



The Importance of Educating Student Teachers in Inclusive Education

A disability perspective

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ABSTRACT

In schools today inclusion involves a challenge to attitudes and expectations within educational communities.

The New Zealand Disability Strategy (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001), is a guide for government action to promote a more inclusive society. Out of its 15 Objectives, Objective 1 encourages and educates the community and society to understand, respect and support disabled people. Objective 3 looks at providing the best education for disabled people. Objective 5 fosters leadership by disabled people. The summary states that New Zealand will be fully inclusive when it's 'a society that highly values our lives and continually enhances our full participation'. Educators must be committed to *The New Zealand Disability Strategy* because its main focus is about a fully inclusive community.

Often, through role models, strong messages challenge negative assumptions and prove that there are alternative ways of looking at the world. Generally those who are the most critical to implementing inclusion, such as teachers, are introduced to the notion by individuals for whom it is a theoretical, rather than a lived concept.

This article involves a sharing of experiences of two women who are involved in teaching inclusion at tertiary level, who live with physical disabilities and who have proved this to be a powerful combination in changing attitudes.

Storied Experience

Keywords

Classroom practices, disabilities, inclusive education, special education, teacher attitudes, teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

Parents and educators continue to express concern about the provision of education and ongoing staff development for the diverse classrooms of the 21st century, and in particular with relation to disabled students (Morton & Gordon, 2006). The question continues to be asked: how can teachers come to understand the importance and value of an inclusive classroom? This understanding can occur as part of ongoing professional development or it can be part of tertiary education of teachers.

In this paper we argue that inclusive education is an important part of any initial teacher education programme. Teachers must understand the issues associated with supporting any child with a special need. It is vital that beginning and student teachers are challenged to assess their own attitudes and values before they can get the correct messages across to fully understand the inclusive perspective. As Lunn quoted when reviewing Linton's writing (who herself is an internationally renowned writer, consultant and public speaker on disability issues) '... it is the way we have been taught to think about disability, or taught to ignore disability, that has played a part in perpetuating a divided society' (Lunn, 2003, p. 151).

At the University of Waikato, School of Education, we are members of the teaching team for the compulsory Inclusive Education paper and we are two women who are qualified and experienced teachers and who also live with congenital physical disabilities. In this paper we, Wendy Neilson and Ashlie Brink, share our perceptions and understanding of how our lived experience adds value and impact to our stories and experiences. We aim to emphasise the importance and relevance of inclusion and to show how everyone can reach their full potential. Our message promotes to future teachers the principle that all children in their classrooms, irrespective of their abilities are worthy of the teacher's time and attention and must be provided with the opportunity to reach their full potential. The message to children with disability is that they too can achieve whatever they set their minds to.

OUR STORIES

When Wendy was born with a congenital disability her parents were encouraged by medical professionals to leave her in Wilson Home (an institutional setting) and "get on" with their lives. They would not accept this and throughout Wendy's childhood she was encouraged to strive to achieve all she set out to. Wendy always believed she would be an independent career woman but that she would never get into a relationship. She successfully achieved and balanced both. At the end of her 7th form (year 13), Wendy applied to become a teacher, but her application was declined as the selection panel believed that she would not cope. After this set back, she tried different study options but when she was

about 22, made a second attempt to gain entrance into teacher training with the aim of teaching in a hospital school. She was accepted immediately, qualified with a Diploma of Teaching, and gradually completed her Bachelor and later her Master of Education. Wendy has two children and four grandchildren. She takes a leadership role in many national disability groups and firmly believes she lives the reality of all that the Inclusive Education paper, that she contributes to, advocates.

Ashlie too, was born with a congenital disability, but this was only diagnosed at two years of age as the doctors believed her parents were neurotic and in their words “typical first time parents”. Ashlie, who completed all her schooling in South Africa, was the only student with a visible, physical and long term disability attending her local primary school, despite professional educators’ pleas for her to attend a special school for people with physical disabilities. Ashlie was compelled to attend a special secondary school, but firmly believes it was to her advantage and has made her the strong person she is today.

Like Wendy, Ashlie has always wanted to work with children in a hospital setting, ideally as a paediatrician, but realistically as a teacher. She too has completed her Diploma of Teaching, Bachelor of Education and a Master of Special Education. Ashlie is also a member of various national disability groups and believes strongly that, as an educator in a tertiary setting, she can make a difference to the lives of children with special needs through the students she teaches in her Inclusive Education classes at the University of Waikato.

