Affordances and limitations of a special school practicum as a means to prepare pre-service teachers for inclusive education

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Abstract

As education systems worldwide embrace inclusive education in some form, pre-service teachers need to be prepared to be pedagogically responsive to diverse students and learning needs. While much learning for inclusion takes place in course work in higher education institutions, field experiences, including practicum placements can complement this learning. Using Loreman's (2010a) seven areas of essential learning for inclusion, with the addition of Waitoller and Kozleski's (2010) idea of 'critical sensibilities', this article considers the extent to which a practicum experience in a special school might contribute to learning for inclusion. The main findings of a small scale qualitative study with 15 South African pre-service teachers suggest that the practicum placement exposes them to children with disabilities and learning difficulties, resulting in a growth of understanding of their learning needs. It also enhances pre-service teachers' ability to plan lessons and draw on a range of instructional strategies to enable learning for all. For some pre-service teachers, however, the practicum convinced them of the benefits of separate special education and the unfeasibility of inclusion. We conclude that a special school practicum has value for pre-service teachers, provided that opportunities are made available for critical engagement with the potential for both inclusion and exclusion of students with special educational needs in different types of school.

Key words

Inclusive education; pre-service teacher education; practicum; special education

Introduction: Pre-service teacher education for inclusive education

Corresponding with the increasing diversity of students and learning needs in classrooms worldwide, is a concern about the extent to which teachers are equipped to secure learning for all. In response to this concern, a burgeoning research base is yielding a repertoire of “innovative approaches” (Forlin 2010a, xxiii) to prepare teachers for inclusive classrooms. This article contributes to this body of knowledge by reporting on a practice-based study concerned to understand the extent to which practicum placements in special schools can contribute to pre-service teacher learning for inclusive education¹. In the literature review that follows, we consider pre-service teacher education initiatives for inclusive education in two categories: content (i.e. what it is that pre-service teachers need to know) and location (i.e. where pre-service teachers learn this content).

Content

Loreman (2010a, 129) has reviewed the literature on pre-service teacher education for inclusion and presents a synthesis of what he regards as the “essential skills, knowledge and attributes for inclusive teachers identified in the literature”. In this review, he identifies seven areas, which he phrases as “outcomes” for pre-service teachers. The seven areas are:

- a respect for diversity and an understanding of inclusion;
- engaging in inclusive instructional planning;
- instructing in ways conducive to inclusion;
- engaging in meaningful assessment;
- fostering a positive social climate;
- collaboration with stakeholders;
- and engaging in lifelong learning

These seven areas serve as a useful framework for understanding what is required for pre-service teachers to begin working effectively in inclusive classrooms. We would argue, however, for an addition to Loreman’s seven essential areas. We agree with Waitoller and Kozleski (2010, 65-66), who maintain that an obstacle to the preparation of “inclusive teachers” is where “skills and technical content” is the focus at the expense of the development of “critical sensibilities that question what is being done, for the benefit of

¹ We have used inclusion and inclusive education interchangeably in this article, reflecting the tendency in much of the literature to use ‘inclusion’ as shorthand for ‘inclusive education’. We acknowledge that there is merit in distinguishing between the two terms, but discussing the nuances of such a distinction is beyond the scope of this article.

whom". We maintain that developing "critical sensibilities" should be an eighth essential area of pre-service teacher learning for inclusive education. In preparation for schools and education systems where exclusion flourishes (even in the guise of 'inclusive education'), pre-service teachers need to be given opportunities and experiences to "awaken their consciousness" and learn "how to critically recognize injustice" (Pickower 2011, 1108, 1130). To be effective in promoting inclusive education, pre-service teachers need to develop critical sensibilities that enable them to recognise injustices and identify (and possibly resist) the exclusionary pressures and practices that prevail in schools.

Having briefly considered some of *what* it is that pre-service teachers are deemed to need to learn in preparation for inclusive teaching, we turn to *where* this learning could take place.

Location

We broadly identify two locales for pre-service education for inclusive education: the higher education institution and the field, which includes community experiences and practicum placements.

