# Project: Preparing New Teachers for Inclusive Schools and Classrooms

 Final Report

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# Introduction

This project was both investigative and comparative in nature. The overall intent was to examine the preparedness of new teachers in N. Ireland to undertake teaching in inclusive contexts, and to acquire input on the mode of delivery and content to Special Educational Needs (SEN) courses in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for future course development.

The project was an extension of a similar one undertaken in Ontario, Canada in 2000-2002, and as such allowed for some useful cross-jurisdictional comparisons in relation to preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms. It was anticipated that the findings would add to the existing body of literature in relation to preparing teachers for today’s more inclusive settings.

Funding from ESCalate was in support of the N. Ireland part of the project (2004-2006).

Overview

It has long been recognised that new teachers are apprehensive about their ability to teach pupils with SEN, and have found their preparation for inclusive classrooms inadequate at best (Dwyfor Davis & Garner, 1997; Garner, 1996; Minke et al, 1996). The current project produced evidence of teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness for inclusive settings, the status of SEN in ITE in N. Ireland, teachers’ preferred model of SEN course delivery, and an outline of the content of the courses. The findings drew from the experiences of current practitioners who are working in inclusive settings on a daily basis. As indicated below, the findings have been disseminated through a number of channels, and it is anticipated that the results will have an impact on the status of SEN in teacher education. It would appear that, some twenty years after the studies noted above, teachers still feel that they are not adequately prepared to meet effectively, the learning needs of the range of pupils who are now included in their mainstream classes.

 Findings from the N. Ireland part of the project were also compared to those from the previous Ontario study, and were amalgamated into a set of recommendations pertinent in both jurisdictions and presented to the Canadian Society for Studies in Education (CSSE).

Background

At present, there is a focus on educating pupils with SEN in mainstream classes. Classroom teachers, therefore, face significant challenges as they encounter pupils with diverse learning needs daily. Existing research shows that many teachers, particularly those in their first two years of teaching, feel neither competent nor confident in their ability to teach pupils with special needs in inclusive settings (Cains & Brown, 1996; Garner, 2001; Lombardi & Hunka, 2001). This pattern has been noted internationally where many researchers express concern about the extent to which all classroom teachers are prepared to teach pupils with a wide range of learning needs. (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Schumm & Vaughn, 1995).

The significant nature of the findings from a study such as this and the potential of these findings to infirm ITE providers is emphasised by Mittler (2000) when he says:

 Ensuring that newly qualified teachers have a basic understanding

 of inclusive teaching is the best investment that can be made. (p.137)

and by Cook (2002) who states:

 *If pre-service teachers do not possess the knowledge and skills to*

 *implement inclusion appropriately, the included students with*

 *disabilities in their future classes will certainly have* *diminished*

 *opportunities to attain desired outcomes regardless of teachers’*

 *attitudes toward inclusive reforms.* (p. 263)

Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

1. To identify and analyse the content and status of SEN preparation offered by teacher training institutions in N. Ireland

2. To identify and collate current research findings on the status of SEN in Initial Teacher Education programmes

3. To identify and analyse the knowledge and competencies required of beginning teachers (relative to SEN) from the perspectives of N. I. principals

4. To identify and analyse the knowledge and competencies required of beginning teachers (relative to SEN) from the perspectives of current N. I. practitioners

Outcomes

 **Objectives 1 and 2:ITE Provision in SEN in N. Ireland**

There are five providers of ITE in Northern Ireland. They offer either a four-year BEd degree or a one-year postgraduate certificate of education (PGCE). Although, SEN is not considered to be a specialist subject within ITE and is not, therefore a compulsory subject, providers are required to equip student teachers with basic knowledge and skills in SEN. The N. Ireland inspectorate recommended that all ITE providers include a mandatory special education module (DE, 2005, Sec. 3.179). The inspectors’ report states, “the student teachers who opted for the courses in special needs reported that they had gained much and believed that they were better prepared to teach children with such needs” (Sec. 3.179). Currently, there does not appear to have been any move to implement this particular recommendation. This may change following the Department of Education’s strategic review of SEN and Inclusion commenced in April 2006, and noted below.