ATTITUDES

The literature indicates very clearly that attitudes present the biggest barrier for people with disabilities (Ballard, 1994; Davis, 1997; Hillyer, 1993; Munford, 1994; Woodhill, 1994). It is the negative attitudes of individuals that so often create the barriers for those out in the community who experience the joys and challenges of diversity. ‘People’s assumptions and expectations about disabled people often form the biggest barriers’ (Disabled Persons Assembly, 2004, p. 8). It is imperative that in today’s world we create awareness amongst children in classrooms and those who teach them, and that everyone deserves to be recognised and valued for their individuality and diversity. The United Nations (2007) emphatically states that it is not one’s disability that hinders full and effective participation in society, but rather it is the attitudinal and environmental barriers. Disabled people seek to be fully included in all aspects of society and the economy and thus, it is essential that children are taught from an early age that like most people, disabled people just want to live everyday lives (Disabled Persons Assembly, 2004). It is this principle that underpins what we teach but more than this, it is a principle that we live by as women with disabilities. For our students it is more than rhetoric, it is reality.

LEGISLATION

New Zealand legislation and policy on equity and rights for people with disability includes the *Human Rights Act* (1993), *The Education Act* (1989), *Building Act* (1991), *NZ Building Code 4121* and the *Disability Strategy* (Minister for Disability

Issues, 2001). One of the most relevant and significant documents for people with disabilities in New Zealand today is the *Disability Strategy: Making a world of difference*. This strategy aims to eliminate barriers wherever they exist. It is a framework that is set to ensure that government departments and their agencies consider and consult with people with disability before making decisions.

The *Disability Strategy* has 15 objectives. However, the most applicable in this context are:

- Objective 1 which encourages and educates for a non-disabling society;
- Objective 2 ensures the rights of disabled people;
- Objective 3 looks at providing the best education for disabled people and within this theme are eight aims; and
- Objective 5 fosters leadership by disabled people. (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001)

The summary of the *Disability Strategy* (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001) proposes that New Zealand will be fully inclusive when it is ‘a society that highly values our lives and continually enhances our full participation’ (p. 1). Again, we are living this reality as members of the team focusing on inclusive education, and it is essential that we are committed to the *Disability Strategy* because its main focus is about having a fully inclusive community in the future. Slee (2001) emphasises that those who argue for social justice in education should continue to validate the ideas of justice in education for disabled people.

The New Zealand *Education Act* (1989) enables “all” children from 5 years of age, the right to attend their local school until the end of the year in which they turn 20 (Department of Education, 1988). Within this Act, children with special education needs have the same rights to enrol and to be educated at state schools as other students. This has created challenges for schools, teachers and students. Prior to the Act, an increasing number of children with special education needs had been “mainstreamed” into New Zealand classrooms, based on the assumption that they would “fit” in without any major adjustment to meet their special education needs (Moore et al., 1999). Slee (2001) maintains that schools were never really meant for everyone, but inclusion speaks to the protection of rights of citizenship for all. In 1998 the Ministry of Education developed the *Special Education 2000* policy framework where the main focus was on inclusion (Ministry of Education, 1998). The aim of the policy was to develop schools to fit, nurture and support the education and social needs of every student (Moore et al., 1999). Currently the Special Education 2000 policy (Ministry of Education, 1998) guides teachers, pupils and parents towards inclusion with the ultimate aim, ‘... to achieve, over the next decade, a world class inclusive education system that provides learning opportunities of equal quality to all students’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 5).

That decade is nearly over.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Initial teacher education in the 21st century must be comprehensive enough to fully equip an individual to meet the opportunities and challenges of the inclusive classroom and school. It is essential that those designing and delivering these programmes as well as those receiving them, understand the complexities of individual difference in the classroom (Morton & Gordon, 2006).

