



## **INCLUSION: SMOOTHING THE PATHWAYS INTO THE REGULAR CLASSROOM<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*Inclusive education of students with special needs is currently a philosophy that is evolving into practice in many schools. A majority of current regular classroom practitioners have had little experience of teaching students with special needs and are expressing concern about how to include these children. This paper reports on a pilot study of teachers' personal experiences of including students with special needs in their regular classrooms. The analysed data reports on the teachers' perceptions of the success of inclusion in their classrooms, the problems they faced, the changes they needed to make to their teaching and outlines their advice to other teachers on how best to make classrooms more inclusive.*

### **Scenario**

*You are teaching a year two class (ages 7 and 8) in a regular school. Typical students in your class include three high achievers; another group of five students who can easily complete all assigned work; a group of fourteen 'average students' who can usually complete assigned work without much help from you; five students who struggle with most work and need constant teacher help; and three students (one of whom has been formally diagnosed as having a mild*

*intellectual disability) who need a lot of help in all subject areas. Of these students in this "typical" class, one student is very aggressive toward you and class members; two are boisterous to the extent of unsettling the class; four (or more depending upon where you are teaching) come from homes where English is a second language and thirteen are from single parent homes.*

The class described above is indeed typical of many classrooms in the new millennium. The fact that students with special needs are in regular classrooms indicates that the philosophy of inclusion is being implemented and that teachers need to cater for students' individual differences and needs. Although teachers have a theoretical understanding of what is involved in inclusion, the process to achieving it is still basically fraught with difficulties. This paper outlines the experiences of teachers as they have worked through the inclusive process in their regular classrooms.

The negative effects of school segregation together with concerns about rights of all students has led to an international commitment to inclusion evidenced by UNESCO's (1994) Salamanca World Statement on special needs education. The Salamanca statement outlined that education systems should cater for a wide diversity of student needs.

## Background

Inclusive education is a policy that 'reflects contemporary views on human rights, social justice and equity being applied to the education of students with special needs' (Westwood, 1997, p. 18). What this policy means for teachers is the full-time placement of students with severe disabilities (ranging from low to high support needs) into regular classrooms. This is currently a contentious issue for teachers, as translating the ideal of inclusion into practice involves significant change and challenge for teachers as they perceive additional demands being placed upon them (Knight, 2000).

'While it is evident that the integration and inclusion of students with special needs will require changes on the part of schools and teachers.... it is obvious that some schools and teachers have been better able to make the changes than others..' (Foreman, 1996, p. 343). Teachers are the critical variable as in any classroom and they need to see what others have done, what changes need to be made and how the changes of catering for the varied needs of students can be made.

It would appear from the literature (eg Kenny, 1996; Vaughn, Schumm, Jallard, Slusher, and Saumell, 1996; Knight, 1998; Knight & Hammond, 1998) that teachers perceive the movement toward inclusion as threatening and therefore it is to be expected that this movement will meet with a great deal of covert resistance. It is believed that when teachers talk about their practice, it encourages collegiality among other teachers to analyse the behaviour of colleagues and provides them with knowledge and strategies on solving problems, as well as generating options to be further investigated. The research presented in this paper aims to demonstrate to teachers how some of their colleagues were approaching inclusion and dealing with issues that have arisen as a result of inclusion. Ainscow (1997) supports such an approach to help in understanding how regular classrooms can be made more inclusive.

## **Method**

Utilising teachers' own personal stories (collected through interviews) have been labelled by Bruner (1966) as the complementary form of the scientific mode of knowing. Recent research (eg. Casey, 1996; Elbaz, 1993) has suggested that this form of discourse discloses the personal and individual nature of experiences and gives teachers an opportunity to clarify their own feelings and beliefs and inform others of successful strategies used in inclusive classrooms.

The particular paradigm used in this research was one of reflection and synthesis. When dealing with an issue such as inclusion of students with special needs, the major focus was on the unique attributes and situations of each individual teacher. Such a paradigm had ethical boundaries that focussed on issues related to successful inclusive practices and explored the day to day practices of teaching students with special needs. The work was epistemological in character focussing on personal experience to better understand teaching practice.

The teachers chosen were nominated by their principals, consultants and peers as having excellent teaching practice involving catering for students with special needs. In this pilot project, eight exemplary female teachers were asked to reflect on their experiences and articulate their understanding of teaching students with special needs.

Semi-structured interviews were taped and included a discussion of a number of issues reported in the literature relating to the inclusion of students with special needs that other teachers have concerns with, namely: planning, programming, the change process in moving toward inclusion, classroom management, teaching methods, collaboration and decision making, support needed, and the general impact on the classroom.

### *Sample*

Eight teachers talked about their classroom experiences. The teachers taught classes from preschool (age five) to Year Five (age eleven) and their class sizes ranged from 18 to 32. All of the children with special needs were included with their age-appropriate peers. The included students (all male) had a variety of special needs including a student with cerebral palsy, two students with behaviour disorders, two students who were speech developmentally delayed, two students with intellectual disabilities and a student with Down Syndrome.

