

CHAPTER SEVEN

TEACHER EXPERIENCES OF INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS INTO SCHOOLS.

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Abstract

The major international movement toward adopting the philosophy of inclusion of students with special needs into mainstream classrooms has generated much discussion (both positive and negative) in schools in Australia. This chapter describes how teachers are attempting to include students with special needs from the perspective of regular classroom teachers. In this Australian study, the experiences of 42 teachers are reported on the challenges they faced prior to inclusion, the impact of inclusion on students' skills and social relationships, and the effects of the process on the major stakeholders involved.

INTRODUCTION

"The major controversy in the field of special education worldwide at present is the move toward the inclusion of all children with special educational needs in mainstream schools" (Hornby, 1999, p. 152). Although teachers today have a better understanding, in theory, of including students with special needs in regular classrooms, inclusion is largely an unmet goal (Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn & Schertz, 2001; Gallagher, 1999; Giorcelli, 2004; Knight, 2002). However, the major provider of education to students in Queensland (Education Queensland) has committed to "the provision of education services appropriate to the needs of all students with learning difficulties and learning disabilities". (Education Queensland, Policy Statement: accessed on-line).

Inclusion is a concept that views children with disabilities as full-time participants and members of their neighbourhood schools and communities. The inclusion philosophy proposes that there not be a range of placements but rather all students be educated with their peers in the same physical location. "Inclusion is one legacy of changing attitudes to people with disabilities and the development of principles based on social justice to underpin service provision" (Stephenson, 2003, p.14).

The negative effects of segregating students with special needs, together with concerns about the rights of all students, has led to an international commitment to inclusion evidenced by UNESCO's (1994) Salamanca World Statement on special needs education. This seminal work outlined that education systems need to cater for a wide range of student abilities in the regular classroom in order to meet their needs. This Statement supports the notion that education in regular schools is the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes and thus building an inclusive society.

Schumn & Vaughn (1995), Scruggs & Mastropieri (1996), Forlin, (1999), Knight (1999, 2000, 2001, 2002), Smith & Smith (2000) and Stephenson (2003) have reported that the process of inclusion makes considerable demands on teachers. Giorcelli (2004) has suggested that inclusion has delivered under-prepared schooling systems, unsupported placements, traditional curricular approaches and a reliance on para-professionals.

The research presented here has been undertaken in response to the widespread acceptance of the philosophy of inclusion and the lack of research evidence of the effectiveness of inclusive practices. The aim of the research was to present a picture of how teachers are attempting to include students with special needs in the regular classroom.

METHODOLOGY

TEACHER SAMPLE

Principals and administrators of 48 Queensland primary schools were asked to nominate exemplary regular classroom teachers based on the criteria of being a successful teacher (although no standards were specified), and volunteering to participate in the study. Specifically, information was requested about teachers' perceptions of the quality of students' learning experiences, the challenges of inclusion, the impact of inclusion, adaptations necessary and the attitudes of the major stakeholders involved in the inclusion process. These issues will be discussed in the results section of this chapter.

Thirty-seven female and five male teachers from regional areas participated in the study, with 41 of the teachers being three or more years trained and having teaching experience ranging from eight to more than 25 years. All teachers were currently teaching in primary schools where student's ages ranged from 5 to 13 years. Twenty-six teachers from this sample had attended workshops on teaching students with disabilities. No attempt was made to draw a representative sample for the study. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that exemplary teachers using strategies based on a philosophy of inclusion were used in the study. The goal of the research with this sample of teachers was to make explicit the inclusive experiences

of a group of teachers who have taught classes containing students with special needs.

The semi-structured interviews, conducted in the middle of the school year, were designed to seek from teachers factual details about the nature of the provisions they make for including students with special needs and also identifying what they see as barriers to effective provision for students. The interviews followed the same format and varied in length from 18 to 35 minutes. An example of a question is "What is the impact on your teaching style when including students with disabilities".

With interviews, there is always the danger of subjective bias from the interviewers. To overcome this problem, a number of procedures were used. Firstly, experienced interviewers were employed to conduct all of the interviews from a set of 10 basic questions. Both interviewers followed a set of instructions to standardise this component of the procedure. Secondly, interviews were audio-taped so as to be a more "sensitive" situation so that the interviewer was not hurriedly scribbling down notes. After transcribing, responses were analysed and themes were identified. To ensure that the analysis was reflective of the teachers' experiences, the analysis was sent back to teachers for comment.