Institution-based learning for inclusive education

The choice, it seems, for pre-service teacher education institutions, is to adopt an infused approach to teaching pre-service teachers about inclusive education, or one in which specific courses are designated with this task. The content-infused approach, described in some detail by Loreman (2010b) is one in which the inclusive education content that could possibly be taught in a separate or stand alone course, is deliberately infused into the wider pre-service education programme. Research on the efficacy of a content-infused approach is mixed (Loreman 2010b; Cook 2002). On the one hand, it realises Forlin's (2010b, 9) dictum that "inclusion cannot be taught in isolation", but on the other, there are difficulties in implementation (Loreman 2010b) and concerns that specific topics like modification of curriculum and instruction cannot get the time they need (Cook 2002). Stand alone units or courses seem to be the more prevalent mode of offering learning for inclusive education. These courses are either compulsory or elective for pre-service teachers (Rouse 2010) and the impact of such courses has been described in terms of fostering positive attitudes and disposition towards inclusion (Killoran, Woronko and Zaretsky 2013; Kim 2011) and improving self efficacy (Lancaster and Bain 2007).

While pre-service teacher education programmes are configured differently internationally, field experiences of some kind are usually required for certification. For these experiences to enhance pre-service teacher learning, they should be integrated with course work and provide opportunities “to experience and study the relationship of theory and practice” (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust and Shulman 2005, 401). We thus find examples in the literature of teacher educators looking to complement course work in inclusive education with various types of field experience.

Field-based learning for inclusive education

To address the dispositional dimension of pre-service teacher preparation for inclusive education, some teacher educators have turned to the community to provide field-based experiences. Based on the assumption that to unseat negative beliefs and assumptions about disability, pre-service teachers need to “have suitable experiences with people with disabilities”, Chambers and Forlin (2010, 75) describe a “triad of inclusive experiences”. This initiative attempts to address the inadequacy that pre-service teachers feel as a result of not having direct contact with people with disabilities. The inclusive experiences entail a community participation experience which is designed to be “recreational and social in nature” (p. 77).

More common than community experiences seems to be the practicum – a supervised opportunity to practise teaching, with support in planning and reflection, and feedback on aspects of the pre-service teacher’s pedagogy (Darling-Hammond et al 2005). With specific reference to preparing teachers for inclusive education, Waitoller and Kozleski (2010) describe the benefits of pre-service teacher learning in a designated professional development school that has a reciprocal relationship with the university, has a diverse student population and is committed to become more inclusive in its practices. These authors maintain that partnering with inclusive schools “create spaces for developing inclusive identities in which pre-service teachers will develop a sense of responsibility and ownership for all the students in the school” (Waitoller and Kozleski 2010, 70). Other authors have explored the potential value of practicum placements with diverse students and in diverse contexts (for example, Wiggins, Follo and Eberly 2007; Burant and Kirby 2002; and Sleeter 2001). While these studies do not specifically locate themselves within the discourses of inclusive education, they do suggest the possibility that these placements have transformative potential by enhancing pre-service teachers’ understanding of, and responsiveness to diversity,

particularly cultural diversity. Special schools, or special education settings where students deemed to have special educational needs² or disabilities are educated, do not feature much in this body of literature, even though special educational need or disability can be regarded as an aspect of diversity (Banks, Cochran-Smith, Moll, Richert, Zeichner, LePage, Darling-Hammond, Duffy, and McDonald 2005). There is evidence of research into the practicum in special education settings for teachers preparing for special education (Mamlin 2012), but relatively less is known about the potential of a special school practicum as a field-based learning opportunity for inclusive education. Lambe and Bones (2008) have found that a special school placement for teaching experience in Northern Ireland resulted in pre-service teachers becoming less hopeful about the possibilities of inclusion, given the realities in mainstream schools, and the supports and resources available in special schools. In this regard, Loreman (2010b, 62 - 63) warns that “Promoting inclusive education, while at the same time using segregated education institutions to achieve some goals, may send mixed messages to pre-service teachers”. He maintains that practicum placements should be in “positive inclusive environments”.

We would agree that a positive inclusive environment would be ideal for pre-service teacher learning for inclusive education, particularly if this environment had the features of the professional learning schools that Waitoller and Kozleski (2010) describe. However, in our context, South Africa, where inclusive education has been introduced at policy level but is not yet widely established (Wildman 2011; Wildeman and Nomdo 2007), it is difficult to find (m)any such schools. So, as teacher educators concerned to prepare pre-service teachers for a future in which inclusive education is increasingly realised in schools, we are studying the affordances and limitations of schools which educate students with disabilities or special educational needs.

The context of the study

Inclusive education in South Africa

Some background to inclusive education in South Africa, and some information about the teacher education programme in our institution context will help to situate the research and

² Terminology is fraught, and the nuances of various identifiers have led to their rejection and revision. We signal our distinct unease with terminology that signifies individual deficit, and suggests unproblematic classification or categorisation of students. This issue is, however, beyond the scope of this paper, and we find ourselves corralled by the selection of the research topic into a discourse of ‘special educational needs’ in the context of ‘special education’.

findings. Apartheid's legacy was not only a racially divided education system, but also one which divided students according to (dis)ability. A well resourced special education system of separate special schools was in place for white, and to an extent 'coloured' or Indian students, with no state provision of special education services for black students.