New Zealand is a country of approximately four million people with a range of state supported and a number of privately operated teacher education institutions and a number of privately operated education providers. Students from some of these organisations receive limited coverage, sometimes only three hours of a three year paper, in inclusive education (Morton & Gordon, 2006). Some providers offer no direct content in inclusive education, while others, such as the University of Waikato, offer a single compulsory full paper on the topic. Slee (2001) acknowledges that 'we should strive against the notion that compulsory special education units for trainee teachers is better than nothing' (p. 175). Where there is little coverage of diversity in the classroom during their teacher education, we have had personal feedback from many teachers that they feel lost, totally overwhelmed and totally unprepared when they face children with specific learning and behavioural needs.

Wylie's (2000) review of the *Special Education 2000* policy recommended all teacher education providers be required to incorporate inclusive education papers in their core training. In addition, she recommended the appointment of a coordinator in every school to provide ongoing support and professional development, to keep resources up to date, and to network with other educational professionals and organisations. These recommendations have not been implemented (O'Brien & Ryba cited in Fraser, Moltzen & Ryba, 2005).

At the School of Education at the University of Waikato, the compulsory Inclusive Education paper covers a wide and varied range of student diversity in its content. The focus is on encouraging the student teachers to value difference and to celebrate diversity. As is true of all areas of teaching, teacher passion and commitment is a crucial component in determining how the learners engage with the content. However, effective teachers also know their subject matter well. Therefore, in essence mathematicians are suited to teach mathematics, and an artist, art. In the same manner, the perspectives and experiences of those who know the realities of inclusion are well placed to advocate and educate about how to include. Unlike curriculum subjects, inclusion is not an area that a classroom teacher can focus on for an hour a day. Each student teacher is challenged to examine their own attitudes and consider how, as leaders of the classroom, they can influence children's understanding and acceptance of diversity of difference. Knowing that students and some teachers have developed techniques for dealing with students with special needs through special education practices will make regular teachers more inclusive (Slee, 2001).

ROLE MODELS

As tertiary educators, we believe that teachers hold the future in their hands. Teachers generally are the role models who influence how children see the world and how they will react to it. It is imperative in today's world that we prepare children to value and celebrate the diversity that they will experience in the classroom and the world, when they become adults. As we prepare the teachers of the future, it is vital that we guide them to have 'both a concern for equity and recognition of diversity' (McKay, 2002, p. 162).

In so many areas, whether it be sport, media or education, the value of role models is acknowledged as a very effective and a very powerful way of getting a message across. Positive role models show how challenges can be overcome and how people can achieve great things. Often through role models, strong messages challenge negative assumptions and demonstrate that there are alternative ways of looking at the world.

As a child with a disability growing up in the 1950s and 60s, there were several role models that Wendy felt had a real impact on how she saw the world. Among these people were Helen Keller, June Opie, Douglas Bader and Theodore Roosevelt. Wendy can remember their stories inspired her to feel that the sky was the limit and that any barriers she felt might stop her aiming high were all in her own mind. These people all had significant disabilities that had not stopped them becoming high achievers.

Ashlie does not remember having such role models when she grew up in South Africa. She was always encouraged by her family to try everything and anything she wanted to as she was the only one who knew her own limits. However, as a young child Ashlie was inspired by a movie based on a true story called "Caroline". Caroline was from a very wealthy family and was never encouraged to do anything for herself because she had cerebral palsy. She wore callipers on her legs and was extremely spoiled and pampered not because of her family's wealth, but because of her disability this was compensated for with gifts. Caroline loved books, but could not read, this was perceived as impossible for a young girl with a disability. She was never taught how to read because, in her day, people with disabilities were not "teachable". It was her 24-hour caregiver who secretly taught her to read because she would be dismissed for trying to teach their daughter – she was "sick" and it was not fair to get her hopes up and to believe she could amount to anything. However, Caroline's caregiver made her believe she could do anything with her life, despite what her parents said. Caroline went on to become a school teacher and is today a principal at a top American secondary school.

For the child in the classroom who lives with the challenges of diversity, a teacher with the right positive and accepting attitude can make or break the learning experience for that individual. If that teacher is a person who lives with disability the impact of them "being there and doing that" sets very positive impressions, which can have class and school wide implications. Creating positive attitudes can remove barriers so that each child can have a much better chance to reach their maximum learning potential. As women with disabilities,

teaching the topic of inclusion, the students can and do ask us about any issues and concerns they may have about teaching in an inclusive classroom and we also use our lived experience to help explain how it can be in the classroom.

