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- Collaborative teacher training for special and general educators: Rationale and recurring themes
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# Teachers, Attitudes, Inclusion, and the Curriculum

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This study is an exploration of the attitudes of regular class teachers to the inclusion of students with challenging needs into their classrooms. Six elementary teachers were interviewed individually. Qualitative analysis for categories of response was conducted.

Categories generated related to: (a) perception of teacher role in integration; (b) concerns of regular teachers; (c) definition of successful integration; (d) primarily responsible individual; (e) integrated or segregated preference. In general, participants experienced difficulty in articulating their roles in integration. A particular focus of concern was bringing included students up to the level of the curriculum, while a second was need for modifications. The curriculum was regarded as the controlling agent in instruction for all students. Resource teachers, rather than regular class teachers, were viewed as being responsible for included students. Segregated placement was seen as superior to inclusion.

Implications are drawn for teacher development at the preservice stage and at the inservice level. Teacher educators and field leaders are seen to share responsibility for preparing teachers adequately for their roles with included students.

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Inclusion in regular classrooms of students with challenging academic and/or social needs is an increasing educational practice. This change in educational practice rises from the fact that many parents, educators, and others view segregation of children as a failed educational experiment. They believe special placement has not achieved its promise for the great majority of students with challenging needs. Given research evidence of lack of superior effect for segregated education and growing appreciation of the value of bringing all types of learners together in the regular classroom (Baker, 1994; Carlberg & Kavale, 1980; Erwin, 1993; Wang & Baker, 1985-86), those responsible for placement decisions are directing more and more students to regular classrooms.

However, inclusion is a controversial practice for many educators, most specifically those regular classroom teachers who are expected to accomplish it on a daily basis. Research over the past indicates that regular teachers are cautious, to say the least, with regard to accepting responsibility for students with disabilities. Reference to this reserve has been made by authorities such as by Hardman, Drew, Egan, and Wolf (1990) who suggest that "the integration of exceptional students into a regular education school and/or classroom setting may be met with

frustration, anger or refusal on the part of teachers" (pp. 66-67). This suggestion draws on a string of research findings such as those of Bradfield, Brown, Kaplan, Rickert, and Stanard (1973) that classroom programs will be diluted by integration, of Vacc and Kirst (1977) that classrooms will be disrupted, of Gersten, Walker, and Darch (1988) that teacher time will be a problem, and of Minke, Bear, Deemer, and Griffin (1996) that regular class teachers believe special classes to be stronger placements for students with special needs.

A less completely dark picture with regard to teacher attitudes has been provided by Bunch, Lupart, and Brown (1997) who studied educator attitudes in Canadian school systems. Bunch et al. found that regular classroom teachers, administrators, special education resource teachers, and even teachers in segregated classes believe that inclusion brings social and academic value to both regular and included students. Concerns related to workload, teacher preparation, and administrative leadership, however, weigh against values teachers find.

As experience with inclusion builds, it becomes increasingly apparent that successful inclusion is not a question of its fundamental practicality. The large number of teachers, schools, and school systems now engaged in inclusion suggests

that resistance is related more to teacher attitude, than to whether the practice is sound and possible. Why do many teachers resist inclusive practice while others find it manageable and effective?

### Present Study

The discussion presented here focuses on this question. Views toward integration, the term used in most school systems for placing students with exceptionalities in regular classrooms, were probed through individual interviews. Participants included six teachers (T1 to T6), all in different elementary schools in the same school system. All had a minimum of three years of experience in regular classrooms. All were integrating children with mild to moderate disabilities in their classrooms with the support of specialized resource teachers.

A pre-designed set of questions guided each interview. Follow-up questions were introduced as appropriate. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Interview length varied from 20 to 30 minutes. Interview comments were submitted to qualitative analysis and categories composed of similar points were established. Categories were:

- Perception of teacher role in integration.
- Concerns of regular teachers.

- Definition of successful integration.
- Primarily responsible professional.
- Integrated or segregated preference.

