



Student teacher perspectives in inclusive practice in practicum: “How can I make a difference?”

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Abstract: There is a growing debate in the field of inclusive education for children with special needs about the importance of strengthening content that underpins initial teacher education programmes. Promoting the understanding that inclusion is multi-faceted and that teachers need to address inequities for these children is vital to equip beginning teachers to make a difference for all children. We will discuss this challenge in teacher education from the authors' perspectives of early years inclusive-education curricula in both the Queensland (Australia) context and in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, with a particular focus on one early childhood teacher education programme where both of the authors now teach.

Key Words: inclusion, inclusive education, initial teacher education

Introduction

The terms *inclusion* and *inclusive education* are defined differently in different contexts. Some educators argue that the term inclusive education means ensuring participation by all children who may be excluded by ability, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity or other categories (Sapon-Shevin, 2007). Ainscow (1999) and Keeffe and Carrington (2007), however, perceive it as a process of removing barriers for all children. Keeffe and Carrington (2007) continue by adding that often such terms are challenged by societal pressure to conform to and uphold the perceived status quo of the dominant culture such as school, churches and other bureaucratic organisations. Sharma, Forlin, Loreman, & Earle (2006) also acknowledge this pressure by stating that:

Inclusion requires commitment from a range of stakeholders including governments, teacher training institutions, schools, teachers, and the school community if it is to be successful. As we move towards an inclusive future it is teacher training institutions that will become pivotal in ensuring teachers have the appropriate attitudes and skills to further this agenda. (Sharma, et al., 2006, p. 80)

Inclusive education is also about creating inclusive environments that reflect shared values that actively work to remove barriers to participation in a range of contexts.

Inclusion is creating a climate where everyone is valued, respected and listened to; where actions and interests are noticed, recognized, responded to and built upon. Through possibility thinking, barriers are reduced and new possibilities emerge. (Glass, Baker, Ellis, Bernstone, & Hagan, 2008, p. 36)

Inclusion and the act of being inclusive are terms that have become widely used in the education industry. This is none more evident than over the past 20 years. The number of students' enrolled in mainstream education in early childhood and primary settings with a verified disability have increased greatly (Forlin & Chambers, 2011). More and more, classroom teachers are required to facilitate the learning of children with a vast range of needs and abilities and, for the most part, this

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is the usual course for an educator. However, more recently teachers are being increasingly required to facilitate Individual Plans (IPs), as they support the needs of the many children diagnosed with an “educational disability”. As a result, inclusion and inclusive practice has become a strong thread in initial teacher education (ITE) in early years education in both New Zealand and Australia.

There is a large amount of evidence highlighting the link between inclusive practice and disability studies in relation to responsive education in general. Teacher education plays an important role in supporting inclusion and assisting teachers’ development of knowledge, skills and attitudes that will support them to teach all children (Gordon-Burns, Gunn, Purdue, & Surtees, 2012). To help position New Zealand within the global setting, the following discussion will focus on pathways for undergraduates in Queensland, Australia from a retrospective lens.

Initial teacher education within Aotearoa New Zealand

The background for this discussion is provided by looking at the link between inclusive practice and disability studies in relation to responsive education in general in one teacher education programme based in South Auckland. Teacher education plays an important role in supporting inclusion and assisting teachers’ development of knowledge, skills and attitudes that will support them to teach all children. Some authors question the success of teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand in assisting the facilitation of inclusion in early childhood settings (Purdue, Gordon-Burns, Gunn, Madden & Surtees, 2009). In a recent 5-year review of the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Teaching) degree delivered by Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT), students responded positively to the inclusive-education thread in the current degree; however, graduates also voiced a need for more in-depth coverage of special (inclusive) education as well as strengthening the thread of te reo Māori me ngatikanga–a-iwi in the programme (Faculty of Education and Social Sciences, 2011). One of the practical skills they wanted to learn and understand more about was New Zealand sign language. Students who regularly use New Zealand sign language in their home centres often see its value for children who are deaf or hearing impaired; moreover, New Zealand sign language was recognised by the students as the third official language of New Zealand and hence having relevance to the community in general.

