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Chapter Five

School Principals’ Views of Teaching Standards for Inclusive Education in New Zealand

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The views of school principals inform this chapter. This book is concerned with what teacher educators can learn from multiple insider perspectives to inform teacher education for more inclusive education. School principals were selected because they are considered to be the insiders who can provide one of the most useful perspectives on teacher education for inclusion. Therefore, the focus of this chapter is the views of school principals on initial teacher education that promotes inclusive education in New Zealand. The questions this chapter addresses are:

1. What are the perspectives of school principals to a new teacher education initiative in New Zealand that emphasizes special/inclusive education?
2. How the researchers gathered the insider perspectives of the school principals?
3. What can teacher educators learn from these perspectives?

**Introduction**

New standards for special and inclusive education preparation in teacher education programs are discussed and the need to gain insider perspectives on these is explained. Brief details of the three principals selected for involvement in the study are provided and the five questions they were asked in the interviews are presented. Feedback from the interviews with principals is presented in the form of themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview data along with quotations that illustrate the key aspects of these themes. The chapter then considers issues regarding how the input based on the new standards will be delivered within the teacher education programs at our university and concludes with recommendations for future research on teacher education for inclusive education.

New Zealand has one of most inclusive education systems in the world with less than 1% of children educated in special schools, classes or units in mainstream schools. The 1989 Education Act gave the legal right for all children to attend their local mainstream school from age 5-19 years. In 1996 the Ministry of Education (MoE) introduced a policy called ‘Special Education 2000’ which was intended to bring about the inclusion of all children with SEN in mainstream schools.

The 1989 Education Act also set up self-managing schools, so that New Zealand now has one of the most devolved education systems in the world, with individual schools being governed by Boards of Trustees made up mainly of parents. The only requirement on schools from the MoE regarding children with special education needs (SEN) is a very general one, that schools identify students with special needs and develop and implement teaching and learning strategies to address these needs (MoE, 2009).

When policy regarding inclusive education for children with SEN is compared with that from other countries, it is clear that New Zealand policy for inclusive education is more radical than that in most countries, with an espoused goal of educating *all* children with SEN in mainstream schools. However, when the actual practice of providing for children with SEN in mainstream schools is considered, glaring deficiencies in the New Zealand education system become apparent (Hornby, 2012). One of the most important of these deficiencies is the lack of input on inclusive education for children with SEN in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes. This chapter will focus on principals’ views of how ITE should prepare teachers for inclusive education in New Zealand. It is intended that an analysis of these views will provide useful insights for teacher educators concerned with this task.

The critical role that initial teacher education programs play in facilitating inclusive education for children with SEN has been emphasized by the World Report on Disability (World Health Organization, 2011) and the report on Teacher Education for Inclusion across Europe (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012). The key to this is considering just how teachers can best be prepared to facilitate the learning of all students, including those with SEN, in their classrooms. Therefore, a fundamental objective for teacher education programs is to ensure that each graduate possesses the attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary to support the learning of all the students they teach (Forlin, 2012).

Until recently ITE providers in NZ, mainly universities, have not been required to include specific input on special or inclusive education for children with SEN. However, in a major break from tradition, the New Zealand Teachers Council (2011) recently adopted mandatory requirements for the SEN input into ITE. This was done by adding an appendix that specifically focuses on special and inclusive education to the existing standards that ITE providers require their graduates to develop. In the introduction to this appendix it is stated that, ‘It would be desirable that teacher educators delivering this component of the ITE programme have qualifications, theoretical expertise and practical experience in special (inclusive) education.’(p.2). This is very important as it clarifies the key the role of teacher educators with experience in inclusive and special education in providing this input. The additional standards are:

**Graduating Teacher Standards for Special (Inclusive) Education**

Appendix 2.2 states that, ITE programmes need to ensure that graduating teachers exhibit specific knowledge, attitudes and practices.