### Perception of Regular Teacher Role in Integration

The regular classroom teachers in this study experienced considerable difficulty articulating their roles in integration. Rather than providing direct responses to the question probing this area, teachers tended to describe the types of students with which they worked or to discuss their relationships with resource personnel.

#### *Types of students.*

*Interviewer:* Can you tell me about your role in integration in the school?

*T1:* Okay. Within the class itself you have a wide variety of students. You have your so-called regular class and then those who would integrate in would be your English as a Second Language, your special students, your learning disabled, and gifted. So you have a wide range.

*T3:* I teach a regular grade

three class, but, I guess, first of all, the philosophy at this school is that even if the kids do need some special education assistance, they're still integrated in the regular classroom. So, we have two special education classes as well.

They're called language classes or LD classes. So they're kids that have some sort of language disability.

*Relationship with resource teacher.*

T2: Well, I sort of co-ordinate the curriculum with the special education teachers because we are not here for them to do their own thing and I do mine. So they follow my curriculum except that they do it in a different way.

T4: I would say that I hardly have one (a role) any more. He (the special education teacher) used to stop in with me and we'd have little meetings once in a while, just to touch base where we are. At the beginning he hoped that he was following the same program, maybe at a different rate, or he'd pick what was the important focus. But now it's totally separate.

In sum, these regular classroom teach-

ers were unable to describe their role in integration. The majority simply referred to categories of exceptionality assigned to students integrated into their classrooms. The label assigned to each student appeared to define the student for the teachers. Two spoke of their responsibility to set the curriculum and the responsibility of a resource teacher to design adaptations for integrated students. As will be seen, the regular curriculum, the need to honour it, and the inability of some students to meet its requirements were controlling deterrents to including students.

*Concerns of Regular Teachers*

The question "What kinds of challenging situations do you sometimes find yourself in as a result of integration?" drew forth a variety of concerns. These centered on having sufficient time to address the needs of integrated students, preparation of students to meet the academic demands of higher grades, and dealing effectively with behaviour. Concerns were not clearly separated, but all drew in aspects of dealing with the curriculum. Additional complexity may be seen in the intertwining of other, less central, concerns.

*Time factor.*

Teachers perceived integrative practice as demanding time they did not have. To accomplish successful integration, that is,

to teach the curriculum to all students at acceptable levels, teachers felt they had to form a one-on-one teaching relationship with included students to the cost of regular students. As well, they would need to spend additional time programming and adapting materials for included students.

*T3:* It is challenging because you've got, you know, 27, which is what I have most of the day. It's a big class for grade three as it is, and then to have four kids that need a modified program for math and language, it's busy. It's a busy day for me because, really, a few of these kids won't do anything unless I sit down with them and I just don't have the whole day to sit with them, because I've got 23 other kids that also deserve some attention.

*T2:* In the non-written part it's not too challenging because the special children have their difficulties in their written work...take an example. In Social Studies we are doing mapping. With the special education students, they just could not follow instructions...I find it very difficult because of the number of special education students. I have to spend extra time on every unit I'm doing.

At the base of concern regarding time appeared to be the belief that teachers had to spend extra time with included students in order to teach them as much content as possible to bring them along. To do this teachers had to devote more time to them than to other students. Teachers did not see that it was possible to devote a proportionate amount of time to each student, or to implement other strategies such as volunteer assistants, or peer tutoring to meet the need for more time. They, personally, had to increase the learning of included students as much as possible.

*Meeting expectations of higher grades.*

This belief affected transition to secondary school. Intermediate grade teachers appeared to view their role as one of catching students up to regular class norms for achievement and work habits in preparation for high school. The restorative model of cure and catch up was quite apparent in contrast to the more contemporary belief of moving each student along as far as possible and relying on future teachers to accept the students where they were and continue the process of education from there. The curriculum was regarded as fixed and to be mastered for each grade and not as a flexible guide to instruction.

