreciation was gained on how to speak with VI pupils, understanding what they are able to 'see' and how their needs can be met. This reinforces existing literature which acknowledges that there is a link between VIAT and improved communication strategies (Aballea & Tsuchyia, 2007; McKenney, 2018; Juniat et al., 2019). Importantly, PGCE trainees recognised the ways lessons can be made accessible, becoming 'more positive and comfortable' in working with a range of pupils. To this end, it may be possible to include targeted VIAT training as part of all university-based PGCE teaching sessions, to enable the development and adaptation of teaching practice.

Disclosure statement

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