Constitutional (Republic of South Africa (RSA) 1996a) and legislative (RSA 1996b) provisions laid the foundation for inclusive education in South Africa. The publication of White Paper Six: Special needs education (Department of Education (DoE) 2001) then provided a framework for the implementation of inclusive education, with subsequent departmental guidelines offering further details on realising its ideals. While White Paper Six addresses a variety of issues (including how inclusive education is to be understood in South Africa; the barriers to learning that South African students may experience; and funding strategies), its relevance to our research is the way in which special education is positioned within the inclusive education system. Special schools, now desegregated, and no longer offering a separate curriculum, are deemed to have an important role in South Africa's envisaged inclusive education system. Recognising the professional expertise of teachers in these schools, and acknowledging the material and technical resources available in special schools, policy dictates that they are not only to remain on the educational landscape, they are to be "strengthened" (DoE 2001, 3). Students deemed to have 'high support needs' are to be educated in special schools, and these schools are expected to act as resource centres to support the development of inclusive schools. Many small towns in South Africa do not have special schools, but in Johannesburg and surrounding municipalities, in addition to mainstream³ schools, there are a number of special schools, representing both the independent and the state sector. These special schools are by no means homogeneous. While policy states that special schools should be reserved for students with 'high support needs', the reality is that a variety of learning needs are represented in special schools, with some students enrolled in special schools simply for their wheelchair accessibility. There are some special schools designated only for students with learning disabilities (sometimes called 'remedial schools') and others which are 'disability specific' (like schools for students with autism, low vision or who are d/Deaf). The most recent statistics show that 0,9% of all South African students attend special schools, amounting to 108 240 students in 442 special schools (Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2013, 28).

³ In South Africa, the word 'ordinary' is used in official documents to signify schools that are not special schools. We have used the term 'mainstream' in this article as it is the term with popular currency, and is reflected in our data. Other contexts may refer to these schools as regular schools, or to the general classroom.

Teacher education for inclusion in our institution

Our university, situated in Johannesburg, offers a four year pre-service teacher education qualification – a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed). Pre-service teachers are taught the principles of inclusive education through a hybrid of an infusion approach with dedicated coursework within a compulsory third year education theory course called “Diversity, Inclusion and Pedagogy”. Enabling epistemological access for all students (Morrow 2007) is a theme that is explicitly and implicitly addressed throughout the programme, and pre-service teachers are introduced to inclusive education as part of what it means to promote learning for all. In each of the four years, pre-service teachers undertake two practicum sessions which are supervised and assessed by university teacher educators. In their first, second and fourth years, pre-service teachers complete a practicum in mainstream schools in and around Johannesburg. In their third year, however, pre-service teachers who have shown acceptable levels of classroom competence are encouraged to undertake a practicum placement in a ‘diverse’ context or in a school with ‘diverse’ students. In these cases, supervision is provided by teachers in the schools, and pre-service teachers are required to complete a number of reflective and analytical tasks in addition to their regular lesson preparation, all of which are submitted for evaluation on their return to the university. With inclusive education being explicitly and implicitly taught in coursework throughout our B.Ed programme, we are interested in discovering the extent to which learning for inclusive education is possible in the context of a special school practicum.

Methodology

We designed a qualitative study within an interpretive tradition (Merriam 2009) to explore pre-service teachers’ expectations, experiences and what they report learning from practicum placements in special schools. This article reflects findings from three sets of focus group interviews. The first were held with the participants before the practicum in the special school, the second were immediately on their return to the university, and the third were nine months later after they had completed a final practicum in a mainstream school. By the third focus group interviews, they had completed the coursework component in inclusive education and so had had the opportunity to use the theory of the coursework to reflect on their experience of practice. We draw primarily on what pre-service teachers revealed about their learning from the special schools in the third and final focus group interviews, with some

reference made to the earlier focus group interviews⁴. Our study is limited. It is a small-scale, practice-based research project within a particular context, and our findings must be regarded as tentative and not necessarily generalisable.

