

Dilemma A: Language

Should we be using more direct language in relation to barriers to learning, and specialist provision?

As a school leader you have found the language used to refer to barriers to learning, in the international settings where you have worked, to be highly euphemistic and carefully selected to obscure the realities of young peoples' difficulties. You have been told by the directors of your current school for example, that you cannot refer to those within your team, who were delivering talking therapies to young people as 'counsellors', even though these professionals hold postgraduate qualifications in counselling and/or psychotherapy. You have therefore had to introduce the alternative phrase 'development officer'. From the perspective of the school's directors, the term 'counsellor' suggests that there are children in the school who need 'counselling' and that this would be seen as a problem, meaning that parents wouldn't want to send their children there.

You have also been told by the school director that ADHD does not exist, and that attributing barriers to learning to ADHD, merely reflects poor quality teaching. On one hand, you can see a rationale in seeing all young people as young people (rather than seeing some in relation to an abstract SEN label). On the other hand, however, you are worried that the school is disregarding the ongoing struggles that individuals are going through, leading to neglect and indifference. To what extent can (and should) euphemistic and evasive language be challenged?

Dilemma B: Advocacy

How can I advocate for this child without undermining the school director?

From your perspective, there are reasonable adjustments that can be made, to ensure that 10-year-old Jamie can remain in the classroom each school day and get the most out of his education provision. Jamie is autistic and had ADHD, and is likely to benefit from regular movement breaks, and opportunities to take ‘time out’ when the conditions within the classroom get too overwhelming. From the perspective of the school director however, if you give one child one thing, then all other children and their families will insist on having it also. It feels like this director is the sort of person who would say to the wheelchair user “*well, nobody else has got one*”. The school director also sees particular behaviours from Jamie as intentional or malicious, rather than due to distress and anxiety. Conversations with Jamie’s parents therefore have become difficult, and you feel compromised. *You* are at senior team level, not at executive team level. Although there are times where you are able to speak up, you must be careful not to say anything that might undermine the school director in a meeting.

Dilemma C: Visible Disabilities

Can I prevent myself from colluding in discrimination against those with more visible disabilities?

The international school, where you work proudly describes itself as 'inclusive' and does not select its intake on the basis of academic performance. They were willing to take in students with exceptionally low prior attainment and want parents to be confident that their child can thrive there. However, the same school is also resistant to admitting students with disabilities that are more immediately obvious and visible, such as cerebral palsy. It seems that the school is worried that this would somehow be bad for its image and create the perception that academic standards are lower. In a competitive market, which requires them to put 'bums-on-seats', they want to emphasise how they can accommodate diverse needs and cater to a range of learning profiles. Simultaneously, however, they also want to project an image of academic excellence and see having pupils with visible disabilities as incompatible to this. You do not know what to do, and were wondering if, by working in the school, you are colluding in discrimination.

Dilemma D: 'We have no learners with SEN here'

Can I, in good conscience, work in a school that claims to have no learners whatsoever with SEN?

You are interviewed for a job in a school with 3000 pupils, which claims not to have a single student with a special educational need and/or a disability. Not one. It is asserted that, because the school is selective, and all students had to pass an entrance exam to gain a place, nobody, in any class, has any significant barriers to learning, or difficulties. You ask whether-or-not there might be any high attaining learners with dyslexia, for example, or a hearing impairment, or mobility issue. The school insists that it doesn't, apparently viewing the entire population of the school as a homogenous neurotypical/'non-disabled' mass. You also ask whether-or-not they have children in kindergarten with needs that only emerge later. They say that, in that situation, they advise parents to remove their child for the school, as it is not the right one for them. The school clearly regards having no pupils with SEN as a source of pride.

Dilemma E: ‘Inclusive’ or ‘non-selective’?

Should I bother to challenge the perception that 'non-selective' and 'inclusive' are the same thing?

Unlike other international schools in the city, the setting where you are Head of Learning Support does not require its learners to sit an entrance exam. It therefore claims to be ‘inclusive’ and uses the term ‘inclusion’ across its website, and on social media. By doing this, you feel, the school is tapping into something that is trendy, zeitgeist, and likely to pull in parents who are looking for a nurturing setting for their unique child. In recent years, it has become apparent in the sector, that ‘inclusion’ is a byword for ‘quality’, and your school is by no means the only one that constantly repeats it.

