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The inclusion of students with disabilities in secondary schools: The voices of 20 North Queensland teachers

Thesis submitted by

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James Cook University

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The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Human* (1999), the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997), the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics. Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001), and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee (approval number H 1800).

Susan Kuhl

Date

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Dr Helen Boon as my second supervisor and a former secondary school teacher, you asked the challenging questions which forced me to clarify what I was investigating.

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Finally, I wish to acknowledge the support of staff and postgraduate students at the School of Education, James Cook University. The support gained from the Faculty during the long years of part time study has been immeasurable for which I am truly appreciative.

Abstract

This qualitative study examines the issues 20 North Queensland secondary teachers face when students with disabilities are included in the school. Current educational policy in Australia has placed a strong emphasis on including students with disabilities in their neighbourhood schools. What began with primary schooling has now flowed on to secondary. Consequently all teachers now play a role in helping students with and without disabilities to develop and learn. This change makes it especially critical to investigate the viewpoints of teachers working with students with disabilities in secondary schools.

Three questions helped guide the inquiry. The first relates to the attitudes and professional beliefs of the teachers. The second focuses on the challenges faced by these teachers when including students with disabilities. The third explores whether the perceived challenges when working with students with disabilities add to perceived stress levels.

During the study the researcher was both a secondary school special education teacher and the mother of a son with disabilities. This made her an insider researcher. To assist authentic inquiry while working as an insider researcher, the researcher kept a journal for systematic reflection on identities, roles and relationships. The 20 mainstream and special education teachers in the study worked in one of two urban or two rural schools. Data collection began with a short written questionnaire to obtain personal biographical information. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted in order to gather information on the teachers' experiences when including students with disabilities. The themes, which emerged from the analysis of the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, were correlated with the reflective journal and the personal experience of the researcher.

The results of the study revealed that the majority of teachers interviewed were supportive of the philosophical ideals of an inclusive approach. However, they had mixed feelings about including students with disabilities in secondary school classrooms. It was obvious that the teachers were strongly influenced by the nature of the disabilities, the educational problems they would encounter and their teaching area. In spite of their unease, there was recognition of the potential for social, academic and professional benefits for students with and without disabilities as well as for staff.

The concerns expressed by the teachers focused on structural, curricular, instructional, professional efficiency and expectancy factors. The culture of the secondary school often meant there was a clash of expectations between the mainstream teachers and the special education teachers, which centered on the nature of teaching and learning within the classroom. There was a dissonance between a collectivist focus on standards and individualist focus on needs. Increasing workloads, the multiplicity of work roles and the restrictions of the school timetable were especially identified as hindering teacher collaboration. Access to ongoing professional development contributed to the challenge as a number of the teachers in the study had limited pre-service knowledge of the impact of different disabilities on learning.

The teachers in the study believed that inclusion in the secondary school environment continues to be complex and challenging; highlighting what appeared to be a large gap between rhetoric and reality. There were conflicting views about whether the challenges involved in the inclusion of students with disabilities added to existing stress levels. However the words ‘frustrated’, ‘discouraged’, ‘overwhelmed’, ‘anxious’, ‘tired’ and ‘exhausted’ were repeated often in the interviews. Analysis of transcripts revealed that the changes attributed to the inclusion process, the socially unacceptable behaviour of specific students with disabilities and the lack of support, particularly in rural areas, had caused a considerable impact on the teachers in the study personally and on their teaching practices.

While it is not possible to generalise from the qualitative results of interviews of this small sample of teachers, a range of cautious observations can be made about the teacher’s role in the inclusion of students with disabilities in the secondary schools. Responsibility for students with disabilities remains a complicated professional issue with mainstream and special education teachers. The difficulties with collaboration and support meant that when students with disabilities were included in the classroom, many teachers in this study expressed serious concern at the ever-increasing demands of their work.

The study concludes with a number of recommendations for practice and future research with regards to successfully including students with disabilities in secondary schools and for the preparation of secondary school teachers for inclusive schooling.

Publications

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To whom it may concern

Re: Join authorship of conference paper and journal article

During Susan Kuhl's enrolment in the Doctor of Philosophy I joint authored the following papers with her:

Kuhl, S., & Pagliano, P. (2009) *Changes in the Secondary School: the transition of students with special needs from the primary school to the secondary school classroom*. Paper presented at the AASE/PASS Conference Transitions Facilitating Change for Students with Special Needs, Melbourne Victoria. Retrieved April 9, 2010 from http://www.aase.edu.au/AASE/index.php?option=com_rokdownloads&view=file&Itemid=196&id=348:changes-in-the-secondary-school

Kuhl, S., & Pagliano, P. (in press). Attitudes of secondary and special education teachers to inclusion of students with disabilities in secondary schools. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*.

My involvement in each paper was less than 20%.

Yours sincerely

Paul Pagliano PhD
Associate Professor, Education

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