Content analysis was used to analyse participating teachers' responses. Data was analysed according to manifest content which provided a means for identifying, organising and retrieving data. The teacher responses were organised as a whole with grade level taught, type of disability nor gender being used to code data. The content was analysed in themes with sampling occurring at paragraph and section level of responses. The thematic categories were generated and based on studies reported in the literature (Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Knight, 2000; Stephenson, 2003).

STUDENT DATA

The teachers in the sample discussed their experiences of including forty-two students (25 males and 17 females). Most students were the standard age for their grade, with eight who were chronologically one year older than their classmates. The students were enrolled in grades that ranged from preschool to year seven. An overwhelming majority of students (40) had remained within the same school system; a significant proportion of these had been in adjoining pre-schools. Two had made use of special needs units in pre-school.

The special needs of children who had been included in regular classrooms were behavioural problems, hearing impairment, social/emotional problems, Down Syndrome, learning difficulties, chronic depression, dyspraxia, dyslexia, Turner's Syndrome, autism, Asperger's syndrome, intellectual disability, dwarfism, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, ADHD, epilepsy, and tubular sclerosis.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

CHALLENGES BEFORE INCLUSION

The majority of teachers responded that initially their attitude to finding out that they would have a special needs child in their class was that they were very concerned. This was later allayed, in a lot of cases, through learning on the job. Particular issues of concern initially for these teachers included:

- (a) the physical safety of the student;
- (b) the learning implications for other students in the class; and
- (c) an inability to cope with the student's needs.

Most teachers attributed their initial concern to a lack of knowledge about the student's individual condition and needs. After a time of frustration and self-doubt (extending to six months in some cases and as few as four weeks in others), most teachers noted positive results. Common factors cited by teachers in allaying concerns included:

- (a) communication with parents, other teachers and the principal;
- (b) support from teachers and aides;
- (c) information regarding the child's specific condition and needs; and
- (d) time in the classroom (on the job) developing methods specific to each child. To illustrate this point, one teacher noted

For one term I just had to sit back and sort of assess where he was at, and that frustrated me because I knew that he wasn't coping, but I had to work out the extent of that. The most frustrating part, finding out where he was at, and once I did that I could actually start implementing some more specific things for him.

All respondents implicitly expressed a desire for maintaining a balance between the special needs child and the other students in the classroom. Concerns raised within this broad commonality were social and academic needs, as well as identifying needs and strategies for coping with these needs. Typical responses include:

Ensuring that the other kids are learning at the rate they should be learning. Because when I said I slowed the program down, that's very dangerous with the children that are high achievers.

Making sure that the children would welcome her as well. Getting the child to mix with others in class and in the playground was very challenging.

I think that's the biggest challenge, just trying to decide, which is personality and nature and which is a result of the syndrome.

All teachers believed that overall, their experiences of inclusion had been positive, with nearly all teachers stating that they needed to adapt to inclusive situations by changing their teaching styles. Teachers noted an alteration in teaching style demonstrating a critical awareness of practice when having a child with special needs in the classroom. Similar findings have been reported by Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman and Schattman (1993) where teachers noted a shift toward a positive attitude after the placement of students with special needs in the regular classroom. Changes for teachers included increased confidence, ownership, knowledge, and willingness to modify instructional techniques. Five teachers explicitly noted increased confidence, particularly in the acquisition of skills and strategies for future experiences.

It's been a wonderful experience. I was very hesitant to start with, very nervous and anxious. Didn't know how I was going to cope, because I'd never experienced anything like it. But I just feel now coming to the end of the year, I've grown both professionally and personally in all aspects, and I just value so much more, children's individuality, and I've learnt a lot from the experience.

Because of the changes that were necessary to classroom practice, all those interviewed indicated the need for and value of professional development about specific disabilities and teaching techniques. The following comment is illustrative of the type of response from teachers.

sometimes you can go to these seminars, but because you don't have a child that it specifically relates to, sometimes, a lot of it doesn't sort of sink in. I think perhaps if they ran one at the end of the year as well, sort of like for teachers who know that next year they're going to have an ASD (special needs) child, or something like that, then they can go.

Other researchers (eg Malarz, 1996, Smith & Smith, 2000) support the notion that staff development is critical to the successful process of inclusion.

PREPARING FOR INCLUSION

The most utilised and valued sources of information in preparation for inclusion of special needs students were the parents of the child, previous teachers of the child and the learning support staff. Stephenson (2003)

suggests that collaborative teaming with specialists is essential for successful inclusion to occur.

