

ERIC PEARSON STUDY GRANT
2013 ANNUAL CONFERENCE PRESENTATION
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SUBJECT : BEST PRACTICE IN INCREASING CAPACITY OF TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS TO SUCCESSFULLY SUPPORT AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

I was privileged to be awarded the Eric Pearson study grant for 2012. I thank the Federation and the Eric Pearson Study Grant committee for providing me with the opportunity as it was a fantastic experience on both a professional, as well as personal, level.

The topic I was attempting (and I do use the word attempting deliberately as I am not sure if I was able to give conclusive evidence of the issues effectively that I set out to do) to address was:

‘Best practice in increasing capacity of teachers and schools to successfully support an inclusive classroom’.

The reason I believed that this topic was and is, relevant to Federation and its membership, is because of the increasing levels of stress that teachers are experiencing in the profession, especially when dealing with students with multiple learning needs in the regular classroom. We see, listen and feel for the teachers who are increasingly recounting of experiences they are having in a classroom with up to 7 different disabilities or learning difficulties and the levels of their frustration and in many cases feelings of inadequacy.

In Chapter 9 of the Vinson Inquiry into Public Education Professor Vinson prefaced it by: *Inclusive education necessitates that schools and classrooms be supportive mainstream environments where **all** students’ needs are met. This is the essential environment that assists all students to prepare for life in the community.*

However in her dissection of the report Maree O’Halloran concluded that: "Over that time teachers have increasingly been called upon to complete "mission impossible". Teachers have described to the Inquiry teaching classes of 30 students with up to 7 children who have different types of disabilities and learning disorders" and "The level of anxiety amongst teachers trying to, without training, balance the educational needs of all children in a class is palpable. The need for training and support is acute".

It was when I was reading Maree O’Halloran’s comments that I was struck by her words ‘mission impossible’ as I am sure all of us here whether we are a classroom teacher, Head Teacher, AP, DP school or Principal are all dealing with the fall out of classrooms with large numbers of disabilities and learning disorders in our regular classroom.

Numbers of students with diagnosis (and undiagnosed) disabilities are in our regular classrooms are growing and teachers are feeling frustrated and distressed by their own perceived lack of professional competence as these students fail to achieve in the classroom. There is no doubt that students with disabilities are entitled to be in our classrooms however there can be also no question regarding the considerable pressure teachers are placed under when it is put into practice. Robyn Ewing (2002) in an article published in the Independent Education entitled ‘*Keeping beginning teachers in the profession*’ conducted research that revealed that a third of beginning teachers cited that it was the impact of students with severe emotional and behavioural disorders in the classroom that caused them to resign from the teaching service.

So how did I attempt to look at this issue?

I proposed to divide my research project into three distinct sections:

- a) How students with disabilities are **currently supported** in the classroom including the use of differentiated curriculum, technology and adapted teaching areas
- b) The level of **pre-service training** for Bachelor of Education students to prepare them for the teaching of students with disabilities
- c) The level and commitment the DEC has in delivering **quality professional development** to support teachers in schools today to deliver an inclusive curriculum

I proposed to compare each of these areas with NSW public schools and schools (public where possible) in America, Hong Kong and New Zealand. However because of time constraints (I tried to minimise disruption to my own school by trying to travel in school holidays) I simply couldn't fit New Zealand in although I did make contact with a number of schools and universities there and I will finish that in my own time and for my own sense of completion.

This report will deal in detail section A. of my study.

The classroom

The Standards for Education (2005) and Australia's Disability Discrimination Act (1992) clearly articulate that students with disabilities have the right to education *on the same basis* as students without a disability with *reasonable accommodations or adjustments*.

What does an effective inclusive education system look like? This is a complex question and there is no definitive answer but the reality for teachers is that there is a growth of students with disabilities in NSW government schools and they have a right to an inclusive classroom settings. This trend for inclusive education is supported by UN policy which affirm children's rights (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 and the UN Standard Rules for the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, 1993) and the individual Educational policies of developed countries (Disability Standards for Education (Australia) 2005; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (US) 1990; Education Act (Great Britain) 1993.

As a classroom teacher, a head teacher and currently as a Deputy Principal I am continually facing the demands of students with disabilities in the classroom whether it is increased administration, availability of training and development in the delivery of a differentiated curriculum, the impact of behavioural issues in the classroom, or simply time. I personally see the fall out and increasing frustration from both students and staff who fear failure. The teacher who believes that are not adequately supporting the student and then the student who responds to their own feelings of failure through poor choices in behaviour. I am not judging either the teacher or the student and empathise with both parties BUT I am also getting frustrated at a system that is letting both the teacher and student down in many cases.

