**Preparing New Teachers for Inclusive Schools and Classrooms: A Comparative Study.**

**Abstract**

The policies of including students with special educational needs (SEN) in general education classrooms are now firmly established in many jurisdictions. Successful implementation of such policy is dependent largely on educators having requisite knowledge, skills, and competencies. This poses a considerable challenge to both novice and experienced teachers. This study examined the role of SEN in pre-service programmes in two distinct but similar jurisdictions-Ontario, Canada and Northern Ireland. The major question under investigation was whether current practitioners in the two contexts believe their pre-service programmes equipped them for inclusive classrooms. The practitioners’ recommendations for the content and delivery of SEN courses at the pre-service level are highlighted.

**Background**

It has long been recognised that many new teachers are apprehensive about their ability to teach students with SEN, and have found their preparation for inclusion inadequate at best (Garner, 1996; Dwyfor Davis & Garner, 1997; Schumm & Vaughn, 1995; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). This was specifically highlighted as being problematic in the first two years of teaching (Cains & Brown, 1996). A pilot study in one teacher education programme revealed that over half (53%) of the participants (n=150), felt unprepared to teach students with SEN. Furthermore, sixty-five percent (65%) reported that the amount of SEN instructional time provided during their pre-service education was inadequate. There has also been a great deal of discussion about the skills and competencies needed by all teachers to effectively teach a diverse student population in mainstream classrooms (Daniels & Vaughn, 1999; Lombardi & Hunka, 2001; Swan & Servis, 1999). Since the majority of students with SEN receive instruction in mainstream classes, it is essential that teachers have the knowledge and skills to provide appropriate instruction for *all* students. Research also shows that training & education are critical to the success of inclusion programmes (McKleskey et al., 1999; Peterson & Beloin, 1998; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996).

This study provides information critical to designing, developing, and implementing effective SEN instruction for pre-service teacher candidates in the two contexts under scrutiny. The reported study (2002-2005) was both investigative and comparative in nature, which allowed for cross-jurisdictional comparisons between Ontario and Northern Ireland in relation to preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms. Although directed primarily at those involved in pre-service, there is likely to be useful overlap in relation to in-service in these and other similar contexts.

**Objectives**

The objectives of the study were to:

* review current research findings on the status of SEN in teacher preparation programmes in the two jurisdictions;
* identify and analyze the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for new teachers (relative to SEN) from the perspective of current practitioners;
* identify a preferred model of delivery for SEN instruction in pre-service programmes;
* develop guidelines for the content of SEN programmes in pre-service programmes.

**Methods of Investigation and Data Sources**

The study used a mixed-method design combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Supporting this design, Creswell (1994) indicates, “it is advantageous to a researcher to combine methods to better understand a concept being tested” (p.177). Simpson (1992) argues that the most valuable features from both approaches should be incorporated, where appropriate, into research that is to have significance in the field.

The first phase of the research utilized a questionnaire developed from the current literature on preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms. Categories included:

•Demographics

•Types of special need currently teaching

•Preparation for inclusive classrooms in pre-service

•Recommended models of SEN delivery in pre-service

•Recommended curriculum in SEN in pre-service

The purpose was to gather broad-based data from a random sample of practitioners in both jurisdictions for analysis, and for developing questions for further investigation in the second phase. This phase involved a series of focus group interviews with practitioners currently teaching in mainstream contexts. The purpose was to hear the voices of ‘key informants’ (Dexter 1970), who understand the culture and who are willing and able to reflect on it, and to articulate what is occurring relative to their own professional practice.

**Results**

The results suggest that current practitioners in the two jurisdictions do not feel that their teacher education programmes adequately prepared them to teach in inclusive settings. The recommended model of delivery for SEN identified by the participants is a combination of ‘permeation’ or ‘infusion’ where all instructors deal with SEN within subject areas *plus* a required ‘stand alone’ course for all teacher candidates. The second preference is a compulsory ‘stand alone’ course of between 10 and 48 hours. The four top ranked topics for inclusion in the course are: Student characteristics; Behaviour management; Assessment and evaluation; and Legislation dealing with SEN students.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Regardless of educational placement, the most salient variable in educational outcomes for SEN students is the *quality* of instruction received (Swanson, 2001). Twenty years ago, Winzer, (1984, 1985) suggested that good pre-service education in SEN results in more positive attitudes towards inclusion and heightened confidence in meeting the needs of the students. The results of this study suggest, however, that teachers still do not feel adequately prepared to teach in inclusive settings. Included students are more successful when their teachers have the knowledge and the ability to adapt curriculum to meet their needs (Ring & Reetz, 2000). Participants in this study have identified what they believe should comprise pre-service education relative to SEN. Although somewhat idealistic given the pressures involved in teacher education programmes, they have identified areas that should be addressed if we are to ensure that all of our teachers are ready for today’s classrooms. Clearly, a ‘stand alone’ course is essential from their perspective, and where possible this should be combined with relevant SEN input from subject instructors. This model would overcome any difficulties that might arise with the instructors’ varying levels of SEN expertise.

**Educational Significance**

The results of this study will have significant impact on pre-service providers in the area of SEN. It is clear that current practitioners are not satisfied with the SEN input as it currently exists. Their voices will inform the design and delivery of the SEN component of the programme and contribute to the identification of teaching competencies necessary to increase the achievement of students with SEN in regular classes. The results will also inform school-based personnel involved in school-university teacher education partnerships of the kind of practical experiences that would enhance the preparation of our future teachers. The results will also have significance for pre-service policymakers by providing a framework for future SEN courses.

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