

Would I recommend teaching special needs?

Yes,
every time!

In the beginning

Following a discussion about teacher training options and my particular desire to teach special needs, my sixth-form tutor said, 'I hope you are not going to waste your skills and teaching potential on children with learning difficulties.'

As a Christian and a teacher, I believe that all students (regardless of their abilities) deserve the best education. Why? Because the Bible tells us that in the beginning God created humans in his own image (Genesis 1:26) and, since humans are made in His image, every single human being is worthy of honour and respect. The Lord said to Moses, 'Who gave man his mouth? Who made him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I the Lord?' (Exodus 4:11) In other words, God created all of our students whether they are high achievers or have special educational needs.

My elder sister has been my inspiration to teach special needs. She has Downs Syndrome. Today at thirty she clings to the happy times she had and the friendships built with peers and staff during her time at school. Teachers remain high in her affections. I wanted to have the same impact on my students as my sister's teachers had had on her. Having a personal background with special needs and the God-given desire to teach, I felt that I, too, could be a compassionate, dedicated teacher striving to give my students the necessary skills for post-school life.

Every emotion

I graduated with a BEd (Hons) degree specialising in Religious Studies and Primary Education. My first post at 22 was teaching 16–19 year olds in a school for students with severe learning difficulties.

That first term I was climbing a very steep learning curve! I encountered every emotion in the classroom from feeling scared, worried and nervous, to feeling proud, happy and joyful. My 12 students presented me with a range of challenges. Some students had severe learning difficulties, others had profound and multiple learning difficulties (including sensory impairment). Many offered challenging behaviour. Thankfully, I worked with a group of dedicated classroom assistants. Their skillful support highlighted the necessity for trust and teamwork in the classroom. The first term was hard work. I used to collapse when I got home – falling asleep in front of the TV was commonplace!

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Initially I was shocked and somewhat overwhelmed by the challenging (verbal and physical) behaviours I encountered. By the end of my first week in the classroom I was covered in bruises, scratches and bite marks. My scalp was raw from my hair being pulled. As the term continued, so did the intermittent eruptions of challenging behaviour. For example, once I was alone in the classroom with two male students, one was throwing anything he could at me and pulling my hair and the other was in a rage pushing furniture over and threatening to throw the TV and computer out of the window. When the situation was over I went – shaking and in tears – to the Headteacher, who encouraged me back into the classroom to talk to the students before they went

home. I needed to see them that night to give me the confidence for the next day.

Following training and study I initiated a number of positive behaviour strategies. They had a great impact on students' behaviour and esteem.

Carried by God

As a Christian I believe that, however difficult the behaviours displayed by students, teachers still need to care and to show they care. Teachers need to take the time to understand the reasons for the behaviour and have compassion for their students, just as God has compassion for us. We are taught that we are given the strength to deal with whatever is thrown our way (even if this includes classroom furniture!) and, during my first term, I certainly was. In the *Footprints* poem there are only one set of footprints during the hard times. That term I was definitely given a piggyback by God!

But there were good times too! In fact throughout my teaching experience I have known many moments of sheer joy and pride in my students. Their various achievements are so precious to me, and the fun we had in the classroom priceless.

I think my vainest moment was during a Current Affairs lesson when my assistant came across an article asking for nominations for the Teacher of the Year Award. She asked the group why they might want to nominate me and, without hesitation, one of my lads said, "Cos she is gorgeous!" (Why had I wasted hours on planning and preparation?!)

Character building

But the most rewarding week I had with my students was also the most exhausting. I took a group of seven lads to the Lake District on an outward-bound week. Assault courses, rock climbing, horse riding, archery, hill-walking and canoeing were on the timetable. All in a very wet week in January – talk about character-building! The students loved every minute; they loved the challenge of having to beat me at everything. Could they run faster across the assault course? Or climb higher up the climbing wall? Or shoot more goals or hoops than I did? During the week there was not one incident of challenging behaviour.

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I was covered in bruises, scratches and bite marks.
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In 1998 Alison Comline graduated with a BEd (Hons) in Religious Studies and Primary Education from Westminster College, University of Oxford. From 1998 to 2004 Alison taught 16–19 year olds with severe learning difficulties. In 2002 she completed a BPhil in Learning Difficulties from the University of Birmingham. In September 2004 she resigned from her teaching post to be a full-time mum.

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The week presented a wonderful opportunity for students and staff to relate to each other in a relaxed atmosphere. After all, teenagers with severe learning difficulties are entitled to be treated with respect and spoken to just like any other teenager. Plenty of fun was had by all. All these activities encouraged the lads to relax, have fun, socialise happily... and have a laugh at the expense of their teacher! They made sure I was soaked more than anyone else whilst canoeing.

A lot of learning occurred that week, possibly most done by me. By the time I had parked the minibus in the school car park on Friday afternoon I could have slept for a month!

Precious memories

A couple of events really stick in my mind. Firstly, when encouraging a 19 year old to abseil down a wall he leant over, took one look down, grabbed me and (not very politely) told me to get lost. I was ecstatic! You see, this lad was usually incredibly placid; he did whatever you wanted. For him to show such emotion and demonstrate assertiveness was great. (I should also say that he did eventually pluck up enough courage to complete the abseil – demonstrating an altogether different sort of courage.)

Secondly, following a night when I had been up with a student with a temperature, he thanked me too many times to count (and still did so three years later). This reinforces just how much our students respond to caring and kindness and how many facets there are to the teacher's role.

I treasure memories of all my students who have moved on and, in particular, those who have gone to be with the Lord. I relish stories of those who have left school and am always eager to find out how they are doing now. Every so often I am able to glean a snippet of news from one of their taxi drivers – who are, so I am told, sick of hearing all about 'Mrs Comline' years after they have left the school!

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