Participants

Having secured approval for our study from the university ethics committee, we invited the nineteen pre-service teachers who had requested a practicum placement within a special school in their third year of study to participate in the study. Fifteen pre-service teachers agreed to participate, fourteen of whom were women. The participants represented diverse race groups, and all but one were specialising in primary and junior high school (grades 4 – 9) teaching. To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of our findings, we provide details below about participants and the placement contexts to enable readers to consider the extent to which findings are transferable (Creswell 2013).

Table 1: Participants and schools they attended

[Insert table 1 here]

Most participants voiced a desire to learn more about the nature of disabilities of students who attend special schools and to learn about how this affected teaching and learning in these contexts. Some had more personal reasons for requesting a special school placement. Jenni expressed her interest in the field as a result of her brother's need for additional support for learning, and Kim was considering a post-graduate degree in inclusive education after obtaining her B.Ed. It is therefore reasonable to note that from the outset, the participants in this study were not only self-selecting, but also particularly interested in learning more about supporting students with additional educational needs.

Data Collection

The three sets of focus group interviews were convened at the convenience of the participants and we used semi-structured and open-ended questions to guide the interviews. During the first set of interviews (before the practicum in special schools), we explored participants' reasons for requesting a special school placement and their expectations of the practicum.

⁴ For details of our findings from students' responses during and immediately after the practicum in the special school, please see Walton, E. and L. Rusznyak 2013. Pre-service teachers' pedagogical learning during practicum placements in special schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 36: 112-120.

The second set of interview questions (after the pre-service teachers completed their special school practicum) asked participants to reflect on their experiences and learning in during their time observing and teaching in a special school. The third set of interviews (after a subsequent practicum in a mainstream school) sought to investigate how, if at all, pre-service teachers believed their learning or experience in the special school practicum had impacted or influenced their teaching in their subsequent practicum in a mainstream school. Participants were prompted to give specific examples to illustrate their responses.

The value of focus group interviews is its time efficiency and its potential to generate rich data as participants build on one another's ideas as they contribute to a discussion (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011; Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook 2007). However, we are also conscious of its limitations. We recognise the potential for participants dominate the discussion in ways that may make one participant's perspective to influence others. We therefore took care in the presentation of our findings to include examples of students' quotes only where that perspective was shared by participants in at least two of the focus group interviews held. We also recognise the potential for bias because of the unequal power relations between the participants and us as both teacher educators and researchers. To reduce the impact of these unequal power relations, we presented ourselves to the participants as researchers who wanted to learn from them about their perspectives and their experiences with the aim of strengthening the practicum experiences for future cohorts of pre-service teachers. We are also mindful that participating in an interview may increase pressure on participants to offer socially acceptable, rather than honest responses (Fisher 1993; Nederhof 1985). While this potential for bias could not be completely eliminated from the study, we sought to reduce its impact by keeping the focus groups small and in guaranteeing participants of their anonymity in the publication of the research. All names used in the account of findings below are therefore pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

The focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for accuracy and to enable us to make extensive use of participants' own words. The transcriptions were our primary data, which we subjected to an explicitly deductive analysis (Mason 2002) in that we borrowed categories from the seven areas that Loreman (2010a) regarded as essential for pre-service teacher education for inclusion. We sorted the data into these categories (Merriam 2009). We acknowledge the shortcomings of this approach, that it limits the generation of

new categories and that emergent categories are likely to be better suited to the data (Glaser and Strauss (1967), cited in Merriam 2009). In this study, however, we were not looking for new or emergent categories, but were concerned to ascertain the extent to which essential areas of learning for inclusive education which have been determined in the literature could be realised in special school practicum placements.

Findings and discussion

Our findings and discussion are presented under the headings of Loreman's (2010a) seven areas of essential learning for inclusive education, with our addition of 'critical sensibilities' suggested above. We show the extent to which we can see pre-service teachers' experience in the practicum placement in the special school contributing to their learning for inclusive education and comment, where appropriate, on where our findings relate to South African and other literature.

Understandings of, and attitudes to diversity and inclusion

Diversity

Loreman (2010a) finds that understanding the value of diversity is essential for pre-service teacher learning for inclusive education, and that teachers must understand their role in meeting the needs of all their students. In South Africa, one of the listed competencies for beginner teachers is that they must "must understand diversity in the South African context in order to teach in a manner that includes all students" (RSA 2011, 56). Practicum placements in special schools cannot be said to promote an understanding of all the many diversities that characterise the South African student population, but they do seem to promote an understanding of learning difficulties, including those related to disabilities.

