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Attitude Change Regarding Inclusive Education in Preservice Teachers

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Upon entering the workforce, teachers in both primary and secondary schools are expected to teach students across a wide range of abilities and cultures. To be effective across this broad spectrum of student needs, teachers require an understanding of why they have such diversity in their classrooms and they also need the opportunity to acquire a range of skills in order to effectively adapt the curriculum to the needs of the individuals in their classes. It is likely that when current preservice teachers were themselves students in school, inclusive education was not as frequent a practice as it is in the current educational environment. Inclusive education requires a shift in beliefs and practice for some people. In order to give preservice teachers the opportunity to construct their own understandings and knowledge base regarding inclusive education, most universities in Australia have designed specific preservice courses for this purpose. At Griffith University the compulsory course Teaching to Difference is a core course across one semester for all preservice teachers. In 2003, a pilot study was undertaken to identify attitude change to inclusive education practices in a group of preservice teachers enrolled in this course. A survey was devised for this purpose from a questionnaire constructed by Kis-Glavis, Nikolic, and Igric (1996). The original questionnaire was designed to identify attitude change in teachers regarding the integration of students with intellectual or other developmental disabilities in Croatia. The adapted survey was devised to measure attitude change in preservice teachers while they were enrolled in Teaching to Difference. This paper will present the outcomes from this survey as a measurement of attitude change in preservice teachers and discuss possible implications with regard to appropriate attitude change in preservice teachers.

Literature review

Australian national and state education authorities all advocate the inclusion of children with disabilities within regular classrooms. This is supported by Australian anti-discrimination legislation. However, it is the states and territories that have major responsibility for education (Forlin, 2004). The implementation of this policy has implications for classroom teachers in regular schools across Australia because an increasing number of students with disabilities are being educated in regular classrooms rather than in special schools (Ashman & Elkins, 2002).

According to Campbell, Gilmore, and Guskey (2003), historically teachers in regular classrooms have not been enthusiastic about this move toward inclusion for a number of reasons. They include concerns about the amount of individualised time students with special needs require, concern about the quality of work produced by these children, a perceived lack of adequate support services, and a lack of confidence in their own
teaching skills for these students. The level of support they are required to provide in their classrooms also influences teachers.

The attitudes of teachers towards children with special needs in regular classrooms determines the success or failure of their education (Alghazo, Dodeen, & Algaryouti, 2003). It is possible that teachers with more confidence in their ability to support students in inclusive settings and to adapt the curriculum for students with special needs will have more positive attitudes towards inclusive education (Foreman, 2001). It has also been suggested that when teachers are able to adopt certain positive values regarding children with special needs and their socio-cultural environment, inclusive education has been more successful (Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, & Leal, 1999). In fact, this is further developed by specifically advocating for appropriate teacher preparation and in-service education for teachers (Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, Smith, & Leal, 2002).

Inclusion will be reviewed in this paper using studies from three countries. Outcomes from a study undertaken in Croatia by Kis-Glavis et al. (1996) identified teacher education as an important area for encouraging the confidence and acceptance of teachers towards creating an inclusive classroom environment. After surveying 194 teachers in regular primary schools in Zagreb, results indicated that although integration has been established throughout the country for over fifteen years, teachers in Croatia are not necessarily aware of the advantages of integration for children with developmental difficulties. They suggest a basic reason for this is possibly due to current, inadequate pre-service education for student teachers. The teachers in this study reported a lack of understanding and knowledge of students with developmental difficulties. They also stressed their need for additional special education training.

Flanders is a country that has been slow to include children with special needs in regular classrooms (Vanderfaeillie, Fever, & Lombaerts, 2003). A recent initiative there has been to set up a new curriculum for student teachers in the educational sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel aimed at developing in these future teachers an understanding of inclusive education so that when they graduate they will have an “open mind and a positive attitude towards inclusive education” (Vanderfaeillie et al., 2003, p. 265). After two introductory courses on inclusive education it was found that the student teachers did not oppose inclusion and inclusive education but they do not advocate for it either. It was found that student teachers with more familiarity with children with learning disabilities or physical disabilities were more partial to inclusion but that familiarity with behavioural problems or intellectual disabilities had no influence on their attitude towards including these children in regular classrooms. They further found that familiarity with mental disorder resulted in less acceptance of inclusive classrooms. Clearly, in this study, familiarity with disability did not always result in the belief that inclusion is a viable option for education. It is possible that, because Flanders does not yet have an inclusive education policy, the student teachers did not have the opportunity to experience successful inclusive practice during their practicum placements. They were confronted with inclusion only on a theoretical basis and this was clearly not sufficient to positively influence their attitudes towards inclusion.

