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A Creative Partnership:

Enhancing Research, Policy, and Practice in Brisbane Catholic Schools

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INTRODUCTION

Catholic schools in Queensland have provided educational opportunities for children with special needs for many years, but not until 1985 was an official policy on the inclusion of special needs children in regular schools ratified. The development of individuals is clearly set out in the policy document.

“Catholic special education focuses on the individual, and aims to facilitate the integration of faith and life as they are experienced in the family, school, Church and community. It involves a matching of individual needs with a range of service alternatives, including personnel, approaches, programs materials and equipment.” (Queensland Catholic Schools and Special Education, 1985).

Because there are special needs children currently enrolled in regular Catholic schools, an urgent need exists for the Australian Catholic University to inform undergraduate students of current policy and to provide appropriate introductory training. This thinking is in line with recommendation 3, published by the Advisory Council for Special Educational Needs in 1990. The recommendation is as follows:

“That higher education institutions provide compulsory units of study to prepare teachers to support pupils with special education needs.” (The Way Ahead, 1990:21).

Staffing limitations at the Australian Catholic University Queensland (A.C.U.Q.) early in 1990 prevented the employment of a full time lecturer in the field of Special Education and alternative means of staffing an undergraduate unit had to be investigated.

The Brisbane Catholic Education Centre (B.C.E.C.) provides ongoing support and inservice education for teachers of children with special needs. Young graduates were entering the teaching profession with insufficient knowledge and understanding of special needs children and thus the need for an undergraduate unit within the Bachelor of Teaching became evident. A coalition of staff of ACUQ and BCEC was formed late in 1990 and work began to design a suitable framework for the unit.

This paper will examine the unique design of the unit, a research study to measure changes in knowledge and attitudes of the students, and the implications for organisations that develop creative partnerships.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SPECIAL NEEDS UNIT

Literature Review

Research has presented a picture of factors and conditions that are related

to the successful integration of children with special needs. These factors and conditions were considered in the development of the unit.

Teachers who perceive themselves as competent to effectively teach disabled students are more likely to view the integration of students with special needs as successful (Hayes & Gunn, 1988; Thomas, 1988). However, Horne (1983) suggests that teacher competence to provide appropriate growth experiences of an intellectual, psychological or emotional nature cannot be merely assumed. Teachers need to be provided by a means, by the education system, to increase their competencies in working with students with special needs.

The positive attitude of the teacher towards teaching disabled children and integration has been identified as essential for successful integration (Dodd, 1980; Hayes & Gunn, 1982; Schmelkin, 1981). Yet data indicates that educators, in general, hold unfavourable attitudes toward disabled students (Leiper, 1988; Horne, 1983). Student outcomes are likely to be affected by the attitudes and associated behaviours of the teacher (Hayes & Gunn, 1988). Any effort to develop the positive attitudes of teachers at the preservice level of teacher education is a worthwhile pursuit.

Support services external to the school are crucial for successful integration. Thomas (1988) found that the best single predictor of teacher support for integration was the attitude of the "contact" special educator. Quality communication between regular and special educators forms the basis for co-operative relationships which contribute to successful integration.

Teachers' knowledge and understanding of the integration process (Horne, 1983) and participation in the decision-making process (Morgan & Rhode, 1983) are factors that relate to integration success. Teachers' enthusiasm for the teaching tasks are more likely to be retained if they have knowledge of what and how to teach the child, and the power to make those decisions. Therefore, they need a thorough knowledge of the planning process for special needs children, and the professional freedom to develop appropriate programs.

Past experiences with integration have been found to have variable effects on teacher attitudes. Thomas (1988) found that traumatic experiences with disabled children resulted in negative attitudes in all but one case studied. In a sample of preservice teacher students, Allen (1978) found that those with previous experience of disabled people expressed more negative attitudes towards a policy of integration. On the other hand, Harvey & Green (1984) demonstrated that teachers who had experience with handicapped children were slightly more favourable disposed towards integration.

In summary, the successful integration of students with special needs into regular classes is influenced by the perceptions of personal competence that teachers have, the positive attitude of the teacher toward teaching disabled children and integration, the support services provided to the

teacher, teachers' knowledge and understanding of the integration process and participation in decision-making about students, and past integration experiences.