*T1:* I didn't know exactly what to do for Intermediate students

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*T1:* I didn't know exactly what to do for Intermediate students



(grades 7 to 10) to integrate them, exactly how much help to give them. When I taught Primary (Junior Kindergarten to grade 3), you do it in a certain way. You try everything. When you move to Junior (grades 4 to 6), you still give a lot of help ... In Intermediate, that is the question that I had asked ... I wanted to know exactly how far to go in Intermediate because you have to prepare them to be more independent in High School.

*T4:* They're not anywhere close to meeting the academic levels that they need for High School. That's what scares me, cause (sic) in grade seven we spend a lot of time preparing them for High School.

The previous discussion and the one here are related. Teachers view the curriculum and the necessity to bring all students as close to mastery of it as possible as givens. That included students experience difficulty in mastering the skills teachers see as demanded by the secondary school presents them with an insoluble problem. The intimation conveyed was that this problem constituted sufficient reason for students with special needs not to be in regular classes.

### *Behaviour.*

A focus for teachers was the possibility that inability to deal with academic and social curricular expectations would cause some included students to misbehave and disrupt the class.

*T6:* My L. D. student who is registered with me cannot handle written work at all. Therefore, board work is really difficult, and he has low frustration level, and he gives up easily, and, therefore, behaviour problems are exhibited in the classroom such as wandering, noise, and distracting other students.

*T5:* The behaviour adjustment child created a lot of difficulties in the dynamics of the classroom, specifically in that he had a very low threshold for tolerating the other children, and often he would explode unannounced and that would result, not only in a break in my regular program, but it would result in me spending a good hour after his explosion in trying to calm the class down.

A sense that the problem is lodged within the student comes through in such statements. It is true that requiring a student to do work he or she cannot do (e.g. written work) will result in frustration

and disinterest. It is equally true that failing to implement a program to respond to the knowledge that a particular student will blow up in uncontrolled social situations will result in disruption. However, it seems reasonable that partial solutions, at the least, could be found in reducing need to deal with written work by emphasizing the oral mode, and in acting to forestall known causes of outburst by watching for behavioural triggers.

One is able to note central factors in the concerns of teachers. The belief that all students must function at, or nearly at, the curriculum level of the class, or that of the next class, is one. It creates spin off problems with time and meeting the expectations of colleagues. A second factor is unfamiliarity of teachers with strategies designed to deal with such things as inability to handle written work or to determine and respond to behavioural triggers. Third is an intimation that such children do not belong to the regular classroom due to curricular and behavioural challenge. Students who are "behind" are expected to "catch up" through a murky process involving need for teachers to provide extra time, to maintain a focus on academic standards, and to regulate behaviour. If students cannot meet success in catching up and in behaving as many teachers wish them to, they should not be in the regular class.

### *Definition of Successful Integration*

The question "What would you define as successful integration?" provided teachers with opportunity to be reflective, to consider philosophical and pedagogical issues, or, alternatively, to focus on pragmatics of practice. The teachers in this study consistently chose to focus on practice. Responses dealt with problems currently faced in their classrooms. The major concerns noted were design of curricular modifications twinned either with classroom management or with resource teacher relationship.

### *Curriculum modification.*

For integration to be acceptably successful, included students had to be able to do the work of the class as the regular students did it. This restrictive view of integration was tied to need for lower pupil-teacher ratios, additional time availability, reasonable academic strength, and acceptable behaviour.

*T1:* Where the students are benefitting. Some of the students, depending on their difficulties, seem to be totally lost, especially in the rotary subjects. It's just beyond their reach. Ideally, if the numbers were smaller, much smaller, and if it could be modified to the extent that I could spend more time with them, to

make them understand. Well, it has to be at their level.

T2: When a child cannot function without too much interruption in the classroom both behaviourally and academically.

Teachers in this study knew that some students could not deal with instruction as it was given to other students, and that modifications would result in stronger integration and less overall stress. However, they either suggested modifications which had to be made by others (e.g. lower PTR), or simply stated impediments to successful inclusion without suggesting possible modification strategies at all. They did not see that they might develop modifications, but were focused on barriers to success and the responsibility of others, rather than on how they might take an active role.