## Results

There was no doubt that each teacher and her situation was unique and each relied on their own personal philosophy and insights. However, an analysis of the material identified similarities and themes that the author believes are of value to other teachers facing the complexities of catering for students with special needs in their inclusive classrooms.

### *Social Acceptance*

Teachers' perceptions of the social successes of inclusion were very positive. There seems to be little doubt that these teachers believe that including students with special needs into the regular classroom is beneficial for their social development. Tangible records of success identified by the teachers were seeing the students happy and taking pride in their achievements. An interesting point to emerge was a student with an obvious disability, in this case cerebral palsy, was more readily accepted by peers than students with mild intellectual disabilities or behaviour disorders. One teacher commented

'X didn't have a classified problem, which in one sense is an easier option....not that teaching a cerebral palsy child is easy but there is more understanding for a child like that than a child who presents normally.....but has a problem with behaviour' (Teacher 2).

Most of the teachers reported much positive peer interaction in the classroom and playground. Two students (one labelled a "bully" by his teacher and the other a child with few social skills) had less positive peer interactions. The children with obvious disabilities were accepted well by their peers, however, to the point of 'mothering' in one case.

### *Impact on Peers*

Generally the peers of the included student became more caring, sensitive, patient and empathetic, not only to the

student with special needs but also to others within the classroom. A big challenge for one teacher was to *'stop other children mothering him'* (Teacher 3).

Even in the case of children with behaviour problems, other class members learned to cope-sometimes by getting on with their work and ignoring inappropriate behaviour and at other times by actually settling the child down to quiet work.

### *Academic Success*

Teachers perceived level of academic success for included students was not as positive as for social success. The teachers tended to be unsure if they were catering for the academic needs of the included children. They expressed a need for assessment strategies to know for sure if the children were achieving to the best of their ability. This was as important for the teachers' confidence as it was for the child. Teachers suggested that knowing what to expect of the student, what the student was capable of, strategies to address their specific needs and most importantly how to assess their academic progress would have been of value as a professional development activity for staff. One teacher indicated *'I am very unsure if his skills are developing as fast as they should be'* (Teacher 3). They also needed to know what aids were available, in particular programs, materials, and different discipline models for dealing with problem behaviours.

### *Specialist Lessons*

All of the included students left the classroom for anything from 10 mins to a large proportion of the day in the case of a student who was only partially included for approximately two days per week. Most students were withdrawn from the classroom with an aide or specialist teacher to work on individual programs. Most of the students were also withdrawn for occupational or physio and/or speech therapy as well.

### *Communication*

Communication with all parents was regular (daily to fortnightly), open and effective in most instances. Parents were all willing to come into the school to discuss their child's progress and to help in whatever way they could.

The teachers found that parents were a key link in the inclusion process and were supportive and helpful by supplying background information and being interested to find out what was happening at school so that they could provide support for school endeavours at home. Some parents came in to help with programs or toileting their children at school. Not unusually, more mothers than fathers participated and came to meetings with the teacher. Most had contact on a daily to weekly basis, usually as a little chat after school.

Most teachers found communication with other professionals involved to be both useful and regular. Depending upon the student's disability, teachers were involved with speech and occupational therapists (involvement at school and receiving reports regularly ranging from monthly to half-yearly); medical specialists (twice a year reports and telephone conversations); pre-schools and previous schools (mostly at the beginning of the year to find out the student's history); with special schools (forming links between school programs); and teacher aides (daily). Principals kept regular contact in many cases, more so in smaller schools.

### *Resources*

Teachers generally used computers with normal software programs for all class members. Students in wheel chairs had to have special ramps and chairs made while the student with cerebral palsy needed a communication board and a head pointer. He had his own computer but it was also available for the rest of the class to use at different times.

Most of the teachers had a teachers' aide working with them and all admitted that this made inclusion much easier. One teacher commented (and this notion was supported by other teachers interviewed) '*...X could not have been included without full time support from Mrs J. (the teacher aide)*' (Teacher 6). Some teachers felt that they had to use the teacher aide for the student with special needs only, either because the aide's time was so short (in these cases the child was withdrawn from the class to work on a special program) or because they felt the aide had to be used for the purpose for which they were funded (ie. working individually with the student with special needs). Other teachers, believing that using the aide with only one student was a very inefficient use of time, used the aide to make resources, help with ideas for the child's Individual Education Plan and in assisting other class members.

### Teaching

All but one of the teachers reported changing their teaching style to accommodate the students with special needs. This one teacher was already teaching using individualised programs because of her personal teaching philosophy. Teachers suggested that including the child with special needs meant that they had to become well organised (plan ahead) and methodical about assessment. Some of the teachers, especially those who were inexperienced, admitted that they struggled and lost confidence at first. They worried they were not catering for academic needs but after having worked with the student for a term some of them had gained in personal confidence. Three teachers however, even after working with a student for more than six months, still felt confused and unsure if they were being successful, mostly because they were unsure of the goals of the inclusion and therefore not knowing if they had achieved them. This was expressed by one teacher as '*even after having him for six months*



*I have no idea if I am doing the right thing'* (Teacher 1). This suggests that it is important to outline clearly the goals of inclusion for each child so that all stakeholders in the process are aware of them.

