

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVITY: PREPARING PRESERVICE TEACHERS FOR DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Teacher education is a field containing significant pressures in curriculum, practicum design and in the roles and relationships with schools. There is no standard approach in teacher education to prepare teachers to teach children with exceptional needs. In Canada, educators estimate that about 15 percent of students have special learning needs (Timmons, 2006). Some universities, in their teacher education programs, offer elective courses on diversity, while others have the subject as a core component of their curriculum. Lupart et al. (2004) highlight the need for teachers and administrators to be better prepared to meet the needs of diverse students in today's classrooms. However, preparing teachers for an inclusive classroom is a complex endeavour. One of the first challenges is the question, who is a diverse learner. Another challenge that the teachers face as they are educated to teach in an inclusive classroom is that many did not graduate from a system that was inclusive, while another challenge is that the educational system often works against promoting inclusive practices. Another area of concern is the lack of diversity among teachers (Finley, 2000). This paper will try to address these questions and explore inclusive practices in relation to teacher education, a vital area of social justice.

KEYWORDS: *Teacher Education, Challenges, Inclusive Education, Diversity, Practice, System*

INTRODUCTION

Teacher education is a field containing significant pressures in curriculum, practicum design and in the roles and relationships with schools. This essay will explore inclusive practices and teacher education, a vital area of social justice. Inclusive education is a relatively new field that became relevant in developed countries in the 1980s and more recently in developing countries. The history of educating children with disabilities has been one of exclusion, institutionalization, and segregation. Through parent and organization advocacy, human rights activists, and statements from international organizations, the landscape has changed. Two key international declarations have been the Salamanca Statement (1994) and more recently the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006. The Salamanca Statement identified inclusive education as the means to achieve Education for All (EFA). Ninety-two countries and twenty-five international organizations signed this important declaration. Over 100 countries have signed the UN Convention, which states in article 24: In realizing this right, States Parties shall ensure: (a) That persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free

and compulsory primary and secondary education on the basis of disability; (b) That persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality, free primary and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live; (c) Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements; (d) That persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education; (e) That effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion. These statements have important implications for teacher education internationally. To prepare teachers for inclusive classrooms requires changes in curriculum, expertise, and practicum placements. We need to prepare teachers adequately to ensure that this notion of education for all is realized.

There is no standard approach in teacher education to prepare teachers to teach children with exceptional needs. In Canada, educators estimate that about 15 percent of students have special learning needs (Timmons, 2006). Some universities, in their teacher education programs, offer elective courses on diversity, while others have the subject as a core component of their curriculum. Lupart et al. (2004) highlight the need for teachers and administrators to be better prepared to meet the needs of diverse students in today's classrooms. However, preparing teachers for an inclusive classroom is a complex endeavour. One of the first challenges is the question, who is a diverse learner? There are learners with different abilities, religions, races, genders, and sexual orientations in our classrooms. Some universities teach a categorization approach to teaching diverse learners. They provide curriculum that prepares teachers to teach children with Down's syndrome, English as a Second Language, behavioral difficulty, and other specific categories. The difficulty with this approach is the sheer number of categories. For example, in Alberta, Canada, there were 56 students in 1950 identified with special learning needs as compared to 77,703 in 2002 (Lupart et al., 2004). Category-based approaches to teaching preservice teachers about disability issues reinforce the idea that children are and should be labelled to be taught effectively. They also perpetuate the stereotypes of the labelled children and do not focus the preservice teacher on essential areas, such as learning needs, attitudes, and different approaches to teaching all children. As global mobility becomes more commonplace, the world is becoming increasingly multicultural, especially in developed countries. Sapon-Shevin and Zollers (1999) highlight the emerging connotations of the word inclusion as it incorporates issues beyond culture and disability and also includes poverty. The researchers note that changes in teacher education ought to encompass philosophy, pedagogy, and advocacy, along with curriculum. They indicate that there has only been a traditional approach to meeting this challenge, offering discrete courses such as multicultural education and/or special education. Again specific courses serve a limited purpose as they typically are survey courses with significant breadth and little depth. The solution is elusive. The demands on teacher education curriculum is significant and includes - literacy, numeracy, technology, social studies, science, art, health, child development, social justice, school parental relations, leadership, and other topics - which are each important but impossible to cover here. The traditional training of special education teachers has changed to ensure that this education be incorporated into regular teacher education programs and often through postgraduate programs.