#### *Resource teacher relationship.*

Successful integration was closely related to resource teacher input. One teacher suggested that the regular teacher and the resource teacher jointly could determine their roles as a strategy to promote success. More commonly, regular class teachers considered success to be the resource teacher coming into the classroom and relieving the regular teacher of the teaching of integrated students.

T3: I guess if the special education teacher helped me more as far as outlining their (the integrated students) program for them, and so that they had really specific goals they could work through. But I guess it would be easier even if the teacher came in on a really regular basis almost every day to work with them for a period of time just to make sure they were on track.

T6: I think it would be easier if he had someone (other than the classroom teacher) working with him on a consistent basis within the classroom, so that someone would be sitting there explaining to him what to do, and maybe transcribing things for him.

The majority of the six teachers interviewed appeared to wish to hand over curricular responsibility for the success of integration to the resource teacher. Rather than discussing what was expected of the student in terms of success, teachers again focused on barriers to success. Among these barriers were previously mentioned concerns such as how to modify curricula and still meet academic standards, how to run a smoothly operating, task-oriented classroom, and how the resource teacher could relieve the regular teacher of teaching responsibility for integrated students.

In effect, they suggested the development of a segregated mini-class for included students within their regular class.

### *Primarily Responsible Teacher*

Advocates of educating all children in regular classrooms state that primary responsibility for the education of students with challenging needs lies with the regular classroom teacher. Other personnel, such as the resource teacher, fill collaborative, supporting roles.

Participants in this study, when asked whom the responsible professional should be, indicated that responsibility should be shared between the regular teacher and the resource teacher. However, the majority identified the resource teacher, and not the regular class teacher, as having primary curricular responsibility.

*T6:* (The) special education teacher ... (who because of smaller numbers) is able to provide more time and more consistent work with the students and probably, because of the greater contact, they know more things that need to be looked at.

*T2:* I think the special education teacher should (have primary responsibility).

*T3:* All they're (the specialists)

there for is to program for those kids that are having problems. So I think it's their responsibility.

Two regular teachers, however, stated that overall responsibility lay with them. Collaboration was desirable, but, to them, the locus of responsibility was clear.

*T4:* Me. That's why I don't like sending them there (to the special education class)...I feel like they're out of my hands, you know. I want to take responsibility for them.

*T5:* I think it would be my responsibility anyway, but it would be nice if it were a joint effort responsibility. I would never say that the other teacher should take responsibility. These children are in my room.

Participants appeared confused regarding who holds primary responsibility for students identified as exceptional, but placed in regular classrooms. The result is, that while the education of integrated students is viewed as a collaborative activity in general, actual leadership in programming, planning, and teaching is not viewed by many regular classroom teachers as their role. Though they do not argue with their responsibility in these areas as related to regular students, they

demur to the special education teacher in the case of included students. One interpretation, supported by other research (Bunch, Lupart, & Brown, 1997), is that the teachers believe special knowledge is held by special education teachers, and what regular teachers know does not fit the needs of the included students. The implications of such a situation are fundamental in terms of integration. If the regular teacher does not realize that familiar, basic instructional strategies are useful with all students, and if that teacher does not accept responsibility for all students, can successful inclusion be achieved?

#### *Integrated or Segregated Placement*

Though no direct attempt was made to explore teacher attitude toward the value of integrated versus segregated settings, a variety of comments were offered from which it is possible to derive inferences.

*T1:* I think, ideally, some of the students should not be (integrated). I know. See this is just my opinion now, I know they're trying to give them a good positive self image, but they should not be. For instance, my math students are failing constantly.

*T3:* Most of all we need to look at what is best for the students. And for many the fact that regular

classes are so large leads to the inevitable small (class) placement, because they can't cope in the regular class.

*T6:* I think with the smaller numbers the special education teacher is able to provide more time and more consistent work with the students. And probably, because of the greater contact, they know some of the things that need to be looked at. Whereas I can only look at things after they become a problem.