The reality, however, is that the school takes in learners with special educational needs, without there being much of an infrastructure to support them. Some of these learners would not have been out-of-place at the special school that you once taught at in the United Kingdom. Your role is new, and other new posts have been created, which means that change is hopefully on the horizon. The director of the school, however, insists that most learning differences are exaggerated, conditions such as dyslexia do not really exist, and that if a student is struggling, it is due to poor teaching. Although you share his commitment to meet learning needs, on a daily basis, in ordinary classrooms, you also wonder if his rhetoric of ‘inclusion’ is merely an elaborate and cynical rationale for doing things cheaply. Under these circumstances, can the school say that it is ‘inclusive’ with any integrity?

Dilemma F: The British Curriculum

Should I advise parents that it might be better for their child with SEN to go to a different international school, that does not follow the British curriculum?

The international school, where you are Director of Learning Support, follows the British curriculum, and offers no pathway for young people who are unlikely to succeed with GCSEs and/or A-Levels. Whereas, in the United Kingdom, young people can access a range of alternative qualifications, and and/or apprenticeships, the UK infrastructure for this cannot easily be replicated within your school and/or national context. You therefore find yourself advising families to consider sending their child to a school that offers the Indian, or American curriculum. From your perspective, the Indian curriculum has a stronger focus on life-skills, and is brilliant for those with special educational needs, because it is sufficiently flexible. However, it is also apparent that Indian curriculum schools have a lower status amongst the expat community which your school largely serves, and that it is unlikely that anybody wealthy would choose to send their child to one.

Dilemma G: Funding SEN Provision

How should provision for learners with SEN be funded?

You have worked in various international schools over the past ten years, in a variety of roles related to leading special educational needs (SEN), and provision for learner well-being. You have a particular passion for setting up things from scratch, and implementing new systems, policies and staffing structures, which strengthen inclusion. In three different schools, therefore, you have engaged in dialogues with school CEOs and/or directors, about how specialist provision could be funded. In each school, it was ultimately decided that families pay higher fees if their child accesses this provision, to ensure that the cost of smaller classes and interventions can be covered. You do not think it is fair that families of children with SEN are penalised in this way. You can see that many are struggling financially, and that some end up going back home (for example, to the United Kingdom) where things are likely to be more manageable for them. For parents who have school fee costs as part of their employee package, you do your best to make sure that any increased fees are still within their allowance. However, this is not always possible. The system also tends to enable the costs of therapists to be covered by health insurance, so you bill for any therapy sourced by the school separately. Saying this, you wonder whether it would be better if the cost of SEN provision was absorbed within the generic school fees that everyone pays, and for there to be a quota system, with a capped number of learners that can be admitted, requiring each tier of support.

Dilemma K: Independent diagnoses

Should I be sceptical in relation to diagnoses and reports that are sourced privately?

Throughout your career, which spans across international schools in six different countries, you have found that diagnoses and/or labels are much more prevalent in some countries more than others. You have also found that conditions which you would expect to inevitably see in a population of over 3000 pupils, are seemingly absent within some school communities and/or national contexts. Rather than reflect reality, you suspect that, in your current school in particular, the diagnoses that many pupils have merely reflect the ones that are preferred by parents and deemed to be less stigmatising and/or more socially acceptable. Under a market model, where parents source, select, and pay for assessments, independently from the school, you worry that the credibility of diagnoses may be compromised. You therefore wonder about the extent that you should look beyond professional reports, and labels attributed to children and young people, by others. You also wonder whether-or-not you should plan provision on the assumption that there will be many more learners with autism (for example) than you have on record. However, you are committed to shaping provision around the needs of learners, and to evidence-based practice, and think that an outright rejection of professional reports might undermine this.

Dilemma L: Walking Away

Should I accept that it is not possible for me to change things, and go?

As a middle leader within a prestigious international school, you enjoy a good quality of life. You live in spacious accommodation, just by the school campus and have a network of colleagues who feel like family. Your four-year-old daughter also has a funded place at the school and is thriving there.

You do, however, have considerable ethical concerns about the quality of provision for learners with special educational needs and/or those with mental health difficulties. Although you are in post as Head of Learning Support, you feel that this is a nominal role, and that you are lacking in agency, resources and autonomy. You hold no budget, and there are no specific learning support teachers or counsellors. To get 'bums-on-seats' the school admits learners with a range of needs. They seem however, to be left to their own devices. There is one young man with autism for example, who spends his days wandering the corridors. Although you have supported teachers to implement strategies to support him, your capacity to have much of an impact is limited. There have also been two suicides of secondary-aged pupils over the past year, which staff are not permitted to talk about, or even mention. For learners that have no apparent difficulties, however, the school has a track record of academic excellence, sending learners to top universities, and winning sports competitions. Many of your colleagues' children (just like your daughter) are considerably happy there. You are not sure whether-or-not you should stay, and try to improve things for learners with SEN, or leave.