Engaging with pre-service teachers' expectations and apprehensions prior to the special school practicum provides us with insight into the attitudes and assumptions that the pre-service teachers in our study held about children with disabilities. We see the effect of a separate special education system on the perceptions of pre-service teachers as they approach the experience with a mixture of fascination and fear of the unknown. Tasfiah, for example, said, "I hardly see people with disabilities so I don't know what to expect". Kim echoed this sentiment saying, "You don't know what actually to expect ... you're told all these stories..." She did not elaborate on what "these stories" were, but others had been warned of students who "throw desks at the teacher" or "masturbate in the classroom". Kholiswa requested a

special school placement because of attitudes that prevail in her community that result in children with disabilities being hidden at home:

I've never been around severely disabled kids, so I want to experience that so it's not a shock. From the communities we live in, it's not very often that you actually get to see a kid who has special needs ... In the black community the kid is [considered to be] bewitched, and the family hide the kid.

With few exceptions, the analysis of our data supports Chambers and Forlin's (2010, 75) assertion that "many pre-service teachers have had little or no previous contact with students with disabilities". Sadie, apologizing for what she thought was a "mean question", asked "How 'remedial' are the students? Are we working with students whose brains don't function?" Others, like Surita, explained how they had always "taken an interest in little children who are not normal". The mainstream schools to which the pre-service teachers were accustomed were designated as 'normal' in the pre-service teachers' discourse with the special school being viewed as a foreign place, and their attitudes reflected common stereotypes and prejudices.

In the focus group interviews immediately after the practicum in the special school, disability awareness was fore-grounded by pre-service teachers as they commented at some length about the types and relative severity of disabilities they had encountered. After their subsequent practicum in a mainstream school, pre-service teachers' understanding of difference was explained mainly in terms of their ability to identify and respond to different learning needs. In particular, pre-service teachers recounted a new "awareness" of, and "sensitivity" to learning difficulties. Alice expressed this as "I've always kind of noticed that there are children who struggle a bit in mainstream schools but after having been to the special school you actually notice how much more they're struggling". Kim, too, believed that she was "able to identify the children with learning disabilities a lot quicker than I did in the mainstream school before and I think it's just having that experience at a special school." Both Sue and Surita felt that the special school practicum had enabled them to look beyond certain behaviours to understand underlying difficulties. Surita, for example, explained this by saying,

"Before going into a special school I never really thought about what issues may be lurking behind a child being naughty or hyperactive or just fidgety ... It made me more sensitive towards them".

These extracts show how the participants explicitly attribute their increased awareness and sensitivity to their experience in the special school. Congruent with Chambers and Forlin (2010, 82) who maintain that authentic experiences with people with disabilities enable pre-service teachers to learn to “develop empathy with people with different needs”, the encounter with children with disabilities has led to an enhanced awareness in our pre-service teachers of the challenges experienced by some students.

Inclusive education

Loreman (2010a, 129) finds evidence in the literature to suggest that pre-service teachers need not only to develop a positive attitude to inclusion; they also should understand “the benefits of and principles behind inclusion”. Before the special school practicum, there seemed to be general acceptance by the pre-service teachers in our study that there is a distinct category of student “with special needs”, with no doubt but that these students ought to be educated separately in special schools. Once in the special school, however, Karl and Caryn were struck by how many of the students in a special school would be able to cope with some support within a mainstream school. By the final interviews at least two pre-service teachers, who had up until then been reasonably positive about working to support students with special needs in mainstream schools, indicated strong views against the viability of inclusive education. After her practicum in a public mainstream school, Jenni was insistent that teachers in mainstream schools “just can’t spend those extra hours with the few individuals that are struggling ... And I think that it’s actually doing an injustice to them keeping them in a mainstream school”. This corroborates Lambe and Bones’ (2008) finding that Northern Irish pre-service teachers were concerned about the inability of mainstream schools to support students with special needs effectively, and that special schools were better positioned to do so. Sue did not offer a reason for her negativity about inclusive education, but her experience led her to pronounce, “I’m quite against inclusive education and from what I’ve witnessed I just feel that the idea sounds so good on paper but it doesn’t work and it won’t work”.

Pre-service teacher negativity towards inclusive education is not unknown in the literature, but this negativity is usually related to feeling underprepared for the demands of the inclusive classroom (Sharma, Loreman and Forlin 2008). In our case, the negative attitude to inclusive education seems to have been engendered by a particular type of special school practicum

experience. By matching the pre-service teachers' comments either in favour of, or in critique of separate special education with the type of school they attended for the practicum, we are clearly able to see that pre-service teachers who experienced well functioning, well resourced, and usually independent special schools emerged from the placement arguing for the benefits of separate special education. These benefits included a slower pace of work and more individual attention in smaller classes (Alice, Sadie and Kim), and accessible buildings and availability of therapists (Dawn). In some cases, this effect was amplified when the pre-service teachers' subsequent mainstream placement was with teachers who feel overwhelmed by the existing demands on them or within school environments that are reluctant about providing additional support for students with learning difficulties. Those whose special school was functioning less optimally tended to be more critical of separate special education.