A study designed to assess the attitudes of Arab preservice teachers towards people with disabilities used the frequency of contact time with a person with a disability to
identify if more frequent contact resulted in more positive attitudes towards people with disabilities. It was found that the Arab preservice teachers in this study generally have negative attitudes towards people with disabilities and that the amount of contact time with people with disabilities did not affect positively teachers' attitudes towards them (Alghazo et al., 2003). They suggested that this might be because the contact was random and was not for educational purposes. But they did find that students in education and humanities programmes had more positive attitudes than students in science. They suggest this is may be due to the fact that the students in education and humanities programmes are required to study courses that deal with educational approaches that concentrate on individual differences and student characteristics, whereas students in the science programme are not required to take such classes.

A longer history of inclusive practice has occurred in Australia than in some other countries where the Schools Commission promoted the movement towards integration from 1975 (Ashman & Elkins, 2002). Today, in all Australian states, inclusion is considered the appropriate model for the education of students with special needs. A study was undertaken in Queensland by Campbell et al., (2003) to "investigate whether favourable changes in attitudes towards disability and inclusion could be fostered by combining formal instruction with structured fieldwork experiences" (p. 375) in a pre-service university teacher education programme. They reported positive changes, not only to knowledge and attitudes regarding a particular disability upon which they focused (Down syndrome), but also to attitudes towards disability in general. The student teachers’ demonstrated a greater understanding of the individuality of the child with special needs as their knowledge of Down syndrome had become more accurate with less stereotypical views. There was also a positive change in the student teachers' expectations regarding learning potential for children with special needs and an acceptance of the benefits of placement in regular classrooms for both these children and the other children in the class. Further interesting changes in the student teachers' attitudes included significantly greater coping and less discomfort, uncertainty, fear and vulnerability when interacting with people with disabilities. They also reported feeling less sympathy for people with disabilities, which may reflect a more desirable, relaxed approach to disability (Campbell et al., 2003).

Teaching to Difference, a course currently undertaken by all teacher education students at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia, is about inclusive education and is an attempt to ensure that emerging teachers have the appropriate skills, attitudes and confidence to teach all students in an inclusive classroom. During the semester the students also participate in a four-week practicum placement in a regular classroom and some will gain experience of having a student with disability in the classroom. A study was undertaken to identify if engagement with the course influenced the attitudes of teacher education students to teaching students with an intellectual disability in regular classrooms.

**Method**

**The attitude scale**

An attitude scale was designed to gauge possible changes in the attitudes of student teachers to the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in regular classrooms.
while undertaking a semester course in inclusive education. The survey was based on an inventory "Attitudes towards integration" developed by Kis-Glavis et al. (1996) for use with regular school teachers in Zagreb, Croatia. Their inventory was designed to "state the attitudes of teachers in regular schools in Croatia toward the children with development difficulties and their integration in regular education" (p. 3).

The instrument consists of 21 statements each with five response categories: I agree completely, I mostly agree, I cannot decide, I mostly disagree and I disagree completely. The statements cover four hypothetical areas, which are:

- Attitudes toward pupils with intellectual disabilities.
- Attitudes toward the inclusion of pupils with intellectual disabilities in regular classrooms.
- Familiarity with the characteristics and needs of pupils with intellectual disabilities.
- Student teacher readiness for personal engagement in the inclusion process.

The statements in the survey are:

1. The regular school can give pupils with intellectual disabilities the same benefits provided by special schools.
2. It would be best if all of the pupils with intellectual disabilities attended special schools.
3. Pupils with intellectual disabilities in regular schools have a negative influence on the normal work in class.
4. Pupils with intellectual disabilities in regular schools can have a bad influence on the progress of the entire class.
5. The inclusion of pupils with intellectual disabilities in regular classes in regular schools is beneficial to their progress.
6. Pupils in regular schools can be prepared to accept students with intellectual disabilities in a reasonable and friendly way.
7. In a lot of ways, pupils with intellectual disabilities are equal to pupils without intellectual disabilities.
8. Some pupils with intellectual disabilities can succeed in the regular school better than a lot of pupils without intellectual disabilities.
9. Socialising with other pupils in regular schools is more beneficial to pupils with intellectual disabilities than socialising with pupils with intellectual disabilities in special schools.
10. Pupils without intellectual disabilities can have pupils with intellectual disabilities for friends.
11. In regular schools, pupils with intellectual disabilities will be bullied by peers without intellectual disabilities.
12. Teachers have to be more sympathetic towards pupils with intellectual disabilities.
13. Pupils with intellectual disabilities can learn more in regular schools than in special schools.
14. Regular schools can be completely prepared to accept pupils with intellectual disabilities.
15. I expect that I will be able to work with pupils with intellectual disabilities in my class.
16. To work with pupils with intellectual disabilities, teachers would need to have additional education in special teaching methods.
17. Regular schools need special education professionals who are educated to work with pupils with intellectual disabilities.
18. The majority of pupils with intellectual disabilities can, with the help of special education professionals, successfully complete the regular curriculum in regular classes in regular schools.
19. The majority of pupils with intellectual disabilities can successfully complete adapted curriculum in regular classes in the regular school.
20. The majority of pupils with intellectual disabilities can successfully complete part of the curriculum in a regular classroom of a regular school and the other part in special classes.
21. The majority of pupils with intellectual disabilities can successfully complete the curriculum in special classes in a regular school.

