ITE students' attitudes to inclusion

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This paper focuses upon a study of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students' attitudes towards inclusion. The cohort investigated was an entire year's intake for the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) at a university that attracts a large number of its students from the local region. (In the UK the PGCE is one of the routes to Qualified Teacher status, and is a one-year course taken by students who have already completed a first, bachelor's degree in a subject such as History, Mathematics or Modern languages, etc.) Key issues were identified within students' responses, and links have been made with other relevant studies. It draws on the view (e.g. Oliver, 1998) that inclusion is about social justice, a human and civil rights issue which is constrained by a society that perceives disabled people as less entitled to having their requirements met in ordinary society than those oppressed owing to race, gender or class.

An earlier study of attitudes in further education (Richards, 2000) identified that, for many students, inclusive teaching was not considered to be an issue that would affect them personally, as it would be addressed by those with specialist qualifications and training. One of the aims of the present study was to identify whether trainee teachers for the compulsory sector had similar expectations. This linked with two further factors, the government's continued drive for increased inclusion (DfE, 1997, 1998; FEFC, 1997; CSIE, 2000, 2002) and local education authorities' plans to close special schools and make local schools more inclusive in the vicinity of the university. It was therefore an appropriate time to review intending teachers' views, as many would have been educated in a system where, generally, disabled learners had been segregated from them, but they would now be expected to be ready to teach such learners on completion of their programme.

Background

The institutional response to disabled people has traditionally been to segregate them into specialised environments (Snowden, 1976; Hall, 1997), initially to remove a 'burden' (Tredgold, 1952) and later to provide an alternative where ordinary provision could not meet their requirements.

This, in the wider context of schools, 'pampered mainstream providers' (Thomas and Loxley, 2001) by offering an alternative that allowed society to exclude particular children under the guise of offering something better that was separate. Increasingly, disabled people have challenged the assertion that segregated provision has any part to play in any vision of inclusion (Oliver, 1998; Tomlinson, 2000), indicating a difference in ideology from that of the UK government (DfE, 1997; FEFC, 1997).

These differing views give rise to tensions for those attempting to understand fundamental issues around the inclusion of disabled people. Often, non-disabled people's views predominate in professional practice with disabled people, and in consequence attitudes to inclusion may be derived from historical acceptance that 'special needs' are better met in 'special places' (Hall, 1997). This could be particularly argued in the field of education, where special schools are uncritically accepted as part of the continuum of provision (DfE, 1997). They also lead to the contradictory perspectives described by Croll and Moses (2000) as education professionals struggle with the compatibility of aspirations of excellence and inclusion

Many argue (Oliver, 1998; Mittler, 2000; Stewart, 1990) that attitudes are the critical variable in the success, or otherwise, of inclusive practice. Oliver suggests that even 'the most enlightened and "right on" teachers who would have no trouble in recognising oppression on the basis of class or race or gender would be happy to say, "I'm not taking a deaf child into my class, and that's not a political issue, it's a resource issue"' (1998, p. 28). He subsequently argues that oppressive attitudes have changed very little in the last twenty years (p. 28). The importance of this is further highlighted by Murphy (1996), whose research led him to assert that if teachers emerged from initial teacher education (ITE) programmes without a positive attitude to inclusion then those attitudes would be difficult to change, particularly when exposed to 'information-based courses rather than greater contact with disabled people on an interpersonal level' (p. 25).

Research into ITE has indicated a continuing concern about student teachers' lack of preparation for inclusion (Bender, 1985; Murphy, 1996; Croll and Moses, 2000). This despite the fact that 'NQTs will be increasingly expected to form the vanguard of inclusive initiatives in education' (Garner, 2000, p. 111) in response to government directives. Such preparation is further hampered by a training programme centred on government-driven standards which expect student teachers to become conversant with their responsibilities under the Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) rather than engage with the intrinsic concept of inclusion (Garner, 2000).

Critics such as Garner (2000) and Slee (2000) argue that the quality of curricula content in relation to inclusion is impaired, as it has failed to keep pace with developments and thinking: courses often adopt a permeation approach which 'has resulted in further dilution of SEN input into ITE courses' (Garner, 2000, p. 113). Those advocating changes in the curriculum recommend tutors to rethink their configuration of teacher preparation to meet the needs of diverse learners, and this should include a philosophical change to view-

ing disabled learners more positively. This, Ware (2001) argues, will challenge ITE providers to consider their own position on inclusion and separate themselves from the 'critical theorists who avert their gaze from both the disabled subject and the dual system of education' (p. 112), asking them to reflect on why 'the academic nod to diversity morphs to cringe at disability' (p. 113). Furthermore, he suggests that teacher education recognises that many programmes fail to make purposeful links between general and special education and as a result 'are institutionally sanctioned to perpetuate educational apartheid' (p. 120).