As teacher educators, we are forced by these findings to consider whether the practicum placement in a special school does more than send the "mixed messages" that Loreman (2010a, 62) cautions about, but in fact may sabotage our mandate to prepare teachers who are able to teach effectively in classrooms where students have diverse learning needs. Slee (2011, 155) is scathing of teacher education that "consorts with conservative forces to maintain oppressive social relations" by forging "an impossible union" between special and inclusive education. We thus find ourselves grappling with questions like whether we are in fact legitimising the place of separate special education by facilitating practicum placements at these schools, when in fact we would like pre-service teachers to be critical of the processes and practices that exclude some students from mainstream schools. But if all that the special school practicum placement achieved was to dissuade some pre-service teachers about the viability of inclusive education, we would abandon the practice. Instead, there is evidence of some valuable learning that can take place in the special school practicum, that is transferred to the mainstream classroom, and which makes a significant contribution to the skills and knowledge set that inclusive teachers need.

Inclusive instructional planning

Loreman (2010a) describes inclusive instructional lesson planning as including planning for variations in learning pace and style, universal access and multiple formats and approaches. Pre-service teachers across the three final focus groups explicitly identified the special school practicum as helping them to plan lessons more effectively for diverse students in their classes in the mainstream school. Tasfiyah explained that the special school practicum

experience “makes one more aware so when you go to a mainstream school. It benefits you: to structure your lessons; to plan differently; to take everyone’s needs into account.” The following two aspects of inclusive instructional planning for lessons were evident from the data:

Multiple presentation formats

Presenting information in a variety of formats is one way that teachers can acknowledge the diverse learning needs of students as they plan lessons (Loreman, Deppler and Harvey 2010). Alice explained how she drew on her experience in the special school as she planned her lessons, saying, “In terms of planning the work it made me think of how would this be taught at a special school?” She proceeded to give specific detail in this regard which we were able to verify from her tutor’s reports and lesson plan. She explained that she was sharing preparation with another pre-service teacher (who had not been to a special school for a practicum) on the topic of an acrostic poem. Alice recalls,

Another pre-service teacher didn’t think that they [the students] needed notes on a poem. She just thought that introducing it, telling them what they needed to do was fine. And I said, “No wait, but there are those kids that even though you’ve told them that, they’re going to have to be able to see something visually because just hearing it they’ll forget or they won’t understand properly”.

Universal access through differentiation

As a result of being in a special school, pre-service teachers felt able to differentiate their lessons to promote access and learning for all the students in their classes. Sadie expressed this as

Planning your worksheets, making sure that there’s information that the weaker kids (sic) understand but at the same time making it interesting for the stronger students (sic) as well. So it’s just getting that diversity and where to pitch your lesson. It just makes it that much easier having been at a special school.”

Talia credited her special school experience with her new ability to “adapt lessons to enable everybody to learn - not only the stronger children and just ignoring the weaker students.” Given the fact that South African teachers have reported challenges in differentiating teaching (de Jager 2013), the confidence that these pre-service teachers express regarding their ability to work with diverse learning needs in one classroom is promising.

Instructing in ways conducive to inclusion

Teaching in ways that are conducive to inclusion include peer tutoring and small group learning, techniques for universal access, using multiple formats, differentiation, adapting resources, and using resources to support the learning needs of individuals (Loreman 2010a; DBE 2010). Across all three final interviews we have found evidence to suggest that the special school practicum has explicitly contributed to pre-service teachers' ability to teach in ways that promotes learning for diverse students. Jenni, for example, explains,

You are given the opportunity to work with special needs students (sic) where you have to develop new strategies and new teaching styles.

The strategies identified by our participants in this regard were peer tutoring, using multi-sensory approaches to represent content and engaging with individuals to support their learning needs.

Peer tutoring

A strategy that pre-service teachers learned from the special school practicum and incorporated into their teaching in the mainstream school was peer tutoring. Dawn said that what she had done when students were struggling with maths was "pair them up with a stronger student". Kiara also said that she "used other students to explain topics, especially with Maths. We were doing long division and they just weren't getting it so then I was using the ones who did get it to help teach."