An open-ended question completed the survey. It was:

Please indicate the extent of your involvement with children or adults with intellectual disabilities: None or ....................................................................................................

Participants
The participants in this study were teacher education students on Mt Gravatt campus at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia, enrolled in a course on inclusive education called "Teaching to Difference". The students were enrolled in a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes in education across the primary, secondary and special education fields. The majority of the primary education students were in the seventh semester of a four-year program and the special education students were in their fourth semester of a four-year programme. The secondary education students varied across semesters and the total number of students was 284.

The course "Teaching to Difference"
This course "is based on the premise that all children have a right to an equitable and inclusive education. The course celebrates diversity in children and the diverse learning styles children may bring to a school setting. This course is also based on the premise that all children can learn. On completion of this course, teacher education students should be able to demonstrate knowledge of, and the ability to implement, effective and inclusive learning and teaching processes, including the use of learning technology and
assessment, to establish a challenging learning environment in which students are encouraged to work towards attainment of their potential. This course runs concurrently with the practicum course and as such there is an emphasis on practical application to a classroom setting”.

This is a core compulsory course and all students enrolled in education degrees on this campus undertake the course.

**Survey administration**

The survey was administered to two different cohorts of teacher education students. The first cohort was in semester two, 2003 and the second cohort in semester one, 2004. Each student was asked to respond to the survey twice—the first time during the first week of the course and the second time in the last teaching week of the course.

A total of 284 teacher education students responded to the first survey presented in week 1 of the semester and 231 of these students did the survey for a second time at the end of each semester.

**Analysis of the data**

The data were analysed by comparing the pretest and the posttest results. Factor analysis was used to reduce the dimensionality of the data, prior to running t-tests.

The data from the pretest in 2003 and 2004 was combined and analysed as one group. A principal axis factor analysis was undertaken on the pretest data. Table 1 shows the results of this after Varimax rotation. Substantial loadings are in bold for ease of identification.

From this analysis, six factors emerged with eigenvalues > 1. Table 2 shows the extracted factors, the meaning associated with each one and the questions from the survey associated with them.

An independent samples t-test on each factor was undertaken to compare pre and posttest factor scores. Results of this analysis are shown in Table 3. It is important to note the direction of the change in the mean between group 1 and group 2 as it relates to the desirable response for each question. It is of interest that the study by Kis-Glavis et al. (1996) from which the survey questions for this study were derived had some similar factors especially a similarity between their Factor 1 (factor of recognition of advantages of integration for pupils with developmental difficulties) and Factor 1 in the present study (benefits of inclusion). However, the previous study found that teachers did not recognise the advantages of integrated education and did not feel competent to work with students with disabilities.

**Results and discussion**

The present study suggests a different trend for this factor with the attitude of teacher education students moving towards a more positive attitude regarding the benefits of inclusion following participation in an inclusive education course. It is possible that undertaking a course of study in the area has a positive influence on the attitude of people towards inclusive education particularly with regard to students with intellectual disabilities.
Table 1

Rotated factor matrix

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<th>FACTOR 3</th>
<th>FACTOR 4</th>
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Table 2

Factor meanings

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<td>Teacher experience / confidence</td>
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Conclusions

It seems as if the possibilities for attitude change in preservice teachers are greater than reported in some earlier studies. Of particular note in this study are changes in the desired direction for Factor 3 (Benefits to the child), Factor 4 (Teacher experience / confidence) and Factor 5 (Additional skill). Also, Factors 1 (Benefits of inclusion) and Factor 6 (Social inclusion) showed encouraging signs of change. However, Factor 2 (Learning) remained impervious to the effects of participation in the Teaching to Difference course. It is possible that the combination of Teaching to Difference, the course on inclusive education, with attendance at teaching practicum generally influenced the teacher education students’ attitudes towards various aspects of inclusive education in a positive direction. Further positive change might be possible if the practical experience of the preservice teachers was extended. This could be achieved by engaging them in a variety of community participation with both adults and children with disabilities, and then by teaching them to reflect and interact with others regarding these experiences.
References