Clearly, such considerations confront teacher education with real challenges. Preparing new teachers to face the kind of diverse classrooms that many of them have never experienced themselves in their own schooling requires significant changes in educational thinking. This suggests a need to move away from questions about who deserves to be included (*Times Educational Supplement*, 16 November 2001) and concentrate on practices that are ultimately about good teaching and learning, rather than viewing inclusion as just additional work – or even a 'poisoned chalice'.

Methodology

The study investigated 120 student teachers' attitudes to inclusion in a one-year full-time Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) cohort at a 'new' UK university. Two questionnaires were designed, the first of which investigated students' knowledge and understanding of inclusion and their personal response to inclusive practice, whilst the second focused on whether their experiences in school and on their university programme had affected their original views.

The first questionnaire was distributed to the students during an introductory session in the first week of study and completed *in situ*. The questions covered understanding of inclusion in terms of definition and applied practice, identification of children given the label Special Needs, and the advantages and disadvantages of special and inclusive education provision. In total, ninety completed questionnaires were returned at the end of the session.

The second questionnaire was completed at the end of the students' one-year programme. The return rate (fifty-eight) was lower than the earlier questionnaire, as it was not possible to gain access to all students at the end of their programme. This questionnaire covered their experience of inclusion in school, asking whether it had changed their original views on inclusion. It concluded with a section on the usefulness of the training and experience they had received and the identification of additional training requirements.

Findings

Pre-experience views

Initial responses by the PGCE students from the first questionnaire indicated a positive approach to inclusion, with seventy-seven (86 per cent) describing

it in terms of rights, offering equality for all children to be actively involved in the same school. The rest differed from this perspective, describing instead situations of 'allowing SEN children to enter mainstream' and physical presence in school rather than active engagement within the environment. General awareness of disabled people's views on the government's initiatives to increase inclusion was extremely limited, with only one PGCE student stating that disabled people supported it. Others suggested that disabled people were against it because they wanted to 'expand special needs establishments'. The majority (91 per cent) of respondents, however, reported that they had 'no idea'.

Asked to identify learners with 'special needs', respondents were divided equally between those who identified them as having 'within-child deficits' e.g. learning difficulties, problems, low ability and 'lacking any kind of intelligence', and those who identified them as learners affected by contextual factors, for example pupils who needed different strategies. Several (14 per cent) referred to such pupils as needing more of the teacher's attention. Most students (80 per cent) stated that all children should be educated together in the same schools, although a majority (46 per cent) indicated that this could include the use of on-site special units. A further 6 per cent wanted special schools to be retained but to take fewer pupils. Only 7 per cent wanted to maintain the current situation or increase special school placements.

The benefits of inclusion were clearly identified by most respondents as having a positive effect on all pupils. For some (32 per cent) these centred on a perception of pupils feeling equal, more worthwhile and 'normal'. Others (27 per cent) considered broader issues to be important. In particular, social interaction was seen as a benefit for 'normal children', as it led to expectations that working together would help understanding and overcome prejudice. In addition, it would offer a 'more realistic perception of life'. Despite these positive comments, a considerable number of concerns were expressed about inclusion. Most of these (51 per cent) were related to the disruption of other children's learning and the increased work load for teachers in meeting such a wide range of abilities, rather than raising issues about actual provision for any children perceived as having 'special needs'. Other concerns centred on the possibility of bullying, special needs not being identified or supported and negative attitudes among teachers and pupils.

In contrast, special schools were described by respondents as having the benefits of specialist, trained staff and an environment that provided specialist curricula, equipment and increased attention. Some respondents suggested that there would be advantages for children being with others of 'the same standard', as it would help them 'feel normal' or that these schools were 'good for extreme cases'. A few concurred with the general sentiments of the respondent who stated that that the 'use of an isolated environment would prevent interference with the learning of able pupils'. The disadvantages of special schools were clearly articulated by most students (81 per cent). They were described as segregating, isolating and excluding pupils, encouraging dependence, stereotyping and 'preventing preparation for the real world'.

Individual students wrote of concern at special schools being 'dumping grounds', of the 'pigeonholing of children into able/normal or thick and stupid' and the long-term effects on behaviour, achievement and feelings of self-worth.

A question exploring the PGCE students' views on developing their own inclusive practice elicited fewer responses. Eleven per cent referred to the need to differentiate work, 22 per cent didn't know and a further 39 per cent did not reply. Key issues of concern were identified as their own ability to meet all children's needs, include everyone and, perhaps significantly, their own ability keep control. Other children's reactions were also seen as a potential problem in the classroom, as were the provision of sufficient resources, increased work load and a notion of falling standards, resulting from, as one student stated, 'the education of a few at the expense of the many'. Some students (11 per cent) were very positive, stating that nothing concerned them about inclusion. However, again, a considerable number (30 per cent) did not offer a response to this part other than to state that they did not know yet what their concerns might be.