***The knowledge and attitudes required are:***

* understanding the likely impact that a disability, behaviour disorder or difficulties in learning might have on a student’s access to and participation in learning
* demonstrating knowledge of disability legislation and educational policies in relation to disability. Policies will include risk assessment as they relate to educational settings for students with disabilities, the requirements of the New Zealand’s obligations under the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the New Zealand Disabilities Strategy.
* analysing the range of learners and special education provisions across New Zealand, features of an inclusive school, school planning teams, the responsibilities of teachers and the community and available services

***The practices required are:***

* applying skills in using curriculum based assessment to identify starting points and reasonable adjustments required to enable students with special education needs to meet syllabus outcomes
* demonstrating how to meet the specific learning needs of students through inclusive education practices, including problem solving processes and application of the concept of reasonable adjustment
* addressing the normal course of children’s language development and the implications of delay or disorder for their learning
* planning, implementing and evaluating programs for the specific learning needs of students
* identifying strategies for collaborating with other professionals, para-professionals, and parents/care-givers to identify learning outcomes for students with special education needs and the reasonable adjustments and learning accommodations required to achieve these
* developing strategies to implement outcomes of the New Zealand Curriculum, and additional literacy and numeracy support
* using assessment and monitoring procedures and data for making instructional decisions
* demonstrating confidence in interacting with students and a commitment to meeting their educational needs*.*

**Gathering the Principals’ Views**

Before these standards are introduced into the re-organized ITE programs in the College of Education at our University it was considered useful to obtain the views of school principals about the new standards for special (inclusive) education. It was decided that the best way to do this was to interview principals at their schools. Principals of three mainstream schools, primary, intermediate and secondary, who were known to have a particular interest in special/inclusive education were selected to be part of the study. The primary school principal has extensive experience of working at schools with a high proportion of children with SEN and is a parent of a young adult with cerebral palsy who attended mainstream schools. The intermediate principal leads a fully inclusive school with all classes being of mixed-ability, including children with special needs, English as a second language learning needs, and those who are gifted. The secondary principal leads a school that has a special needs unit to cater for 20 students with intellectual disabilities, as well as a learning support class of students with mild/moderate learning difficulties, within an otherwise fairly typical New Zealand secondary school.

Each of the principals received a document that presented the new SEN standards, plus the existing standards, and the following list of questions that they were asked to respond to in the interview.

1. What for you as school principal are the most important aspects addressed by this appendix?
2. Is there anything you think should not be there, or should have less emphasis?
3. What aspects are not included, but should be, or are insufficiently covered?
4. How much do you think addressing the standards identified in Appendix 2 will improve teachers’ ability to effectively teach children with SEN?
5. Have you any other comments about the standards themselves or how they should be taught to student teachers?

Interviews were video recorded so that principals’ comments could be played back and key statements and quotations noted later.

**Feedback from the Principals**

A summary of responses from the three principals is presented below, with example comments and quotations indicated by P for primary, I for intermediate, and S for secondary principal.

***Most important aspects of New Standards***

All three principals agreed that the main focus needed to be on practical teaching skills and strategies, for example, ‘Emphasis needs to be on teaching strategies, not philosophy’ (I). This principal also thought it essential that teachers have a good knowledge of evidence-based strategies. He commented that teachers tend not to take up evidence-based practices but use what they have done in the past, but in teacher education there is the opportunity to get these new teachers to learn effective evidence-based practices for teaching children with SEN.