Just mainly collaboration with the other teachers, spoke to them about their experiences and what worked for them. What level she was at. And also spoke to her parents, and got a bit of an indication of where they were and where they thought she was going. I think that was important.

A lot of talking, particularly to the mother of the child, because in most cases they have the most intimate knowledge of the child's strengths and weaknesses etc. I also made contact with the previous school she had been at and spoke to her teacher and talked to a few others, mainly other teachers who had experienced the same sort of difficulties and what worked and what didn't.

Most teachers felt they had to gather their own reading material, and only two cited professional development as part of their preparation (although as stated above the important need for professional development). Alternatively, one teacher, when dealing with a child with a behaviour disorder, wanted to wait and get to know the child before reading any of the paper work and therefore not prejudice her interaction with the child.

Additional information needed by teachers was accessed from the following resources: professional development, discussions with principals, videos, books, the internet, specialists, and in a few cases, speaking with the child.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Half of the responses indicated that no changes were made to the physical classroom environment. Only three responses specified that the child's special needs did not necessitate change. The remaining respondents did not differentiate as to whether the lack of change was a decision made by assessing the specific child's needs, or whether resources and change were simply not made available to the teacher.

Specific alterations that were mentioned by individual respondents included:

- (a) ramps
- (b) safety precautions on cupboards and equipment
- (c) lowering the height of equipment
- (d) special mat due to carpet allergy
- (e) door cut in half
- (f) location of the student by the door for ease of access to the toilet.

(g) attention to lighting for an autistic student

(h) sitting and standing frames

RESOURCES

As most students had remained within the same school system, and a large percentage of these had attended the same pre-school, individual schools were generally aware of students' resource needs. Eight respondents specifically mentioned that the human resources such as learning support teachers were necessary.

Twenty teachers were provided with para-professionals (teacher aides), although the allocated times for these varied greatly. The terms of employment ranged from one-half hour per week through to full-time teacher aides for five students who had high support needs. The support of a para-professional was cited as invaluable, both in terms of individual care for the special needs student and also the variety of tasks performed were supportive of the teacher generally. The value of these para-professionals is strongly supported in the literature (Wadsworth & Knight, 1996; Knight, 2000, Smith & Smith, 2000, Stephenson, 2003).

All teachers who had the services of teacher-aides indicated that they were incredibly helpful, although they were deployed in a variety of ways. One-quarter of the teachers indicated a reluctance to form an exclusive association between the para-professional and the special needs student. There were a variety of reasons for this, the most prevalent being a desire not to have the child excluded from the larger group all of the time.

She (the para-professional) is there for my use basically, not for the child's use. As I said before, less is more, and I'm trying to wean the child off one on one, so that she becomes more independent and self reliant, so she (teacher aide) doesn't come into the room until 9.30 am and she leaves at lunch time. What we do is either one of us will be setting up the task but moving away, so she might last 10 minutes or so and then we just work in with the other children or I will be doing the lesson and she will be checking on the child but working with other children as well So the child realises the aide's not just for her and I'm not specifically for her. She has to be one of the class.

The majority of responses indicated that the para-professionals were indispensable for a variety of tasks, and worked as a "helper" for the teacher, rather than being specifically allocated to a group of students. Some of the tasks performed by para-professionals included photocopying, making telephone calls, typing, making charts and working one on one with the child with special needs and with other small groups of different ability children in the classroom.

IMPACT OF INCLUSION

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The responses of most teachers indicated that harmonious and rewarding social relationships required hard and constant work on the part of the teacher and sometimes the students. Implicitly at least, social networks were regarded as something requiring effort, rather than occurring naturally. Eleven teachers indicated that they had to “explain” to the rest of the class the behaviours of special needs students:

I don't think they're trying to be nasty, but they just say it the way it is, and then you discuss it so they see it in another light.

Several teachers have consciously implemented systems of social inclusion such as lunch buddy rosters, and class seating rotation.

Because my little girl can't go up and down the stairs to eat her lunch . . . she stays up(stairs). She gets a buddy to sit with her, and we've got a roster. They suggested we have a roster.

Most teachers were positive regarding the social implications of the child's inclusion, yet this was always amended by comments regarding the hard work, or “reality” of their social interactions.

Socially, it's the best thing for him to have him in there. Those students who know him are inclusive and tolerant. Not those who don't know him.