Within Australia I contacted approximately 100 teachers and promising anonymity, I collated many heartbreaking stories where classroom teachers are struggling with their core job of teaching but afraid to speak out for fear of so many things – job (casual), ridicule, preferential treatment of class allocations. Many classroom teachers feel they neither have the skills, training or access to quality professional development to successfully integrate a student with disabilities in their classroom, especially in the high school setting. 62% of teachers reported that there is no time provided to understand an individual student's disability and KLA specific support in teaching these students within the regular classroom. Many teachers articulated the term 'differentiation' but believed they are not providing an individualised program for students that addresses their specific learning need and indeed they are 'learning on the job' to discover what a differentiated program looks like. There seems confusion over differentiation and adjustment in teaching and learning programs. I spoke to 29 primary teachers who felt more confident in providing an individualised differentiated program for students in their classroom as they know their students better and are able to build in areas that the student can do well as well as support their learning. All teachers believe

that it is essential we provide programs that ensure all students are able to learn and achieve outcomes in our classrooms.

So what did teachers in America and Hong Kong see in terms of current support in the classroom. Firstly can I say that American schools, at least the ones I visited, are so far removed from Australian schools. Not only are there the metal detectors, the securely looked school where at some you are scrutinised by a security camera before you are even allowed to enter a secure room for 'signing in'. However, the school massacres have necessitated this and for that reason I agreed not to take photos and not to identify schools individually. Schools I did visit included 3 in Anchorage, Boston, New York, Washington, 4 in Denver then a number of small regional schools between Farmington and Las Vegas. I will refer to them in general terms.

American teachers are outstanding and passionate about their profession. Teachers / public schools are obviously fighting against Charter schools and while that was obviously a hot topic of discussion, I won't delve into that here. Many of the schools I visited were poor schools who provide breakfast and lunch programs on top of curriculum and in many cases a 'safe' environment for 7 ½ hours a day. However I was there to look at the inclusive classroom and I was so impressed what teachers are generally doing in most schools. Some interesting observations included:

- Teacher aides (or as we now know them SLSO's) were in all cases in current teacher training and they are assigned to schools as part of that training and are required to work there for a set number of hours per week.
- Identified students with Learning Support needs have weekly case management meetings before school where the targets for the coming week are set and resources allocated on a 'needs basis'. An example of this was a young boy who the previous week had needed intensive support in English as they were writing compositions and he had very low literacy skills. The program was modified for him including technology support but they discussed, noting on his file that while teacher aide support would be there this time with assessment, the next time there was a composition he would not have personal support but be provided with a scaffold. The following week there was a mathematics assessment and due to his high competence in maths that an extension program be prepared for him as well as the regular work.
- Students with behaviour needs are referred to a general Learning Support team that also generally met every week. What I found fascinating that when a student is referred they do not automatically go 'on case load'. Rather, each class teacher is required to complete an observation sheet over the course of a week and based on those results a decision is made. At one of the meetings I sat in it was decided that a particular student's behaviour was linked to academic achievement and teachers were provided in writing how this individual student's work should be differentiated and fascinatingly, while he was under performing in all subjects he was excelling in History so there was information provided for that teacher about extension strategies. All teachers are then required to report back to the team, in writing, after 4 weeks, on the student's progress. I did ask one team the question what if it didn't work, does he still stay on caseload? – I was told of course it works as if it didn't then it was the LST fault in misdiagnosis and/or poor advice to teachers. I interpreted this to mean they thought they rarely got it wrong.
- Unless students are actually in a 'special class' within a school I saw little evidence of withdrawal of students with learning or behavioural problems. I did however see teachers who really broke up the lesson with up to 4 or 5 different strategies in a single lesson – strategies such as writing the aim of the lesson on the whiteboard, quick quiz on previous lesson, journal writing, group work, use of technology, teacher talk, mindmaps etc... things I felt very comfortable with but had not typically used all together in a 60 minute lesson. One classroom I spent a whole day in, I saw the teacher change the activity every 15 minutes but the change was so fluid and obviously seamless in the lesson delivery that it worked. Deconstructing the lesson afterwards with the teacher I was

overwhelmed when the teacher shared that she prepares each lesson ensuring there is at least one activity that every student in her classroom can excel at individually.

Reading John Hattie's work I was struck by a statement he made in 2005 that '*research shows that **how** teachers teach is a key determinate of student outcomes, second only to the contributions that students make to their own learning*'. I believe I saw this in action in many of the schools I visited.