Multi-sensory representations of content

Learning to use visual representations to enhance learning was the instructional strategy most mentioned by pre-service teachers. Talia, for example, said, "I tried to incorporate different strategies such as using pictures for students who couldn't maybe read properly". Kiara supported this by saying "I also used lots of pictures and videos to make it more visual". Karl was particularly aware of students who needed "visual or oral resources" and who "would prefer maybe more visual or oral work". Surita, combining visual learning with concrete apparatus, expressly called on her special school practicum experience as she worked with a student who was finding it difficult to grasp division as she taught it. She recalls,

So I said, 'Ok fine, let's just take out whatever you have in your pencil case and let's try and work this out visually' because I remember when I did it in the special school we did things very practically so ... they first understood it by doing it physically.

Support for individual learning needs

As a result of her special school practicum, Kim reported that she found herself willing and able to respond to an individual's need for learning support. Similarly, Talia said that she is now "more patient now as a person. I'm able to sit with a student one on one and help them (sic) till *they* (voice emphasis in transcript) understand the work".

While some of the instructional strategies described by pre-service teachers seemed to be harnessed in an ad hoc manner in the mainstream schools, it was clear that the special school practicum had given them the confidence to attend to diverse learning needs in the classes they taught.

Collaboration with stakeholders

Both Loreman (2010a) and South African policy and literature emphasises teacher collaboration with a number of stakeholders. These include parents (Loreman 2010a; Engelbrecht, Oswald and Forlin 2006), other teachers and professionals (Loreman 2010a; Engelbrecht 2007) and teacher assistants (Loreman 2010a). Our study found that the special school practicum did not contribute much to pre-service teachers' collaborative skills. Only one final focus group interview elicited some conversation about collaboration, with Alice and Tasfiah suggesting that teachers should work more productively with each other to support learning for all. Alice's words in this regard were, "They [teachers] should create a community so that if one child is having a problem then maybe another teacher could address it in her classroom, so that it's not just one teacher trying to make a difference to a group of students." The point of "outside help" was extended by Alice who suggested that a school could ask "a psychologist to come in once a week" and Sadie who felt that the role of the therapists in the special school she attended meant that "You don't have to struggle as a teacher by yourself". Surita reflected briefly on the importance of having "an approach where you can work together with the parents" in discussing her response to working with a student who was experiencing difficulties. In none of these comments, however, did the pre-service teachers express their ability to collaborate effectively or even what collaboration might entail. They were simply able to identify that collaboration may be beneficial, and that it ought to feature in student support.

Engaging in meaningful assessment, lifelong learning and fostering a productive social

climate

These three aspects of essential pre-service teacher learning for inclusive education that Loreman (2010a) identified barely featured in our participants' responses. Assessment was entirely absent from all of our data, not just the final focus groups, suggesting that the practicum in a special school cannot necessarily be expected to contribute to a knowledge of assessment for and of learning in the context of inclusive education. However, our inconclusive finding might be attributable to the short duration of the practicum session, in which there may have been few formal assessment opportunities.

Engaging in lifelong learning was only raised in one of the final focus group interviews. Alice thought that teachers should "go for training" and Karl said that he would need ongoing learning opportunities which he described as "that little bit extra that can help us go the extra mile ... because we never know what kind of students we might have". The latter comments resonate with Loreman's (2010a, 131) contention that pre-service teachers need to be able to "seek out professional development activities as required".

In Loreman's (2010a,131) literature review, fostering a positive social climate includes teaching social skills, explicitly demonstrating welcome and acceptance of all students, effective behaviour management and developing classroom routines that "promote learning". Only one pre-service teacher, Surita, mentioned how her special school practicum had given her ideas for classroom management in a mainstream school. She said that, "I tried to use other methods, like counting to three or clapping or just playing statue games in order to get their attention, which I learned from the special school." Behaviour management was, however, an issue that had been quite extensively discussed in the focus groups immediately after the practicum in the special school, with pre-service teachers commenting on how they had observed their supervising teachers interacting with students exhibiting challenging behaviour. With Surita as the exception, this issue was not raised again, suggesting that the special school practicum may not have played much of a role in developing pre-service teachers' ability to manage the social climate of the classroom to promote learning.