Teachers regard the special class setting as one in which much more could be accomplished academically with students with special needs than in the regular classroom. They pointed to familiar themes of lack of time to work with integrated students in the regular classroom, the need to keep up with the curriculum, lack of regular teacher expertise, and class size as impediments to successful integration. Of particular concern was need to keep up with the curriculum. All other comments were related to this central concern in some fashion. Teachers appeared either unaware, or dismissive, of research which suggests that academic and social progress are equal in the two settings, or actually may be higher in the regular classroom.

### Summary of Findings

If any understanding has arisen from this study, it is that regular class teachers lack a clear view of their role in integration, and that they view mastery of the regular curriculum as determining whether or not a student should be in a regular class. Their definitions of inclusion often reflected a restorative model in which the teacher works with the integrated student to bring her/him up to the working level of the class. Inability to achieve academically at the level of other students, lack of time for teachers to work individually with students, the possibility of inappropriate behaviour, lack of regular teacher expertise in special education, and number of students in a class all figured in teachers' minds as reasons to question integration. Though they knew that modifications could make inclusion more successful, they could not suggest how they could implement them, but relied on others to do so.

Curriculum pressure is a concern found elsewhere in the literature. Murray (1991) notes feelings among teachers that there is not enough time to spend with every student, and that these feelings are heightened when a special needs child is seen to require even more individual attention. In addition, the idea of one standard curriculum for all is one that is heavily ingrained in our schools. (Gartner

& Lipsky, 1987; Little, 1985). Teachers' allegiance to one standard curriculum also meant that teachers were frustrated with students' inability to keep up with the curriculum of the regular class. Thus, teachers saw the special education class as being more suitable for accommodation of the needs of children with challenging needs.

This view is in direct conflict with the contemporary movement toward increased inclusion of students with challenging needs and the changing policies of school systems and governments in recognition of this movement. Finally, teachers appeared unaware of the growing research support behind inclusive practice.

### Implications

These findings hold serious implications for leadership in the schools and for teacher education, both of which hold responsibility for preparing teachers to take up responsibility for all students placed in their classes. It can be argued from the results of this study that teachers' lack of perspective regarding their role in integration is indicative of inadequate and inappropriate preservice and inservice preparation for integration.

In defining their roles in integration participants in this study referred to the curriculum in a manner which established

it as an unquestioned authority directing what was to be taught and mastered at any grade level. The curriculum determined if any particular student had a place in regular education. School system policy and research questioning the efficacy of special class placement could not override the fact that a student was misplaced, if he or she could not meet the requirements of a prescribed academic curriculum. This lack of confidence in teacher ability signals deficiencies at both preservice and inservice levels.

In a sense, it is as if teachers see themselves as agents of the curriculum rather than as agents of learning with the curriculum serving simply as a guide and tool. As agents of the curriculum, teachers believe in completing each part of it at a predetermined grade level for all students; they are concerned with how well any student can handle it; they feel uncomfortable with changes to the curriculum in order to accommodate students with exceptionalities. The end result is that many view the placement of such children in regular classrooms as inappropriate.

Teachers obtain their understanding of teaching and learning from their own experiences in school, their teacher preparation programs, and their experiences as employed teachers. In particular, their

understanding of the teacher, the student, and the role of the curriculum comes from the latter two sources. It may serve teacher educators and educational leaders well to examine their professional programs with a view to determining how a view of teacher as curriculum agent has become inculcated in so many. As Bunch (1992) has suggested, inclusive practice calls for teachers to rethink many of their basic understandings of the form of education.

We could look back at findings of studies such as this and pinpoint specific teacher concerns such as time and curriculum modification. Such an approach, however, would serve only to focus on individual barriers in the path of learning. It would be more beneficial to lift our eyes and minds to a higher level of implication and aspiration. The greater need is to examine the assumptions on which our teacher education and administrator leadership programs are constructed. Perhaps then we would be in a position to begin the understanding of how the curriculum has become more important to teachers than student needs and how teachers in general might meet those needs. We might even begin to see how to reform what we do so that teachers will grow in professional confidence and view all students as learners within their own right.

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