What better way can the objectives of the *Disability Strategy* (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001) and government recommendations be met than by encouraging people with disabilities to train as teachers? When we engage in lectures and tutorials with our student teachers our passion and commitment to what we are talking about speaks for itself. The students understand that we speak from the heart and from the “power of knowing” and they value that perspective. It is very important to state the rest of the teaching team come from a considerable background of experience and depth and are absolutely committed to the philosophy and importance of inclusion. It is just that for Wendy and Ashlie, theirs is a lived reality.

WHEN WORKING WITH OUR STUDENT TEACHERS

In our compulsory paper the student teachers are challenged to become aware of the range and diversity of the children that may comprise their classroom. The issue is that they will have to be prepared to teach children from different racial, cultural and ethnic groups, different levels of ability and disability and different socio-economic backgrounds, different behavioural expectations, or children who live with abuse. Nearly always, the student teachers express fear and concern about how they will cope with such diversity in their future classrooms. As part of their preparation these future teachers will need to become familiar with the range of syndromes, disorders and disabilities that constitute the population of students with special needs (Slee, 2001). However, probably more importantly, their attitudes are challenged, they also consider various behavioural and learning strategies, cover New Zealand educational policy, look at the value of collaboration, using Individual Education Plans and the impact of sensory challenges. This paper also looks at the specific needs of Māori learners (Macfarlane, 2004) and the challenges of children with special abilities (Moltzen & McAlpine, 1994).

Feedback from beginning teachers who have previously completed this paper highlight that they constantly reflect back to their Inclusive Education paper and value our straight-up approach to disability and the realistic examples we are able to offer as well as what is deemed politically correct and what is not. In the Inclusive Education paper we deal with the realities, give them simple coping strategies and help them to understand that their own attitudes have a significant impact on how they could be effective and caring teachers in their own classrooms. The way the teacher deals with every child in his or her classroom is a role model for the rest of the class and the way each child might respond to his or her peers. It is so important that teachers never forget this. Many teachers who have graduated from the University of Waikato’s initial teacher education programmes have expressed how valuable the Inclusive Education paper has been for them (student feedback, 2007).

When preparing teachers of the future, our prime interest and responsibility as teaching staff relates to how children

who personally experience diversity, or special needs, can most benefit from how we prepare their teachers. There is no empirical evidence to support our perspective, but there is qualitative feedback from teachers in the field which supports our contribution. For example, with some Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) they emphasised that during their own teacher education, classroom diversity and children’s special needs had not always been addressed. They reported from their work with teachers in the classroom that teachers’ attitudes have an extremely powerful impact on each child and the atmosphere and attitude of acceptance in the classroom. This in turn affects the child’s self esteem and confidence and consequently their learning potential (Macfarlane, 2004).

If a child experiences diversity and difference it can have a real impact on their self-esteem, confidence, whether they are able to set goals, how they see themselves in their own world and whether they can plan for their future with confidence. This is borne out in the early years when most youngsters have not been influenced by negative events and children tend to just accept their peers with no questions asked. As children mature and listen and watch the world around them, so they are influenced to see things differently. This is where the teacher can have such a big influence by creating positive role models of acceptance and by valuing each and every member in the classroom, and by not tolerating any behaviour that is negative. For the child who lives with diversity, this helps them to feel they are valued individuals, achievers in their class, or just another individual where everyone has a place.

CONCLUSION

Although the philosophy, focus and intent of inclusion in our schools today is challenging and changing attitudes and expectations of all the students it serves, it still has a long way to go before those involved in education are committed to valuing the diversity of every child in the classroom. If we are to celebrate and value inclusion in the wider community, the classrooms of today need to be the models of the world for our future. Teachers must be prepared to set the example of acceptance along with valuing each and every classroom member.

There is an obligation for teachers to embrace and value the diversity of every child in their classroom. However, it is the attitude of the teacher that most strongly impacts on how every child is valued.

In New Zealand today, and looking into the future, teacher education must continue to develop a strong inclusive focus, and have this reflected in all teacher education programmes throughout the country. To enhance and value this, the teacher education providers must encourage and support more people with disability to train as teachers because these are the individuals who can best show how people with disability are more like everyone rather than different. If these teachers can then go on to be part of an inclusive education teaching team for beginning and student teachers, they can then also add the value of their own lived experience.

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