High-performing ITE programmes are strongly grounded in practice and “require students to spend extensive time in the field throughout the entire program, examining and applying the concepts and strategies they are simultaneously learning about in their coursework” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 40). In particular, field-based teacher education, in the context of promoting inclusion and social justice, has been shown to be an important aspect of ITE (Howie & Hagan, 2010) and creates ongoing opportunities for the student teacher to become a valued member of a community of practice in their home centre. (Home centre refers to a pre-service teacher’s early childhood education (ECE) centre where they volunteer regularly (8 to 12 hours per week) for the duration of their degree at MIT.) Practicum experience has been highlighted by these students as a strength of the MIT programme.

Student teacher survey.

An informal survey (“plus/minus/interesting” or PMI) is administered by the year coordinator for each semester over the three years of the programme. An extension of this process was carried out by the authors to investigate students’ perception of their home centre practicum experiences in terms of their engagement with inclusive education practice. Forty-eight students in the final semester of their teaching degree took part in an informal survey about how welcoming was the



centre where they had spent the longest time over the three years of their home-centre practicum. The questions asked in the survey were:

- 1) How welcoming and inclusive was this centre?
- 2) Were there any barriers to inclusion for you as a teacher? Any other comments?

The results of the survey are summarised in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1

Welcoming and Inclusive Practice– Year 3 student perspective

Large number felt their home centre was very helpful, had inclusive relationships

Several said their home centre demonstrated great teamwork

Most Centres had a collaborative approach

Only one person said their centre was not welcoming

One centre had five children with special needs in the centre

One said that inclusion is not just about including children with special needs

Note.n = 48.

Table 2

Barriers to Inclusion– Year 3 student perspective

Several felt their child's language was not recognised

Some said they were not included in professional development or staff meetings

Two volunteers said they were not valued as much as employed staff

One felt that there should be more training in inclusive education for teachers

One person felt their centre only acknowledged the child, not the family

Note.n = 48.

Overall, the students' home centres were very helpful and had inclusive relationships that focus on teamwork and collaboration. Some of the barriers that were recognised by these student teachers related to issues pertaining to diversity of family background; for example, the child's first language was not always recognised. Also the role the students played in the centre and their level of inclusion in centre life made a difference to their perceived ability to be an "agent of change". Supporting inclusive practice includes centres enabling the students to make a difference in children's learning and to negotiate a valued place in the home centre. It was interesting that, possibly because of the open-ended way that the survey questions were worded, students described centres that were welcoming overall as those that recognised diversity in both staff and student volunteers as well as being accepting of all children in their centre.

Being a change agent is problematic for pre-service students, and often relates to their powerlessness to effect change (Price & Valli, 2005). In their analysis of the tensions and challenges that pre-service teachers face as they attend to change processes in learning to teach, some of which relate to individual and institutional change, but also understanding actions in their

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daily work. Knowing when and how to get the necessary support for these challenges in regards to their practice is important. They argue that teacher educators need to work with these tensions to develop understandings of change in relation to the teaching self and the context of the student placement.

Importance of the local context.

Teachers are increasingly likely to work with a diverse range of families, many of whose attitudes, beliefs, values, languages and customs will be different from their own (Alliston, 2007). An understanding of the context the students work in for their practicum experience is important, and often students will choose work as their home centre located in a community with which they are familiar.. The communities where students complete their placements reflect the diversity of Auckland and especially Manukau, in South Auckland. For example, Pasifika peoples make up 13.7% of Auckland's population, with nearly 8000 Pasifika children enrolled in ECE centres in 2010. Likewise, the largest ethnic group of ECE students at MIT in 2011 were from Pasifika backgrounds (23%). The recent report about addressing the gaps in understanding special education from the perspectives of Pasifika families showed, in particular, the challenges that ECE centres face in building relationships with families to support children's individual needs (Mauigoa-Tekene, Howie,& Hagan, 2013). Students who have opportunities to develop relationships with these families over time in their home centre can strengthen relationships; this is especially so for those students with useful community links and a cultural sensitivity and intelligence that may reflect the diversity of the local community.

Relationship to the Queensland Context

As a graduate of an Australian tertiary provider, one author developed very early in their career a passion for inclusive education and the practices associated with being an educator. At that time there were no fields of education study relating to inclusive education, although more progressive Australian institutions were delivering a single stand-alone paper on diversity in education. When speaking with both staff and children, the author often noticed a lack of explicit and respectful discourse in relation to providing young children with disabilities a fair and equal opportunity to access the same learning opportunities as their peers'. This disrespect was often reflected in the language that was used when referring to a child or group of people. Keeffe and Carrington (2007) suggest the way in which language and practice is used around children, such as the overuse of term "special needs", often creates its own barrier in inclusive practice. As an attendee of an ITE institution that was in the initial stages of emergent inclusive education practices, students had to rely heavily on their own passion for inclusion to ensure the success of class members. Many other teachers and graduated teachers had many challenges ahead of them. Until recently, such advocacy had been omitted from ITE training, reinforcing pre-existing attitudes.