In preparation for inclusion, teachers used a variety of strategies including speaking to previous teachers and schools, finding out prior history from parents, reading up about the disability, talking to specialists and consultants if available, reading files, and finding out what resources such as aide time support was available.

The teachers stated that careful monitoring and assessment of the student with special needs progress was essential in order to adjust their programs. Finding strategies that worked for the child and teacher were reported to be necessary. In certain cases, instructions had to be simplified to the extent where the other children were set to work so that the teacher could explain directions to the individual student. Worksheets were partially covered or special instructions were placed on the blackboard so that the student with special needs was not overwhelmed by the work. Some teachers mentioned that they tried to keep everything the same for all students so that the student with special needs did not feel singled out.

Some teachers found it necessary to adapt classroom materials. One strategy that was used by some teachers was to adapt teaching materials using Bloom's taxonomy and plan multiple activities at different levels related to the same theme of work. Other teachers needed more concrete activities and materials for the student with special needs.

Presentation of material was also important (as it is with all students). Teachers were made even more aware of this and were alert not to overwhelm students by, for example, *'putting too much information on worksheets'* (Teacher 7).

The teachers in this research emphasised that a lot of extra time was needed, often after school and during lunch times,

to plan and program to meet the needs of the whole class. Teaching the student with special needs in the classroom did sometimes take the teacher away from the other students and so certain strategies and assistance were needed. The time spent planning after hours helped to free the teacher up in the classroom so that when the class were working independently and/or in groups it allowed time for the teacher to work individually with the student with special needs. Using the teacher aides, volunteer parents and other children as peer tutors also allowed more time for the teacher to get around to meet the needs of all class members. One teacher admitted that after seeing the extra work she had to do, some of the other teachers at her school were worried about '*opening the floodgates* (to other special needs children to be enrolled in the school)' (Teacher 8).

In addition to planning, after school and lunch hours were often used for meetings with parents, and other support staff. The meetings with aides were generally as part of the lessons but there were also short meetings at morning tea and lunch. A lot of time was spent talking in unofficial meetings with parents, in many cases every afternoon for up to 10 minutes each. Only one teacher was released from teaching duties for meetings and planning.

Finally, based on their experiences to date, the teachers were asked to offer advice to other teachers about how to successfully include a child with special needs. The following summarises their advice:

- Find out as much as you can about the child. Do some background reading and find out the expectations (of parents, etc.) so that you can effectively meet students' needs.
- Use the experiences of other teachers and consult with advisers.
- Be assertive with your supervisors. Don't think you have to do it on your own.

- Establish a routine for the whole class. The extra work is worth it as it means less work in the long run.
- Be well organised and set up your classroom so that it meets the needs of all your students and can run most efficiently. Program ahead so you know where you are going and keep records for follow up and use for the next teacher (and for your own confidence).
- Be consistent with students with special needs.
- Let students know your expectations.
- Help students to feel valuable, contributing class members, confident and secure.
- Raise the students' self esteem. Accept their limitations and find their talents.
- Communicate with parents regularly. Keep them informed and try to keep their expectations realistic.

## **Conclusion**

Students can and do learn in an inclusive setting. Structures need to be set up that support teachers and students as they attempt to bring about changes in their thinking, attitudes and practice. A school inclusion policy should detail how needs will be met and the strategies that will be used to implement inclusion so as to ensure that real (not superficial) inclusion is visible in classroom practice. Parents, teachers, school executive, specialist teachers and other major stakeholders need to be involved in the planning, on-going monitoring and evaluation of a policy.

Gathering information and being able to problem solve with others during implementation is critical to effective teaching and the implementation of inclusion. As the results of this research demonstrate, effective implementation takes time as teachers need to build up a repertoire of successful strategies and practices.

This initial research of elementary school teachers has identified key areas related to classroom management and

instruction which require further exploration and analysis. Supportive classroom teachers and administrators are critical to the successful teaching of students in inclusive settings. Teachers' behaviour, attitudes and skills, together with peer acceptance of individual differences are important factors in the successful inclusion of students.

The teachers in this study have displayed a lot of skills that have supported the inclusion process, in particular:

- a positive attitude to inclusion;
- a willingness to adapt resources and teaching strategies;
- collaboration with professionals; and
- communication with parents.

Whilst attempting to include children with special needs in regular classes, special education to date has merely replicated itself in a regular school and in so doing has '*colonised rather than transformed the mainstream*' (Dyson, 1997, p. 154). This cannot of course ensure successful inclusion. What is needed, as has been demonstrated in this research, is that teachers and the structure of the system need to adapt to changing conditions.

## Endnotes

- 1 This research was supported by a research grant from Central Queensland University

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