Critical sensibilities

We have included this category in our findings because our data analysis shows that several (but not all) pre-service teachers who completed a special school practicum developed some sense of critique towards exclusionary practices in both special and mainstream schools. In

the final focus group interviews, some pre-service teachers repeated the critique of separate special education that had been voiced immediately after the special school practicum. They recalled harsh words and unkind treatment of students in the special schools where they were placed; the low behaviour and work expectations some teachers had of their students; and the exorbitant costs of independent special schools and the long waiting lists to get a place there. Dawn registered her critique in terms of concerns regarding prejudice and discrimination:

[T]he drawbacks of a special needs school are great. The children [with disabilities] do not interact with other children, and the so-called normal children do not get the opportunity to interact with children with special needs. I would like to argue, in fact, that it is this segregation that promotes the prejudices and intolerance that society has for disabled children.

With regard to exclusionary practices in mainstream schools, Talia, was critical of teachers who "...felt that if a child had a learning problem they would immediately send them to the special class because they felt they didn't have time for children who are different". Karl was also critical of the tendency to send students to segregated special schools, saying, "You can't just push that one child aside and send them to a special school because they might have a slight problem that we can address in the mainstream school". Surita bemoaned teachers who sent students out of the class for poor academic performance by asking "What is leaving him outside going to do to [help] him?"

Considering the variance in participants' perceptions about the benefits of special schools and the feasibility of inclusive education, it seems that our concerns that the placement may validate the mainstream/ special school dichotomy were not unfounded. The findings of this study alert us as teacher educators to the need to explore the possibilities of providing more guidance in interpreting the experience (Burant and Kirby 2002) for future cohorts of pre-service teachers doing a practicum session in special schools. This means engaging critically with the fact that there is potential for students to experience exclusion within both mainstream and separate special education contexts. Conversations with practising teachers, headteachers and students themselves could add valuable 'insider perspectives' (Messiou 2006, 306) that would give pre-service teachers more nuanced understandings of the complexities of inclusion and exclusion.

Summary of findings and conclusion

Our study suggests that the three areas of most promise for pre-service teacher education for

inclusive education offered by the special school practicum are:

- An exposure to children and young people with disabilities and learning difficulties, with a concomitant growth of sensitivity and understanding of the need for an appropriate pedagogical response
- An enhanced confidence in their ability to plan lessons in ways that promote learning for all students
- An enhanced ability to draw on a range of instructional strategies to enable learning for all.

These represent significant affordances, especially in the South African context where it has been found that teachers (including pre-service teachers) do not feel themselves able to identify barriers to learning and are negative about implementing differentiated teaching strategies that would meet a wide range of learning needs (de Jager 2013). A practicum in a special school may draw pre-service teachers' attention to the need for collaboration and ongoing professional development, and may offer them opportunities to learn productive classroom management techniques. It is also possible that the practicum in the special school may make pre-service teachers more critically aware of exclusionary pressures and practices that operate within the education system.

It is, however, in our analysis of the evidence of some pre-service teachers' reflections in the final focus group interviews that the limitations of the practicum placement for developing knowledge and skills for inclusive practice must be acknowledged. The exposure to special schools has resulted in some pre-service teachers being convinced of the benefits of separate special education, the inability of teachers in mainstream schools to respond appropriately to the demand to provide additional support for some students, and, in a few cases, to articulate how vehemently they are opposed to inclusive education. These sentiments do not bode well for an education system committed to the (gradual) implementation of inclusive education, with teachers in mainstream schools being increasingly expected to teach students with varying learning needs, especially in contexts where separate special education is not available. Our findings thus point to the importance of mediating the special school practicum for pre-service teachers. Experience, as Dewey (1938) reminds, can be miseducative. Pre-service teachers require "critical guidance" (Darling-Hammond et al 2005, 418) in the form of seminars, readings and feedback if they are to benefit from learning in diverse contexts. In addition, teacher educators need to provide occasions for "guided reflection" to enable pre-

service teachers to “make sense of what they have seen and heard” (Banks et al 2005, 266). So we would contend that pre-service teachers completing a practicum in a special school need structured opportunities before, during and after the experience to interrogate critically both the history, current role and practices of separate special education, as well as the potential and limitations of inclusive education. We suggest that Slee’s (2011, 157) question of “who benefits from the current arrangements” provides a useful frame for pre-service teachers to consider the extent to which different models of educational provision promote the aims of social justice for children with special educational needs.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the study, we conclude that the potential affordances of the special school practicum are sufficient to continue to encourage these placements. In particular, we regard as valuable the opportunity for pre-service teachers to be exposed to children with disabilities and learning difficulties and the potential the special school practicum offers in prompting pre-service teachers to think productively about what it means to plan and teach in ways that are responsive to the learning needs of children.

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