One of the challenges teachers face as they are educated to teach in an inclusive classroom is that many did not graduate from a system that was inclusive. They are forced to create classrooms that they have only read about rather than ones they have experienced. Even in their experiences, they may have a limited exposure to inclusive practices. The educational system has a variable approach to inclusive classrooms, with many children still educated in segregated classrooms, especially at the middle and secondary level, and pulled out for one-on-one work or remediation at the

elementary level. When these new teachers graduate and enter the teaching profession, they have few role models to help them implement inclusive practices in their classrooms. Jordan and Stanovich (2004) identified characteristics of teachers that are useful for incorporating inclusionary practices into teaching. These include believing that educating children with special needs is their responsibility, teacher efficacy, and inclusionary practices been established at their school. In teacher education programs, preservice teachers need an opportunity to explore their beliefs and biases. If teacher educators do not present curriculum that is infused with inclusionary practices, it will be challenging for new teachers recognize their responsibility to include all learners. The research on teacher education (Nevin et al., 2007) highlights that beliefs and attitudes about inclusion and students with special needs can change if there are opportunities for successful interaction with people with disabilities. This research presents powerful evidence that should guide the practicum planning for preservice teachers. There should be opportunities throughout the teacher education program to interact and form relationships with students from different backgrounds and abilities. Often practicum placements are secured for students based on which teachers will take them; this does not ensure that we are graduating competent teachers who believe in promoting inclusive practices in their classrooms. Mayhew and Grunwald's research (2006) points out that university professors who support issues such as affirmative action are more likely to incorporate diversity-related content into their teaching. As with classroom teachers, the attitudes and beliefs of teacher educators are critical to the transformation of the attitudes of their students. The educational system also often works against promoting inclusive practices. There is a significant trend toward standardized testing and increased standards in schools. We have seen schools ranked based on the results of these standardized tests, with parents choosing schools and schools selecting students based on these results. New teachers are often under pressure to ensure that their classes perform well on these tests, while individualized instruction, differentiated teaching, or teaching outside the curriculum is often discouraged. A significant disconnect then occurs between their teacher education programs and the realities of the system. Another area of concern is the lack of diversity among teachers (Finley, 2000). Classrooms are filled with students of different races, cultures, genders and abilities, and teachers are predominately white, female middle-class and monolingual. They often have a limited personal experience with inter-racial and intercultural interactions and do not know firsthand what it is like to live with a learning difficulty. Mayhew and Grunwald (2006), in examining factors that contribute to university faculty incorporating diversity-related content into their teaching, found that professors of different races were more likely to incorporate diversity-related content into their teaching than white professors. To encourage teachers to incorporate inclusive practices, especially those from the dominant race and culture, experiences in their education programs that connect them with diverse students in their classrooms are needed. Finley (2000) stresses the need to integrate multicultural perspectives into the content and structures of teacher education programs. The same will need to happen in the field of disability, all courses should be infused with the knowledge and understanding to empower teachers to teach subjects such as math and language arts to all learners. This requires teacher educators to be knowledgeable about more than the content of the subject area. Throughout the first postsecondary education degree, teacher educators are prepared in one subject area or content area, such as history or science. Their focus as they enter teacher education is to transform that content knowledge to learner knowledge. The content becomes the vehicle to teach preservice teachers about learning and hopefully diversity is embedded in all we do. Becoming familiar with the field of diversity and inclusion can be a steep learning curve for many teacher educators who have not formally studied these fields. It is incumbent upon them to work with colleagues and ensure that curriculum areas are addressing inclusionary practices. Jordan and Stanovich (2004) found in their work that teachers who implement successful inclusive practices become teachers who advocate and support inclusion. Schools need support systems in place

to ensure teachers can experiment and try new methodologies that focus on supporting all children. These schools, then are ideal for practicum placements for preservice teachers.