Other teachers noted a difference between the attitudes of students who had long associations with the special needs child, and those who were new to the school, or from a different class. Recurringly, it seemed that new students would require an adjustment period, in which they would come to “accept” the behaviours of the special needs student. This transition was facilitated by the teacher, and in some cases, by the remainder of the class who were accustomed to the special needs child. This signals a broader adjustment by the class of the special needs child and their particular behaviour, rather than either an adjustment of the special needs child, or a more natural “acceptance” of their behavioural and/or physical differences.

We had some new children come into the school and because they hadn't been exposed to the way he was, they didn't cope with him at all, but the rest of the children did, because they knew.

No responses were overtly negative about the social inclusion of special needs students. Girls, however, were believed to exhibit more empathy for included students. In line with the research reported by Stephenson (2003),

interactions were often initiated by students without disabilities and tended to be more assistive in nature.

SKILL ACQUISITION

More than half the teacher respondents indicated an improvement of some kind. These improvements were various including behavioural, organisational, motor skills and academic achievements. One teacher, who had two students with Down Syndrome in his classroom had noted no skill improvement for the year he had taught them, although the teacher had taught other students with special needs in previous years and they had made improvements.

Two of those teachers who noted an improvement were very positive about the abilities of their special needs students, however, only in particular discipline areas.

He's an extremely bright child. He asks questions that show an understanding of a child well above that year level, completely. But that's in the areas that interest him, science, and all those kinds of things. The areas that don't interest him, he's lower in, in oral comprehension, those kinds of things. Because he doesn't see the need for them.

Ten responses were ambivalent regarding an improvement in skill acquisition. Teachers responded by stating the difficulties experienced by the student. In some cases improvement was dependent on the day, and on the mood of the child.

Skill acquisition's very difficult, because the children are just progressing on so quickly. As he gets older the gap is going to widen. . . . he will have to be on a completely separate program, whereas now it's only part. . . . he can't do any work independently.

Most teachers indicated that there needed to be some sort of system or individual attention for improvement to be possible. Positive reinforcement, card and book systems to detail skills demonstrated were used, desks rearranged to ensure maximum improvement, and group re-organisation to ensure improvement in learning support. Realistic expectations were also highlighted as important:

I just expect them to get in and do everything But, like I said, we negotiate the extremes and the levels we go to, the time limits that type of thing. The thing is you've got to be patient.

IMPACT ON THE STUDENTS' PEERS WITHOUT DISABILITIES

All responses to this question were characterised by a thread that has already been identified as a commonality. Almost all teachers noted that the classroom environment in which they operate is a supportive one, and the students within the group are accustomed to the particular behaviours of the special needs child after a "settling" in period. Any negativity or lack of support comes from outside this group (in the playground, or new students). Hendrickson et al (1996) study revealed that greatest difficulties for regular school students were communication problems and initial discomfort with certain characteristics such as drooling. All respondents indicated that the other students in the classroom were generally supportive, helpful, and understanding.

the kids in that classroom became very protective of these two children, and very understanding and were always on the lookout for making sure that he's getting his lunch and doing things like that and eating at the right time and not wandering off and stuff like that. Maybe we could have built that up, that care, up with the other people in the school They have to be aware basically, awareness is the biggest thing.

Another recurring theme within these responses was the effort that teachers have made to explain to students the differing treatment of those with special needs. This was primarily to avoid claims of inequity, as certain behaviours going unnoticed would appear to be favoritism.

CLASSROOM OPERATION

The majority of respondents restricted their comments on classroom operation to flexible grouping and child centred approaches as these were the examples given in the interview

" A lot of grouping, very child centred. I try to have three different levels and I try to make it so that those levels are not obvious to the children. Looking around, every child seems to be doing the same thing and different children do not know that another child is doing something different or the expectation on them is different. I try to cater for the lower learners, the middle learners and the extension learners, basically through groups, through modifying my expectations even if they are doing the same activity... they are achieving success because they are achieving their goal"

Flexibility (in both groupings and generally) and a child centred approach were cited as absolutely necessary by all but two of the teachers interviewed.

ADAPTATIONS

Twenty-seven teachers cited adaptations including simplifying tasks, clarifying, repeating and step by step instructions.