When asked to describe what support would be beneficial in preparing for inclusion, 42 per cent did not respond. Of those that did, most identified the need for training early in their programme of study provided by people with experience of inclusion and special needs. Some asked for this to be 'hands on' experience rather than lectures. A particularly strong view was expressed by one student, who stated that she would not require anything, as she 'didn't agree with inclusion' and the key issue for her was to 'get rid of it'.

Post-experience views

The follow-up questionnaire indicated that all PGCE students had been exposed to some form of inclusive practice on their school placement. For most, it involved pupils with behavioural or learning difficulties, although a wide range of impairments and conditions were described. Learning support assistants were identified as the most common means of achieving inclusion, with differentiation and 'setting of classes' described as close alternatives. A few students made reference to the use of support teachers, individualised programmes, adapted resources and specific medical intervention, e.g. Ritalin. The positive effects of 'buddy' schemes and peer support were also described, whilst, by contrast, another respondent stated that inclusion was successfully achieved through 'pupils being removed [from class] by the teacher on inclusion duty who was summoned by phone' (an efficient method noted by OfStEd in the school's inspection that enabled excellent exam results).

Most students (76 per cent) described the inclusion at their school as successful. This was because pupils with special needs were seen to join in classroom activities and achieve. They were described as happy, accepted by peers and having a 'sense of contributing and belonging'. The support of the learn-

ing support assistant and adaptations of the curriculum were identified as important in achieving this success.

Of those who felt that inclusion was not particularly successful, most thought that it was due to needs not being met through lack of support and too much pressure on achieving within the time allocated. Two respondents highlighted the disruption of other pupils' learning, whilst another two expressed concern about the lack of pupils' opportunities to achieve. This included one with epilepsy who was 'so drugged he couldn't write' and a situation where 'helpers tend to do the work for children, so pupils weren't learning by doing for themselves'. Several students indicated mixed views, recognising the benefit for individuals but feeling that it was offset by consequences for their peers, e.g. 'In some cases the inclusion aided and lifted the SEN pupil, unfortunately inclusion pulled the rest of the class down, especially in pupils with behavioural issues.' Similarly, the consequences for teachers were stressed: 'Inclusion is good for the pupil but additional planning is probably too much for the teacher.'

A majority of PGCE students (59 per cent) stated that their views on inclusion had not changed since teaching in school. Whilst for some of them this was because they had always believed in inclusion, and still did, most stated that teaching practice had further affirmed their view that inclusion couldn't work because of the additional support required at the expense of other learners. In some cases this was an expression of personal ideology, for example 'I am against inclusion. I think that it hinders the development of those who need support and those who don't,' but in others it indicated a tension between beliefs, e.g. 'While the idea of inclusion in schools . . . is a persuasive one, the pupils in question would probably benefit from a school in which every teacher was equipped to deal with their needs far better.'

Those 41 per cent of PGCE students whose opinion about inclusion had changed were mainly those for whom inclusion was now seen as a sound way of working, particularly where appropriate resources were available. For some students the experience had strengthened their views from general support for inclusion to a position of committed advocacy. Most significantly, only two students stated that they had moved from supporting inclusion to opposing it. Their experience showed them that 'theory is different from putting into practice' and that all learners' needs were not being met.

> At first I felt that SEN pupils deserved to be taught in mainstream schools but from experience this is not possible in the way that it is taught as a whole class – either it is patronising bright pupils or too difficult for weaker pupils to take in. Bright pupils are not being pushed.

When questioned about what had been useful in preparing them for teaching inclusively nearly all respondents (95 per cent) rated their school experience highest. Only half had found university training of any help, whilst a similar number cited reading books. A small number indicated that knowing a disabled person was influential in developing their inclusive vision and practice. Asked about their future training needs, half the group did not

respond and six others said that they did not want any. Suggestions for future training items included curriculum differentiation and classroom management skills in the absence of specialist support. A small number chose to identify 'special needs' as an area for future training, wanting guidance on 'how to stimulate SEN pupils to want to learn' and to spend time in special schools or 'follow an SEN pupil for a day in school'.

Discussion

The findings of this study draw attention to two key factors in preparing student teachers to work inclusively: these are university-based preparation and the inclusive culture of the placement school. As many students appeared to begin their training with a positive belief in inclusion, sustaining it and providing them with the tools to manage inclusive learning should be a prominent part of their programme. Moving from belief to practice requires skills, resources and support for success. Otherwise such belief can become little more than 'a nice idea' and characterised as hopelessly idealistic (Croll and Moses, 2000).