There is good reason for teacher education programs to promote inclusive practice in schools, as it leads to better practices for our preservice teachers to model.

Researches (Hawkins, 2007) connect the improved academic performance of students to inclusionary practices. Williams (2002) demonstrates that classrooms with heterogeneous-ability-grouped children have an overall greater academic achievement than homogeneous-ability-grouped children. This type of research needs to be incorporated into teacher education practices, since our ultimate goal is to increase student success in our schools. More research that assesses the academic achievement of all students in inclusive classrooms is required. This research is critical as inclusive practices are advocated internationally. The process of moving toward inclusive settings should be documented and evaluated in a systematic ongoing way. Kabeer (2000) questions whether the concept of inclusive practice, which originated in developed countries, is appropriate for developing countries. With more than one hundred countries signing on to the UN Convention, inclusive education is now a global educational trend. Many countries, such as South Africa, are enabling legislation to ensure that inclusive placements are the norm for all children. The challenge in many countries is to develop teacher education programs that support such school legislation. Many schools in developing countries are under-resourced, understaffed, and challenged in providing education to children. In particular, children with special needs are often totally excluded from the educational, economic, and social system. They are kept at home, still often hidden. On a recent trip to Sri Lanka, this author visited rural communities where children with special needs were kept at home, and families were embarrassed to take their children out into the community due to a lack of understanding and perceived ridicule. In spite of this situation in developing countries, there are examples where advocates make notable gains in inclusive practices. The National Resource Centre for Inclusion in Mumbai, India, has worked diligently to educate schools and have children with special needs accepted and supported. Dyson and Zhang (2004), in a comparative study on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion in Canada and China, found Chinese teachers had a positive attitude toward inclusion and children's well-being. Teacher education programs can learn from how different countries promote inclusive practices in their own programming. It is at the teacher education level that we can begin to influence teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward children from different backgrounds, cultures and abilities. This will require several support systems to be in place. To begin with, the infusion of curriculum with diverse information to support teachers in implementing inclusive practices into their teaching is needed. Correspondingly, carefully selected and researched practicum placements that promote inclusion are necessary. In addition, professional development with schools to support them in moving toward inclusive practices must be continually incorporated. Finally, attention must be paid to ensure preservice teachers spend time with children with different abilities and backgrounds in some capacity in the teacher education program. With the pressures on teachers to teach more math and reading, prepare children for standardized tests, deal with bullying in schools, complete increased paperwork, and to continually upgrade their knowledge and skills, focusing on inclusionary practices could easily drop to the bottom of the priority list. Porath and Jordan state that "we are presently at a crossroad in educating students in all disciplines. Students and teachers find themselves grappling with old experiences and conceptions of education. Many cling to the model of knowledge delivery as the best way to educate" (2004, p. 57). Inclusive practices are not about the transmission of knowledge. They are about involving children, working with their strengths, participating in active learning and peer interaction, and using differentiated curriculum. Hutchinson (2004)

found that preservice teachers, who viewed teaching as interactive and not merely the transmission of knowledge, paid attention to students' individual differences and were open to inclusive practices. Inclusive practice has the potential to transform our classrooms, and allows for vibrant, efficient learning communities that educate all children to emerge. Lenski et al. (2005) stated that textbook coursework in multicultural education has not prepared teachers to work with children from diverse cultures. If such coursework is not effective, then other options must be explored, such as carefully crafted practicum options and infusions into the curriculum. Preservice teachers must become conscious of the importance of attitudes and bias and the only way that will happen is if teacher educators become conscious of their own bias and the impact of their attitudes. Preparing teachers for inclusive settings is not only a curriculum issue, but also a cultural issue. Time must be committed to explore personal cultural beliefs and beliefs about ability, and also to reflect on how these attitudes and beliefs affect our teaching.

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