All three principals also agreed that a major need is for teachers to understand the effects of different types of disabilities on children’s learning, as well as the pedagogy required for addressing these. That is, they need to learn how to design and implement programmes for each child with SEN. This is illustrated by the comments, ‘Teaching student teachers to focus on children as individuals is very important, but an overwhelming task.’ (P). Also, ‘Teachers need to know the difference between different disabilities, dyspraxia, dyslexia etc., so lots of specific information is needed.’ (P)

***Less emphasis needed***

Although each principal recognized that theory, history and philosophy has its place in preparing teachers for inclusive practice, two considered that this is of lesser importance than the development of the necessary teaching strategies and specific knowledge about children’s disabilities and learning or behaviour difficulties. One principal stated that teachers need to have a theory and research base of knowledge of special and inclusive education, which includes the history and development of provision in New Zealand, and also to be made aware of the strengths and weaknesses of current provision. (S)

***More emphasis needed***

One principal stated more emphasis is needed on helping teachers to develop the understanding and skills necessary to work in partnership with parents of children with SEN. She said, ‘It is incredibly important to be able to work with families, so you need to teach students this, which is big ask.’ (P). The same principal also pointed out that individualized educational programs (IEPs) are not specifically mentioned in the Appendix. She commented that IEPs are a very important part of the education of children with SEN, so that the skills that teachers require for this are very important. She concluded that IEPs provide the basis for putting an appropriate teaching plan in place that can be reviewed in order to evaluate progress, which is very important.

Another principal suggested that the new ITE input should include an awareness of the continuum of models for providing for children with SEN in schools (S). For example, in his school provision ranges from a mainstream class with teacher-aid support, through learning a support class, to separate classes for children with more severe SEN. He considers that trainee teachers need to develop an awareness that there are different ways of working with children with SEN, even within the same school.

One principal considered that more emphasis should be placed on teaching as a problem-solving process, so that teachers can come up with strategies to deal with problems they are presented with, in order to help children with SEN overcome the inevitable hurdles they will face. ‘Teachers need to see themselves as problem-solvers, not coming up with simple knee-jerk reactions but looking more deeply.’ (P)

She also made the point that student teachers need experience with children with SEN in order to build their expertise and therefore confidence in dealing with them. They also need to learn how to write reports on children with SEN, for parents and other professionals.

***Will it improve teachers’ competency regarding SEN?***

The three principals all thought that implementation of the requirements of the new appendix would bring about positive change in ITE. One considered that, ‘It is an essential part of our teaching practice that has now been recognized by making these standards mandatory.’ (S) Also that, ‘It will make a big difference, in helping all teachers to address the needs of children with SEN, which is one of the biggest challenges in secondary schools.’ (S)

Another principals considered that it would, ‘… raise awareness that children with SEN are part of the classroom and thereby widen teachers’ knowledge about disabilities (P). The third principal thought that, ‘… it will make a huge difference because every class has children with special needs in it.’ Also that, ‘The better teachers are at adapting for individual needs the better teachers they are.’ (I)

***How the new standards should be taught***

All three principals considered it important that professional learning about teaching students with SEN be provided by lecturers who have experience of teaching children with SEN. One principal suggested that it is also important to involve experienced current practitioners to teach on the courses and to have practica that expose trainee teachers to effective teaching of children with SEN in schools (S). Another thought it was important for them to spend time in special schools and in mainstream classes where teacher-aides or specialist teachers are involved, to see how these professionals work with children with SEN and mainstream teachers (P). This principal also suggested that, in the training, students be presented with various scenarios of children with disabilities, ‘…asking how would you support this child, what would you do first, is there testing needing to be done, do you need to visit the child’s home?’ (P)

The third principal made the point that teachers need to know how to deal with children with SEN in the context of a class with typically over twenty other children, and suggested initial teacher preparation nurture strategies for dealing with children with SEN, but also know how to deal with the rest of the class at the same time. ITE lecturers need to be able to demonstrate how teaching strategies work in mainstream school classrooms (I). This principal also considered that the input on special and inclusive education should be compulsory for all students, not an optional course, as had sometimes occurred in the past in New Zealand.