There were three main patterns of course structure noted in the BEd programme with similar ones in the PGCE. These included: a single course or series of SEN/Inclusion units delivered by specialists; permeated or infused SEN made explicit in some instances but implicit in others; and some combination of the two. The time dedicated to SEN was not consistent over the institutions examined but it would appear that the greatest amount of SEN time occurs where there is a series of input units over a four-year BEd programme. Time devoted to SEN in a one-year PGCE course is constrained by this particular model of ITE. There is no stipulation as to the content of the SEN input for any of the ITE providers. It would appear that this varies according to the available staff expertise. Previous research noted that the ITE providers themselves would prefer a compulsory ‘stand alone’ course in SEN for all pre-service teachers as difficulties associated with the quality and monitoring of permeated input have been evident (Kearns & Shevlin, 2006).

Objective 3

This objective related to issues for principals in relation to staffing schools with teachers who were equipped to teach in inclusive classrooms. As noted in the evaluator’s report, principals appeared to be reluctant to complete the survey, the majority opting to pass it to their Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO). It is acknowledged that some of the wording in the survey may have precipitated this move. It may also suggest that principals feel ill equipped to respond to a SEN survey. The result was that the opinions gleaned in this part of the study were those of the SENCOs rather than the principals. In the opinion of the researcher and the evaluator, this does not adversely impact on the quality of the information and may indeed enhance it overall.

The SENCOs preferred model of SEN course delivery was:

1. A compulsory Stand Alone course plus Permeation
2. A compulsory Stand Alone course
3. Permeation
4. Elective or Optional course

Their preferred course content was ranked in order of importance as follows:

1. Assessment and Evaluation
2. Student Characteristics
3. Code of Practice
4. Behaviour and Classroom Management
5. IEPs
6. Instructional Strategies
7. Curriculum Adaptations

Given the nature of the SENCO role, and the experience required to do the job effectively, the content outlined may also be appropriate at the in-service level and will, therefore, be of value to those providing in-service and professional development for SENCOs.

Objective 4

Current practitioners provided a range of information in relation to their preparation to teach in inclusive classrooms. One significant aspect was that the majority (71%) had been teaching for between 6 and 15 years. This would suggest that their ITE likely has taken place since 1990, a timeframe during which there has been an increasing emphasis on inclusion. It would be anticipated, therefore, that ITE programmes would reflect this trend. Responses from the teachers indicated that they do not feel well prepared, suggesting that the ITE programmes may be somewhat lacking in this area. Another interesting factor to emerge was that those who had exposure to SEN in their ITE felt that they had information ‘about’ certain conditions and disabilities (e.g. Autism; Dyslexia) but lacked input and strategies on ‘how to teach’ the children who had them.

The teachers’ preferred model of course delivery was as follows:

1. A compulsory Stand Alone course plus Permeation
2. Permeation
3. A compulsory Stand Alone course
4. Elective or Optional course

Their preferred course content was ranked in order of importance as follows:

1. Behaviour and Classroom Management
2. Student Characteristics
3. Assessment and Evaluation
4. Code of Practice
5. IEPs and Instructional Strategies (tied)

7. Developmental Differences

It is not surprising to see Behaviour at the top of the list since the largest number of teachers identified this group as being included in their current classes (71%). It is generally regarded as the group of pupils within SEN that presents teachers with the most concerns in relation to inclusion, and the group that is also the least welcomed in an inclusive setting.

The number of required course hours indicated by both groups ranged from a low of 10hrs to a high of 48 hrs.

Learning

The main things learnt from these findings is that teachers today still do not feel well prepared to teach in inclusive classrooms. Despite the rise in pupils with SEN in mainstream settings, much needs to be done at the pre-service level if new teachers are to feel competent and skilled enough to meet the needs of a wide range of pupils.

