

Individual Direct Experience Approach For Teachers of Inclusive Classrooms

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Abstract

The position of teacher training in relation to its contribution to the development of inclusive thinking and practice on the part of student teachers is of fundamental importance. Inclusion is a contemporary educational movement impacting the role of the classroom teacher. It would recognise the importance of a human rights perspective to education, emphasise the political nature of education, would advocate that inclusion is concerned with challenging and reducing inequalities and exclusionary values and practices and that it is very serious about enhancing the learning and participation of all students. As a result, teacher education programs have made attempts to incorporate inclusive education as part of their curricula. An analysis of the literature reveals that inclusion training has favourable effects on the attitudes of pre-service teachers. A common complaint is that the focus is heavily weighted on theory, as opposed to practical experience. To address such concerns, the authors recommend the Individual Direct Experience Approach (IDEA) as an innovative approach to preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms.

I. Introduction

Globally as well as in Europe, there is a clear move towards inclusive practice and wide agreement on the key principles first encompassed in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). Since that time, these principles have been reinforced by many conventions, declarations and recommendations at European and global levels, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which makes explicit reference to the importance of ensuring inclusive systems of education. The UNESCO Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education (2009) set out the following justifications for working towards inclusive practices and educating all children together: Educational justification. Inclusive schools have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and benefit all children. Social justification. Inclusive schools are able to change attitudes towards diversity and form the basis for a just, non-discriminatory society. Economic justification. It costs less to establish and maintain schools that educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different schools 'specialising' in different groups of children.

With social justice at the international forefront of educational agendas, the inclusion of students with exceptionalities in the general education classroom has propelled a worldwide political and philosophical movement. In an inclusive model, students with exceptional needs are educated alongside their peers in the general classroom as the first placement option to be considered. The inclusion movement is an impetus for change, not only in educational policies, but also in the role and expectations of the classroom teacher. Inclusion has a tremendous impact on general classroom teachers as they are increasingly faced with the challenge of meeting a wide range of student needs through inclusive practices. In response to the inclusion movement, post-secondary institutions have recognized their role in preparing pre-service teachers with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to

successfully manage diverse groups of learners (Ashan, Sharma, & Deppeler, 2012; Lancaster & Bain, 2010). There is an urgent need to equip teachers to work in diverse settings, and it is evident that most post-secondary institutions offer some form of inclusion training as part of their teacher preparation program.

II. Perceptions of Teacher Training for Inclusion

While positive attitudes may be able to transcend philosophical barriers to inclusion, they may not always translate into feeling prepared for the reality of inclusive teaching. For example, a review conducted by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) concluded that although most teachers held positive attitudes toward inclusion, teachers did not feel prepared for teaching students with exceptional needs, especially in the case of students with severe learning difficulties and behavioral/emotional disorders. A qualitative study conducted by Fayeze, Dababneh, and Jumiaan (2011) reported that pre-service teachers held strong and positive attitudes about the philosophy of inclusion as an entitlement of children with special needs. However, when asked about their preparedness to implement inclusion, the participants felt their mandatory inclusion course, while adding to their knowledge base, only provided a very narrow understanding of practical skills. Hodkinson's (2006) study found similar findings and concluded that first-year teachers felt their pre-service training provided them with a good understanding of the theory of inclusive education, however their understanding of the practical delivery was limited. Moore-Hayes' (2008) study reported that pre-service teachers cited the need for more preparation and experience in order to feel prepared for working with students with exceptional needs. Additionally, in a study conducted by Forlin and Chambers (2011), the researchers discovered that a unit of study in inclusive education increased pre-service teachers' knowledge and their confidence as teachers. In contrast, it also increased their levels of stress in teaching students with disabilities.

We recommend that in preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms, teacher education programs should incorporate opportunities for direct experiences with students who have exceptional needs during field experiences. A recent study gathered opinions from 124 faculty members across the United States, where the majority considered field experiences to be a leading example in teacher training for inclusion (Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman, & Merbler, 2010). Moreover, Rose and Garner (2010) stressed the importance of practical, school-based experiences as an addition to the theoretical base of university inclusion courses. In fact, one of the leading researchers in this area argued that field experience opportunities and direct contact with students with special needs may be the "only meaningful solution" (Loreman, 2010) to improve inclusion training. A solution to this issue may be to develop a more systematic and consistent approach to field experiences through well-structured, meaningful expectations. Such an approach may ensure that pre-service teachers are realizing the full potential of the field experience as a training opportunity for inclusion. One such approach is the Individual Direct Experience Approach.

III. Individual Direct Experience Approach

IDEA is designed to be implemented during a pre-service teacher's field experience, ideally an extended field experience of six to 12 weeks. It consists of having pre-service teachers work individually and directly with one student with exceptional needs, as a living case study, throughout the duration of their field experience. Essentially, IDEA allows pre-service teachers to experience direct interactions with a student with exceptional needs and to apply the knowledge and skills learned from these interactions to make appropriate adaptations or modifications to whole class lessons. This scaffold process allows pre-service teachers to understand the "how" and "why" of differentiating instruction and make accommodations for exceptional learners. The primary objectives of IDEA are to develop practical inclusive teaching skills and to allay pre-service teachers' anxieties regarding working with students with exceptional needs.

IV. Expectations of IDEA

IDEA requires pre-service teachers to choose one student with exceptional needs from their classroom placement as a "living case study" during their field experience. The criteria for selecting students are that they have unique educational needs and require differentiated instruction or other forms of adaptations or modifications. It is certain that in every classroom at least one student can be identified, in consultation with the mentor teacher, as an appropriate living case for IDEA. After the living case is established, the pre-service teacher is expected to fully and deeply understand the individual education plan (IEP) and/or the learning profile of this student, including prior educational experiences and assessment. Preservice teachers are also required to research the student's exceptionality and communicate with the student's teacher, teacher assistant, parents, and other members of the school support team in order to have a global understanding of the student. Following this background research, the key expectation is for the pre-service teacher to engage in individual, direct experiences with the student for the duration of his or her field experience. A recommended frequency of the interactions would be two to three times per week for 15- to 30-minute sessions

V. Conclusion

There is a consensus that best practice for preparing teachers for inclusion is a pressing issue for teacher educators. Field experience is an essential ingredient for teacher preparation, including the preparation of teachers for the inclusive classroom. While experience with students with exceptional needs has been accepted as benefitting pre-service teachers, it is not always intentionally incorporated into field experiences. IDEA is an approach to systematically introduce pre-service teachers to teaching in the inclusive classroom. Not only does IDEA provide pre-service teachers with the opportunity for interacting with students with exceptional needs, but it also requires that knowledge gleaned from these interactions will be implemented in whole class instruction. As such, IDEA represents a closer approximation of the demands of the inclusion classroom than isolated direct experiences. In addition to providing guidance as to how inclusion is practiced, anxiety about working with students with exceptional needs may be lessened.

Future research in this area could address some of the potential limitations or unanswered questions related to IDEA. For instance, it would be valuable to research how the impact of IDEA applies to other inclusive settings, as student demographics vary greatly

from classroom to classroom. Also, to provide validation to the approach, longitudinal studies could determine if the impact of IDEA is sustainable as pre-service teachers enter the profession and progress through their careers. Qualitative studies could provide insight into the experience of IDEA and the nature of the impact on pre-service teachers' preparation for inclusive teaching. Given the existing research in this area, IDEA is a promising starting point for structuring intentional direct experiences into inclusion training for future teachers.

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