Definitely explaining tasks, simplifying instructions, all of those and assisting with behaviour management, they were all things that I had to target with that child. This is something I explained to another teacher, if you find it monotonous breaking down every single step of every single task, get the child to sit next to someone who is responsible enough to say... OK, now you've got your maths folder, open it up, rule a margin. That was something, everything had to be simplified, little checklists on the desk, laminated on so that he could follow the instructions himself and break things down. Assisting behaviour management, like I said I focused on behaviour management at first and felt although I was focusing on the behaviour at hand there was something that was still causing the misbehaviour and when I realised it was the learning problem that's when the behaviour problem started to subside

Scott, Vitale, Masten (1998) also examined the issues regarding the classroom teachers' perceptions of the use of instructional adaptations for students with disabilities. Studies from 1986 to 1996 showed general educators as very positive about the desirability and effectiveness of making instructional adaptations for students with disabilities, but when these students are included in general education classrooms, their teachers are unlikely to alter their traditional whole-group instructional strategies in favour of specific individualised instruction. This research, also supported in a report by Hopper (2004), highlighted the need for one to one instruction for students with special needs especially when providing instructions or explanations.

you can't even leave him for five minutes to set these children other work to then come back to him. That's what I mean by his constantness, and that's going to, I think be a real problem for him as the content gets more difficult and you need to spend more time here, he's just so full on.

ROUTINES

All teachers agreed that routines and rules were of absolute importance within the classroom. Most mentioned that this was the case for all students, yet their students with special needs were particularly upset by changes to routine.

Vital, particularly in the younger grades with routines they all work better. It is wonderful to change the routine occasionally, it gives us all

a boost, but basically the daily routine is very important for the smooth running of the classroom and the security for the kids.

Most teachers indicated that there would be some modification of the rules for their students with special needs. Most of these respondents clarified that this was a modification of expectations, rather than a modification of rules. Extra care in explaining rules (and the reasons for them) needed to be taken with students with special needs. Individual rules books, picture books, visual cards etc were used as a means of reinforcing appropriate behaviours.

The types of strategies that were utilised by teachers to promote acceptable classroom behaviour in the classroom included:

- (a) Positive reinforcement (stickers, sweets, lucky dips etc, praise)
- (b) Positive reinforcement (praise only)
- (c) Establishing clear expectations
- (d) Literature with moral messages
- (e) Exclusion from the group for unacceptable behaviour
- (f) List of consequences for unacceptable behaviour (the student can choose their consequence)

Schumm, Vaughan, Haager, and McDowell (1995), Johnson (1999), Smith & Smith (2000) and Knight (2002) report that elementary general education teachers did more planning to maximise learning outcomes for students with special needs. In view of the adaptations described above, it is not surprising that planning was cited in this study as an aspect requiring more time. The development of strategies to ensure that the special needs child is included, comfortable and learning also took a lot of time. Other work that demanded extra time were discussions with learning support teachers, meetings, extra time working with the para-professional, reading available literature, watching videos on specific disabilities, and attending seminars.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Almost all teachers indicated that students with special needs were able to participate in excursions and field-trips. Only two of the children were unable to participate in some extracurricular activities. Both these children were autistic. One child did not attend sports carnivals because of her dislike of noise and crowds and the other child could not attend camp because of his incontinence and lack of independence. There were however,

several indications of the enormous preparations and planning required to include special needs students in such activities.

We did have to do a lot of build up in order for them to go on camp and that involved meetings with the people who were going on camp . . . both times it involved the addition of an extra person on camp with us. Those people being aware of what that child's needs were and how we were going to cater. Looking ahead and saying what problems might this child have and when and preventing those problems. So, no they've never not been included, but we've always had to make sure that we've made provision for that.

Of those teachers who elaborated on their response, all seemed positive about the benefits of including special needs students in such activities. There seemed an implicit recognition that additional provisions would need to be made for this inclusion to be possible. In most cases there was an implied understanding that the student with special needs would not participate to the same level as other students. Modifications of equipment and/or personnel would be required, perhaps in addition to the modification of expectations.

SPECIALIST ASSISTANCE

Only three teachers indicated students had no specialist lessons outside the classroom. All other teachers indicated that there were regularly scheduled times for which the special needs students would be withdrawn from the classroom. The particular type of assistance offered at this time varied and were dependent on the child's needs. The broad types of assistance offered included: speech therapy, assistance in the special education unit, occupational therapy, academic learning support whereby the child was withdrawn from the classroom as well as assistance in the classroom, and meeting with social workers.

Withdrawal from the classroom was overwhelmingly to make use of Learning Support Teachers. For many of those interviewed there were multiple students who visited learning support, and not all of these were students with special needs.

COMMUNICATION

All teachers stressed the importance of communication, most particularly with the parents of the special needs child, but also with other parents, with the principal, other teachers, specialists and with other students in the classroom so that they understood the particular behaviours of the student with special needs. Problems that did arise were attributed to breakdowns in communication, and were usually resolved through attention to this

communication process. Giorcelli (2004) cites the need for proactive, constructive and consistent communication.