Few of the student teachers had experience of disabled people as peers. This could have the effect of preventing understanding of the key issues of inclusion and segregation from those who have actually experienced it whilst continuing to provide the context for stereotypical views (Mason, 2000). In addition, it provides a context where it is easier to accept the necessity of segregated provision owing to lack of school resources or staff skills when those, or similar, learners do not have a forum to challenge such deficiencies on a personal level.

Many of the student teachers' initial statements about inclusion reflected the government's ideology in that they accepted a range of segregated provision. This suggests that, even before embarking upon their PGCE programme, they had internalised values about pupils seen as problematic to the education service. For a significant number of these students there appeared to be reservations about rights to be included automatically, as some pupils were perceived to be less valued than others. Despite a general and clear articulation of the advantages of inclusive systems, individual sacrifice was deemed necessary to protect other learners' education, especially if time was being taken away from those who were thought to be more able. This, of course, reaches into the argument as to whether schools can balance inclusivity and excellence.

Several student teachers supported the use of 'inclusion units'. This did not appear to be seen as a contradiction: such units were rather viewed as a resolution of the difficulties of educating all children in their local school by providing support away from other pupils whose learning they might disrupt. They were also seen as places where the responsibility for such pupils could be shifted from the mainstream to specialist teacher.

A particularly significant finding of this study is the student teachers' lack of awareness as to what they should do to work inclusively. Given that so

many were broadly in favour of inclusion, they appear to have few ideas about how to make it work. Some PGCE students expressed fears about their ability to work inclusively if there were insufficient resources or difficult pupils who would affect their classroom control. Others saw learning support assistants as vital to the successful inclusion of pupils. Those who indicated a need for training wanted practical strategies supplied by tutors experienced in inclusion, rather than lectures. However, as a majority of teacher educators are unlikely to have experienced inclusion themselves, this again highlighted the importance of the school placement in providing a quality opportunity to gain the necessary skills for today's diverse classrooms.

Preparing student teachers for inclusion will clearly require teacher educators to review current programmes. Many of the PGCE students in this study did not find input from the university helpful, preferring school-based training and reading books. This places a great deal of responsibility upon schools and may reflect a 'lottery' situation in terms of quality of experience. Similarly, reading may provide a useful opportunity for expanding knowledge, but the quality of what is selected may affect the student's experience. Reading may serve to expand or restrict ideas about inclusion, depending upon the writer's perspective. Finally, some students wanted to spend time in special schools or shadow pupils with special needs. The danger with the first approach is that it may do little to aid understanding of how inclusion works, whilst the other may offer an insight into an individual's experience but only if contextual issues are explored to understand their importance in making inclusion successful.

Conclusion

The study indicated that many training teachers are inclined positively to inclusion. However, their understanding of what it entails in terms of practice and their own role in achieving it is far less clear. Most had not experienced any contact with disabled people and were not aware of any views about inclusion other than those presented by non-disabled people through the media. Consequently most saw little problem with a concept of inclusion that involved the use of withdrawal, separate classes, units or, indeed, the use of medication like Ritalin. This resulted in different perceptions of useful strategies. What is clear is the need for teacher education programmes to develop thinking about inclusion and personal contact with disabled people on a peer basis. This would challenge students to reconceptualise their views of disabled learners and their right to be included. Subsequently, when PGCE students start to think more deeply about inclusion, they may be able to identify more easily what they need to do to be successful. In addition, strategies for including all learners in a classroom need to be developed so that newly qualified teachers can face their diverse classroom with more confidence. Schools and reading material need to be selected carefully to optimise the experience, and techniques for working with learning support assistants would help with what was identified as a key criterion of success. This would

suggest the relevance of continuing strong partnerships between ITET providers and schools.

Finally, teacher educators need to ask themselves whose vision of inclusive education they should use as the basis of their programmes and how they can serve practitioners' needs at the same time as realising larger, utopian ideals for society. This is vital, as student teachers are likely to integrate the beliefs transmitted to them through the culture of the programme. It is therefore incumbent upon them to enable those new to the profession to see that teaching to an inclusive model is not about extra work but an opportunity for all learners to flourish. Accepting this diverts attention from perceived 'special needs' to wider strategies for teaching and learning. Such a focus could mean that 'one size' can fit all in terms of schools. What cannot be accepted is that one size fits all in styles of teaching and learning. Inclusive learning will not result from the 1,700 ready-made government lesson plans downloaded from the Web every day (*Times Educational Supplement*, 21 June 2002). It will result from learning opportunities that are individually tailored to equally valued individual learners. These are, of course, demanding agenda in a policy and cultural context which is increasingly subject to credentialist audit, and which appears frequently to privilege 'league table' school profiles over attention to individual development; the fact that the students reported above are recent graduates of such a culture goes some way to explaining some of the troubling comments that are occasionally made.

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