Dilemma M: Boundaries

Should I care about things less, to prevent myself from getting burnout?

You are passionate about improving outcomes for vulnerable learners at the international school where you lead learning support and go above-and-beyond in relation to this. Upon starting in your role, you introduced weekly drop-in sessions for parents for example, which are exceptionally well attended and make you aware of various priorities that need to be followed up on. You also run various support sessions for teaching staff, on inclusive classroom strategies, which they appreciate, and report not ever having had access to before. In addition, you are the person who seems to step in whenever there is a crisis, such as a medical emergency or a fight. You sleep for a few hours each night, in a small bedroom on the school site, close to your office, before waking up for yet another intense day.

The school director tells you that problems only exist for you, because you spend time listening to others. If you stopped listening to others, he asserts, people would forget about niggling worries they may have, and things would run more smoothly, with no issues. You wonder whether-or-not he is right and that the only way of preventing burnout is to have more boundaries.

Dilemma N: Judging Parents

Is it fair for me to be judging parents for sending their child to a school that is so toxic?

The secondary international school where you are Director of Pastoral Support is attended by children of the global super-rich. It resides in a considerably wealthy area and parents include CEOs of large multi-national companies, celebrities and former politicians. They do not seem to be getting much in return for the extortionate school fees, and you worry about young people with special educational needs and/or mental health difficulties for whom there is considerably little (if any) provision. Teenagers with autism roam the corridors unsupervised. Recreational drug taking and other risky behaviours are rife. The schools' CEO is focussed on admissions and income and strives to provide the minimum that he can get away with, at the maximum cost.

You are surprised to learn, upon talking with parents, that they all seem to be aware of the issues. Flatteringly, they suggested to you that you open a new school, which would move their kids to. You are amazed, that they continue to send their child to a school, which they know is so neglectful and toxic.

Dilemma O: Values and Aspirations

To what extent should I be supporting parents to rethink their meritocratic values and aspirations for their children?

The competitiveness between parents, around university admissions, is placing considerable pressure on the young people who attend the international school where you are Vice Principal (with responsibility for student welfare). Parents are focussed on ensuring that their child secures a place at an elite university, such as those which are part of the Russell Group in the United Kingdom, or the Ivy League in the United States of America. For these parents, it all seems to be about having the car bumper-sticker for the university their child has got into, and to be able to drive around with this, as a badge of pride.

As Vice Principal, you do not think that such an intense preoccupation with attending an elite university is in the best interests of learners. Within the culture however, overcoming barriers to high academic attainment, and ultimately gaining a desired university place, does tend to bring with it high esteem and status.

Dilemma P: Resistance to collaboration

Should I just accept that the other learning support specialist in the school just isn't interested in collaborating with me?

You have always considered collaboration with others to be key to securing the inclusion and wellbeing of vulnerable pupils for whom there may be multiple barriers to participation. In your experience, it is through dialogue and reflection with colleagues for example, that support strategies can be identified and/or refined, to enable greater personalisation of provision. You have also always enjoyed working in schools where there are opportunities for collaborative professional development, such as 'Lesson Study', through which groups of teachers observe one another in the classroom and engage in joint reflection and planning. You are therefore disappointed when you join a large international school as the lead learning support teacher for the secondary. Staff at the school seem to all work in isolation. There appears to be a cultural perception, amongst various groups of colleagues within the school, that seeking guidance from others is a sign of weakness. In addition, there is another new lead learning support teacher in the school, for kindergarten and elementary, who is from the USA, and has no interest whatsoever in collaboration. She has openly stated '*I want to make my mark here*' and seems very competitive. You wonder if you should conform to the individualistic ways of working, so not to upset anybody, and fit in. However, you do not consider this to be in the best interests of children and young people in the setting.

Dilemma Q: Habitual Practices

Should we stop having Friday afternoon detentions?

The Head of School at the large international setting where you have worked for the past year, leads a detention every Friday afternoon, for young people who have had repeated warnings about their behaviour throughout the week. Each Friday, it seems to be the exact same young people in these detentions. They are young people who you have identified as requiring learning support, many of whom are likely to have a diagnosable condition such as ADHD. These young people turn up to the same room week-after-week, yet nothing ever changes. Typically, they are young people who struggle to link cause and effect, for whom the behaviourist approach of having a ‘consequence’ for a ‘behaviour’ may not ever be effective. Other regulars in the Friday detention, have difficulties with impulse control. By Friday, the overwhelming majority have forgotten about things that have happened earlier in the week and have no idea why they are there.