PARENTS

Twenty-five teachers indicated that the parents were “very supportive” yet the means by which this support was offered varied greatly. Regular phone, or written contact was maintained in all cases, as well as regular attendance at requested meetings. For the more “hands on” parents, time was spent in the classroom.

They were excellent, just so supportive. It was just wonderful. And if he did anything that was really too over the top, we would ring and they would come and remove him straight away. There was a lot of communication, there was a lot of work.

Additional information supplied here revealed

- (a) The use of communication books which are taken home each day. Both the parents and the teacher are kept informed this way; and
- (b) There was a reiteration of the importance of communication between parents and the teacher.

Jordan, Reyes-Blanes, Peel, Peel, and Lane (1998) saw successful inclusion as developing teacher-parent partnerships, particularly across cultures. Successful parent conferences can lead to positive communication between school and home (Kroth and Edge, 1997). Parental involvement can be a sign of successful transition to school (Ramey and Ramey, 1994) and classroom achievement. In this study, most teachers were comfortable with the expectations of the parents, and seemed to have a good understanding of what they were, indicating effective communication. Most teachers appeared to find the parents’ expectations realistic.

CONCLUSION

There is a lot of pressure to include children with special needs. “We are now engaged in what some workers would see as the second stage of the inclusion movement. This involves the redesign of schools to be fully inclusive, accepting of diversity, and more compatible with contemporary social attitudes which stress individual rights and empowerment” (Ward and Center, 1999, p. 28). We have but just begun this journey.

Overall, the teachers interviewed in this study displayed a genuinely caring and generous approach to the inclusion of special needs students. They did demonstrate signs of workplace stress, particularly those teachers who internalised each aspect of the child’s experience as their own personal responsibility. Although teachers indicated that having a student with

special needs had increased their teaching confidence, some teachers were looking for “coping” strategies in the classroom. The emphasis on communication, information and training seemed to reveal that there were not adequate support structures in place. Teachers were reluctant to comment on this explicitly, and were even more reluctant to appear inequitable by suggesting that students with special needs should not be included. There were, however, two teachers who suggested that the numbers and severity of special needs students should be assessed to ensure that the learning experience of the other students was not jeopardised. This is an issue that was implicitly raised as most teachers commented that the biggest challenge was creating a balance within the classroom (either academic, behavioural, or social).

While all teachers were “in principle” very supportive of inclusion, all expressed at some point within interviews, the difficulties, or practicalities associated with having a special needs child in the classroom. Such concerns were, the potential effects on the learning experience of the other students in the classroom, and the degree to which the special needs child was included (most teachers were determined to limit the “withdrawal” as much as possible). Other issues of concern were, a lack of information, training, and specialist support, although all teachers indicated that generic information was not useful, and that they required specific information and coping strategies relevant to the specific special needs of their child.

All teachers signalled a desire for social inclusion of the student with special needs, and many teachers seemed to take the pressure of this upon themselves. This, however, caused significant stress and self doubt in some teachers. The most rewarding aspects of inclusion were instances where the social inclusion had been successful. All teachers interviewed were either positive, or very positive regarding the social inclusion of their special needs students. Responses revealed that there were occasions on which social inclusion was not successful, either because the special needs child did not seek friendships, or because of the severity of behavioural problems. All teachers indicated that the creation of a supportive atmosphere within the classroom was achievable, yet new students and students from other classes posed problems because they did not “understand” the behaviours of the special needs child. In most cases reported in this research, the success of social inclusion is credited to the implementation of strategies such as buddy systems, peer tutoring, rosters, and room arrangement.

What is clear from the research is that inclusion needs to be more than the physical presence of students with disabilities in the regular school. For inclusion to be successful, there is a need to transform the old culture of mainstream schools to allow for engagement of students in all aspects of the classroom and instruction in an energized framework.

Finally, the positive impact of inclusion for two teachers is summed up by the following:

What you see of kids on paper is not who they are. At the beginning of the year when I go through and have a look at the files and who I have got, I have really learnt that what it says on a piece of paper can be daunting but it's not the individual.

In a lot of ways I feel very privileged to have had kids like these because I felt like I have learnt a lot and it's boosted my confidence in dealing with kids with special needs. I think it has made me more flexible, more open minded. I certainly don't feel afraid anymore of getting someone with autism or ADD or something that has not been diagnosed. I think it has done wonders for me and I would like to think that it has been a positive experience for the kids.

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