It must be acknowledged, however, that completion of ITE is only the beginning for teachers. It must be expected that they will continue to grow and develop through in-service and professional development as they move ahead in their careers. It would be unrealistic to expect beginning teachers to be ‘experts’ in all areas of SEN, however, it is realistic to expect ITE providers to ensure that new teachers are as well equipped as possible to meet the demands of today’s classrooms. It is not sufficient to be knowledgeable re- the content of the curriculum, teachers must be able to adapt and differentiate that curriculum in order to meet the needs of pupils in their classes. Teachers must also understand the learning process, possess a repertoire of teaching strategies, and be able to provide a challenging learning environment in which all pupils will learn and grow. Teachers must also be prepared to undertake continuous in-service and professional development some of which may be on their own time, and at their own expense.

Implications for Practice

There are a number of implications for practice, applying primarily to ITE providers but also useful for in-service and professional development. The research has provided guidelines for both the model of SEN course delivery in ITE, and for the content of the courses.

1. Pre-service teachers want consistent and compulsory input related to SEN
2. Their preference is for a focused ‘stand alone’ course combined with SEN issues permeated across the other subject areas.
3. In instances where permeation would be difficult (e.g. lack of experience of tutors), then a compulsory ‘stand alone’ course is preferred.
4. Guidelines for the list of the topics for SEN in ITE are consistent for both groups.
5. ITE providers, and those developing in-service in SEN, can use the content guidelines as a framework around which they can plan their programmes.
6. Using the notion of a spiral curriculum, ITE, in-service, and professional development can be developed to ensure the ongoing growth and development of current practitioners.
7. Given the nature of the BEd (4yr) and the PGCE (1yr) programmes, the time allotted to SEN in the latter would need careful consideration.

Dissemination

The findings from this research have been disseminated in a variety of ways as noted below:

1. Conference presentation: BERA Conference, Cardiff, September 2005

Paper entitled: ‘Preparing new teachers for inclusive schools and classrooms’

2. Publication:

Winter, E.C. (2006). Preparing new teachers for inclusive schools and classrooms. Support for Learning, 21 (2), 85-91.

3. Conference presentation: Canadian Society for Studies in Education (CSSE) Conference, Toronto, Ontario in May 2006

 Paper entitled: ‘Preparing new teachers for inclusive schools and classrooms: A comparative study’

 This paper was presented in collaboration with Dr Donna McGhie-Richmond (University of Alberta) and compared the findings from the Ontario study (2000-2002) with the N. Ireland findings (2004-2006).

1. Seminar presentation: Stranmillis College, Belfast in the Fall 2006 (tba)

 ‘Preparing new teachers for inclusive schools and classrooms’

 This seminar series involves the ITE providers.

1. Findings to be incorporated into the Department of Education (NI) strategic review of ‘Special Educational Needs and Inclusion’. The purpose of this review (commenced April 2006) is to develop comprehensive and cost effective recommendations across the spectrum of SEN in N. Ireland, and to develop a revised policy of SEN and Inclusion. One of the key themes in the review is related to capacity building for teachers, SENCOs and classroom assistants.

Dr Winter has been invited to participate on the Advisory Group set up to oversee the review, and it is anticipated that the research conducted for this project will contribute to the final recommendations.

1. Copies of the research findings and publications have also been requested from the following:
	1. The Inter-Board Learning Group

This group encompasses all five Education & Library Boards in N. Ireland and runs a Diploma in Special Education for SENCOs. The Diploma is validated by Queen’s University Belfast.

* 1. The Ontario College of Teachers

This body is responsible for the evaluation and accreditation of Teacher Education programmes in Ontario.

* 1. Laurentian University, Faculty of Education
	2. Ontario University Institute of Technology, Faculty of Education.

Summary

Overall, both the project itself, and the dissemination of the findings have been very successful. The key aspect is that the findings are in the hands of individuals and groups who have the power to impact on the SEN input in ITE and In-service programmes.

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