The only rationale you ever hear, for conducting the Friday detentions, is that they are something which the school has ‘*always done*’. It is apparent however, that they do absolutely nothing to change behaviours. You are therefore tempted to push for the school to consider alternatives but are not sure whether-or-not it is worth facing the inevitable resistance and/or if young people would find a disruption of this routine disturbing.

Dilemma R: Confidentially or secrecy?

How do we balance the desire, of families, to keep information about their child's needs secret, with a desire to share information with the relevant professionals, to inform personalised planning?

Just over half the learners at the international school, where you are Head of Learning Support, are from the local community, and a culture in which marriages are typically arranged between families. As the school is non-selective and competing to recruit sufficient numbers of pupils to be financially sustainable, it admits children and young people with a range of moderate learning difficulties, some of whom, in the United Kingdom (where you initially trained to teach) would not have been out-of-place at a special school. There are also learners who have specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Although parents are often resistant to acknowledge their child difficulties, many have sought explanations for their child's distressed behaviours and/or low exam results by arranging private diagnoses.

Typically, when children and young people in the school have a diagnosis of a learning difficulty and/or neurodiverse condition, parents are insistent that they do not want anyone other than yourself to know. About 10 percent of teachers in the school (as well as around 90 percent of non-teaching staff) are from the local community, and parents worry about bringing stigma and shame to their family. They also worry about undermining their child's marriage prospects.

Dilemma S: Impact versus delivery

Should I promptly deliver a new inclusion policy, which I know will not be worth the paper it is written on?

The executive leadership team of the school where you have been Head of Learning Support for the past three months are keen for a new Inclusion Policy to be in place, and for you to deliver one. However, in your view, merely writing a document, and putting it on the school's website, would be for performative purposes only. You are committed to developing a new policy, but only one that is authentic, and reflected in teachers' day-to-day practice. From your perspective, it is therefore important that the policy is co-constructed with various stakeholders (such as staff and parents) and negotiated through discussion. You want any new policy to be underpinned by shared values, that are negotiated and agreed upon, to build an inclusive culture that truly makes a difference to pupils.

It appears however, that the entire school community is used to a 'top down' approach. When you ask teachers for ideas for a new policy, they either passively repeat buzz words which they seem to think they want you to hear, or they say that they just want you to tell them what to do. Your experience tells you that this needs to change, in order to more effectively support children and young people, including those at serious risk of exclusion and/or marginalisation. In the meantime, a new email has appeared in your inbox from the Director's PA, asking for the new inclusion policy...

Dilemma T: Getting involved

Is it best for me to walk away from this incident?

You are in your second week in your new role as Head of Learning support. You walk past a room in which two members of your Learning Support team are trying to support a boy who seems to be highly dysregulated and sweeping objects off surfaces and onto the floor. You know the name of the boy and vaguely remember him coming up on a conversation with your team a few days ago. However, you have not yet got around to reading the boy's records or have not yet interacted with him.

You can see that your colleagues are struggling. Your experience tells you however, that if you go into the room, you are likely to make things worse. The boy doesn't know you and you have no relationship with him, as a basis for calming him down. However, you do not want your colleagues to feel unsupported and walking away feels counter intuitive. Although you are committed to not being a 'saviour' in these situations, you feel that, in order to build a cooperative culture in the department, you do not want staff to feel like they are left to do things on their own. You also wonder how much worse the situation with this boy can get anyway....

Dilemma U: Inclusion or neglect?

Are we being inclusive as a school, or is it a case of neglect and denial?

The international school, which you have just joined as Head of Learning Support, prides itself on being inclusive. It is non-selective and takes in learners with exceptionally low prior attainment, including some individuals with complex needs who have fairly limited verbal communication. You are surprised to find that these learners are educated in ordinary, mixed-attainment classrooms, with a single teacher, and that teachers tend to take full responsibility for these learners and get on with the job of educating them. In fact, observing practice in the school, which has such a strong family 'feel', has enabled you to extend the boundaries of what you previously thought was possible. You are concerned however, that nothing seems to be in place for these learners, to enable their learning or development. More often than not, they struggle to access the curriculum and are given tasks by teachers which do little more than preoccupy them, during lesson time, such as colouring. You are also concerned that a significant number of learners with complex needs, are left to wander unsupervised, around the school. By claiming that meeting the needs of learners with SEN starts with high quality teaching, the school seem to be accepting young people, and taking their school fees, without actually investing in an infrastructure to support them. From your perspective therefore, the school is walking a fine line between inclusion and neglect.