**What can teacher educators learn from these perspectives?**

It has previously been stated that, in New Zealand, ‘The integration of inclusive education within pre-service teacher education programs remains both contentious in conception and problematic in its execution (O’Neill, Bourke & Kearney, 2009, p.590).’ The complex nature of holistic inclusive teacher education has also emerged through the perspectives of the school principals who were part of this research study. The major messages that come from these insider perspectives are also evident in the research literature on teacher education for inclusive education, including: the need for state of the art pedagogy on effective evidence-based teaching practice (Forlin, 2012; Gurung & Schwartz, 2009; Mitchell, 2008; ); the need to understand the continuum of support in schools (Farrell, 2009; Hodkinson & Vickerman, 2008); the crucial need to understand the IEP process (Farrell, 2008; Jacklin, Griffiths & Robinson, 2006; Ward, 2004); the need to appreciate that inclusive teaching involves ongoing multi-professional problem solving that includes parents as essential partners (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Hornby, 2011; Soan, 2006); and the value of case study learning for initial teacher training (Brownlee & Carrington, 2000; Scanion & Boyle, 2009).

The teacher preparation course that this chapter explores acknowledges these important issues raised by school principals. However, there are two additional issues that relate to how courses are offered through initial teacher education programs at this university First, there is the debate about whether inclusive education for children with SEN should be taught as part of a course that focuses on social inclusion, that is on the attitudes and values required for effectively including a wide diversity of children within mainstream schools. Or, alternatively, whether the focus on inclusive education for children SEN needs to be specifically addressed in a separate course.

Second, there is the debate regarding infusion or permeation of SEN input by all lecturers who teach in ITE programs, versus having stand-alone courses that are taught by experts on inclusive and special education. The ‘permeation’ or ‘embedded’ model is an approach that incorporates specific activities for inclusive education training in a general education subject (Pearson, 2007). However, Avramidis & Norwich (2002) caution that this approach requires much planning, collaboration and monitoring. This ‘content infused approach’ is under-researched (Loreman, 2010) but does have some support from studies by Voltz (2003) and Woloshyn, Bennett & Berrill (2003). Florian and Rouse (2009) argue that separate modules or units on special education in initial teacher education can serve to ‘reinforce *the sense of separation that characterises special education and leads to the belief that such children are the responsibility only of those who have undertaken specialist courses’* (p. 596). Nevertheless, the approach adopted by this College of Education considers it best to combine both separate courses for some foundational knowledge on special and inclusive education, with a collaborative approach that require all lecturers involved in ITE to work together to infuse knowledge about SEN and related teaching strategies into all courses.

Currently, a stand-alone course with a focus on the theory and practice of inclusive education for children with SEN is being developed for delivery to all students in their final year of pre-service education at the University of Canterbury. The goal of this course is to ensure that student teachers meet the graduating teacher standards relevant to special and inclusive education and to ensure that students with special education needs participate optimally in education and leave school equipped with the skills necessary to fulfill their potential (Ministry of Education, 2010). The team of lecturers teaching courses on inclusive and special education at our university consider that the content needs include the skills highlighted in Appendix 2.2 and covered by texts on meeting special needs of a diverse group of learners in inclusive schools (Stakes and Hornby, 2000; Salend, 2011).

**Conclusion**

It has proved very useful to gather views, insights and suggestions from principals of primary, intermediate and secondary schools regarding implementation of the teacher standards for SEN and inclusive education to be introduced into ITE programs in New Zealand in 2014. Gathering these views was very efficient and manageable with interviews lasting around thirty minutes each. The interviews raised some important issues that are discussed in the literature and provided the authors many useful ideas that support the development of meaningful special and inclusive education input in all ITE at the University of Canterbury.

However, it is realized that the research project described in this chapter was a very small-scale study with simple methodology. Clearly, further research is needed involving more rigorous methodology and larger numbers and types of participants in order to tap the wealth of insider perspectives which can provide useful feedback to inform teacher education for inclusive education. Priority areas for research are considered to be: how the SEN/inclusive education input is implemented in practice; its effectiveness in providing beginning teachers with the skills and knowledge they need; and evaluation of the impact of teacher education for inclusive education on pupils with SEN in schools.

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