In order to foster these values and attitudes in ITE in Queensland and other states of Australia, many tertiary institutes offer a number of courses, both major and minor electives, centred on inclusive education. This is in addition to a fundamental introduction to the pedagogy relating to inclusive practice. However, it must be pointed out that not all students undertake studies in a series of inclusive education electives; this is due mainly to the diversity of options on offer to students, of which inclusive education is just one. Thus in some instances, students are only engaged in discourse relating to inclusive education through a single introductory course. Such limited design and delivery of undergraduate courses, according to Nes (2000, as cited in Hemmings & Woodcock, 2011), will impact greatly on the way that graduate teachers utilise *inclusive education strategies* in their day-to-day classroom delivery. Forlin & Chambers (2011) recommend "greater contact with people with disabilities during training, either through site-based



programs or through course experience” (p. 19). This, in conjunction with a continuity thread throughout the ITE process, greatly enhances a student’s knowledge and ability to work in a mixed-ability environment, while promoting positive attitudes and practices for inclusion. This is a sentiment strongly supported by Richards & Clough (2004) and Lancaster & Bain (2010).

A majority of the many tertiary institutes throughout Australia have gradually introduced inclusive practices and diversity into the classroom core learning areas in diploma courses and undergraduate-level studies. In addition to this, many are also developing position statements regarding inclusive philosophy (Aniftos & McLuskie, 2003). This is further supported by statements from state government departments, including Education Queensland (2005). Furthermore, many institutes now offer a degree that specialises in Special Education teaching. Through proactive approaches by such providers, pre-service teachers will graduate with a solid understanding coupled with a positive confident attitude that will advocate for all children.

Implications for Aotearoa New Zealand

With this in mind, we now see positive changes coming through in universities and technical institutes, not only in Australia but also in New Zealand. The TEFANZ (Ward, 2013) New Zealand Graduate Teacher Survey showed that respondents who trained as early childhood teachers ($n=119$) reported they had quite a few opportunities to learn strategies for teaching learners with special education needs and, in particular, opportunities for handling challenging learner behaviour during practicum; however, there was less opportunity to talk to external professionals who support ECE professionals in regards to these learners. Teacher training institutions are central to ensuring graduate teachers demonstrate commitment to ongoing respectful and responsive attitudes towards inclusive practices (Purdue et al., 2009, as cited in Gordon-Burns et al., 2012). The Bachelor of Education programme at MIT aims to develop deepening understandings of social justice in its students, and hence develop the critical thinking skills they will need to challenge exclusionary practices; this aim is addressed throughout the programme and specifically in the course Teaching for Social Justice. Purdue et al. (2009) also discuss the tensions for lecturers who need to model respectfulness for those students who do not always share the same attitudes towards difference and diversity; such students can sometimes challenge the agenda of lecturers who are creating possibilities for inclusion in centres. This is where the stories of inclusive and exclusive practice that students share with each other are so valuable, because these stories help students to recognise the signposts of good practice.

Conclusion

There are great hopes and aspirations that initial teacher education will raise awareness in teacher educators that inclusion is multifaceted and that responsive teaching must address inequities for children with special education needs. The recent research into understanding special education for Pasifika families has shown in the New Zealand context the importance of considering the wider context of diversity. Teaching for intercultural education alongside disability studies recognises the increasing diversity of local communities, particularly in urban areas, and helps build relationships to support whānau more holistically. Inclusive environments need to support all whānau who interact with the child, and it is essential that student teachers need to know they have a place and are part of the whānautangata (family and community) (Gordon-Burns, Gunn, Purdue, & Surtees, 2012). One of the recommendations discussed for the continuing development of the MIT ECE degree is about supporting quality in the home-centre experience. One suggestion has been to offer professional development to centres to enable them to support student teachers more effectively and to strengthen linkages and relations between MIT and the centres (Howie and Hagan, 2012, p. 97). When looking at support holistically, we need to be mindful of the Aotearoa



New Zealand context with its links to the entire Pacific region. This collaborative approach in working together must be a priority in promoting good ECE environments for excellent teaching and learning to occur.

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