In Denver I had an opportunity to attend a 'un –conference' which had me completely confused as there was no agenda, no registration and no guest speakers. Obviously there is a local group of teachers coordinating the day and this is helped by sponsorship providing free morning tea and lunch (I think the sponsors of this particular one was Xerox). You arrive and write on a board questions you would like addressed or expertise you have had success with in the classroom that you would like to share. It was one of the best conferences I have attended!

Hong Kong was so different!

My visit to Hong Kong was coordinated by the Hong Kong Institute of Education who went out of their way to ensure I had the opportunity not only to spend time in the Inclusive Education unit at the university, but to do school visits and also meet with the Minister for the government's Education Bureau.

Hong Kong has strong educational policy to cater for students with special education needs and the Education Bureau provides schools with additional resources, professional support and teacher training. Recognised special education needs are: Specific Learning Difficulties, Intellectual Disability, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Physical Disability, Visual Impairment, Hearing Impairment and Speech and Language Impairment. All schools operated on a 3 tiered model which is:

Tier 1 – quality teaching in the regular classroom for students with mild learning difficulties

Tier 2 - 'add on' interventions for students with what they referred to as persistent learning difficulties. This included in many cases students on the autism spectrum. This form of support involved small group learning and 'pull-out' programs.

Tier 3 – intensive individualised support for students with severe learning difficulties. Students supported on this tier all have an Individual Learning Plan.

The funding was excellent with the basic provision for a school with 6 students requiring support starting at \$120 000 up to a ceiling of one million dollars. These funds were and are encouraged to be used flexibly including:

- Employment of additional teaching staff
- Employment of teaching assistances (SLSO's) to assist teachers in designing appropriate learning activities including individual support after school with homework
- Hire of professional services such as speech therapy
- Purchase of teaching resources
- Organise programs to promote peer acceptance and support
- Access teacher training programmes to enhance teacher understanding of integrated education and support measures to strengthen teacher professionalism in catering for student diversity
- Up skill parents to strengthen home-school cooperation

The Hong Kong Institute of Education provides excellent residential courses during the summer break where schools send teachers for training in inclusive education practice. Many of the schools I visited rotate their teachers through the program so most teacher's complete in-service training at the Institute every

three to five years. Teachers I spoke to believe this access to quality training and the opportunity to reflect on educational practice with peers is pivotal in success in the inclusive classroom.

Teacher Training

In this report I have spoken about what is currently happening in our classrooms but there is still the question of how well are our teachers prepared for the realities of the inclusive classroom. I interviewed 10 practicum teachers and found that their understanding of an inclusive classroom is varied, even those training at the same campus. Both US and Hong Kong universities have specific training in their teaching degrees focused on inclusive education and especially in Hong Kong, pre-service teachers are required to complete a practicum in a special education setting.

Professor Chris Forlin at the Hong Kong Institute of Education has completed extensive research on both pre-service and in-service training for teacher education for inclusion. She has also looked at the necessary school reform for inclusive practice. However in a climate of budget cuts to our schools and the cloud of Gonski hanging over us, meaningful training for our current teachers will be a hit and miss affair.

The DEC and BOS have excellent online training current teaching staff can complete on differentiated curriculum, supporting students with learning needs etc. but I find that doing these online courses in isolation is meaningless in many of us. They lack the opportunity for robust conversation and sharing of experience that is so important for teachers especially those who are struggling with a classroom of students with diverse needs. There is also the question of time and when we can complete these courses especially when we are contending with the changes that the new BOS syllabuses will mean in our working lives. Professor Chris Forlin (1997) wrote 'Teachers' perceptions of the stress associated with inclusive education and their methods of coping', she contends that most teachers have high standards for their classroom and their students and being ill equipped for the inclusion of students with disabilities, sets them up to fail. Completing these courses in isolation and reflecting on your failures in the classroom in some cases will just add to the stress and levels of frustration for many teachers.

Where to?

I believe the NSWTF is being proactive in addressing the issues associated with Inclusive Education. There are however a number of simple strategies that the Federation may wish to explore further that could help our membership.

1. Provide an online forum through the NSWTF website for our membership to seek support for inclusive education. Teachers could post problems/issues they are encountering in their classroom or with specific students. This collegiate opportunity would mean sharing of resources and experience and reduce the level of isolation, frustration and inadequacy many teachers are experiencing.
2. Explore the idea of promoting the concept of 'un-conferences'.