Criteria for Unit Development

The authors of this paper met on many occasions and, after much discussion, several criteria emerged, providing guidelines for the development of the unit. The criteria were as follows:

- the unit must be compulsory for all Bachelor of Teaching students in their third year of study.
- expert lecturers with current practical experience would be invited to plan each module and deliver the major lecture.
- the students need practical field experience within the unit;
- close contact with at least one special needs child is required.
- care needs to be taken to ensure that the students develop a positive attitude towards special needs children throughout the unit.
- students need to gain knowledge of specific disabilities
- students need to gain skills regarding meeting the needs of individual children in schools.
- students need to be informed of BCEC policy, enrolment support processes and teacher support.
- the roles of parents, teachers, administrators and consultants must be included;

The unit was structured as follows:

Lecture: 1 hour per week

Tutorial: 2 hours per week

Modules

| | |
|----------|---|
| Week 1: | Introduction to exceptionality |
| Week 2: | Programming to meet the needs of exceptional children |
| Week 3: | Theories and models of teaching |
| Week 4: | Monitoring student progress |
| Week 5: | In school |
| Week 6: | In school |
| Week 7: | In school |
| Week 8: | Classroom Management |
| Week 9: | Behaviour Management |
| Week 10: | Student factors - hearing impairment |
| Week 11: | Seminar presentations |
| Week 12: | Seminar presentations |

Lectures were provided by BCEC staff and tutorial assistance by the university.

Unit Assessment

1. Reflective journal - weekly readings

2. Independent research of a specific disability - written paper as a child study
3. A seminar presentation

Teachers, parents, resource teachers and consultants were invited to attend the seminar presentations in Weeks 11 and 12. Within these seminars the students presented information about a specific disability which they had studied, and related this knowledge to the special needs child with whom they had worked.

Rationale for the content of the unit:

The content of the unit built on the statements set out in the QCEC policy document. Since most of the graduates will eventually teach in Catholic schools, it was important that the knowledge and skills developed through the unit be consistent with the mission of Catholic education, and with the current approaches to learning that are valued by Catholic schools.

The experiences of consultants and class teachers gathered from inservice activities were also used as a guide to the overall content. For example, teachers often say that the behaviour management of some students is a more stressful and difficult aspect of teaching than teaching students with significant intellectual disability. Difficult decisions were made about what to include in the unit and what to omit.

Many units of study focus on students learning about specific disabilities in a sequenced approach. This unit focussed on the teaching/learning process and not disabilities per se. When students undertook their child study they were able to focus on one disability area and explore in depth, with the intention of providing appropriate teaching/learning experiences for the child. The result, therefore, was a more meaningful search for specific information.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

The aim of the research study was to measure the changes in:

- knowledge of people with disabilities, their educational needs within the Catholic educational system
- personal competence and willingness to teach disabled children.
- beliefs about the human rights of the disabled and their families.
- attitudes to the disabled and their educational provision.

METHOD

Instrument:

A 42 item true/false survey was developed from the ground up to meet the aims of the research study. For this unique situation no other instrument

was found to be appropriate.

The instrument consisted of 18 knowledge items and 24 items on the following factors:

- beliefs about students' own competence
- knowledge of and experience with disabled people
- attitude to teaching disabled students
- willingness to change to suit the needs of individuals
- attitude to disabled people
- beliefs relating to human rights of the disabled and their families

Data Collection

The instrument was used prior to commencement of the unit of study and after its completion.

Data Analysis

A series of t-tests was conducted on the factors set out in the aims of the research. A factor analysis allowed for an examination of the weightings of each item. A second series of t-tests was conducted from information gained from the factor analysis. From those t-tests other factors emerged of possible importance:

- a teaching factor - beliefs about competency
- personal feelings - disabled people
- rights of disabled and parents
- personal experience with disabled
- integration/segregation

RESULTS

This was an exploratory study which was searching for significant changes in knowledge and attitudes to a probability level less than .05. Results are presented in Table 1.

Significant changes from pre-test to post-test occurred in three factors: knowledge of disabilities, beliefs about personal teaching competence and attitude to disabled persons. Ceiling effects at both pre-test and post-test level occurred for two factors: willingness to change to meet individual student needs and beliefs about the human rights of the disabled and their families.

DISCUSSION

The authors were delighted (and relieved) to discover that changes in knowledge occurred to a significant degree. It would be expected that the students would learn something in a unit of this nature, and quite alarming

if they did not.

The change in students' beliefs about their own competence to effectively teach disabled children was a very important outcome of the study. Teachers often perceive themselves as lacking the competence to cope with and cater for students with special needs. (Hayes & Gunn, 1988; Thomas, 1988).

Students overall increase in attitude to the disabled was a pleasing result, indicating that close contact with disabled children in the regular school had a positive effect.

Refinement of the instrument is necessary for future use. Factors which achieved a ceiling effect should be replaced. More questions on each factor need to be developed. A wider range of answer choice would be more appropriate in the revised instrument. A 5 point Likert scale may be trialled.

Students tend to have a 'rosy glow' of expectation about teaching the disabled until they are faced with the reality of it. Results that showed a negative change, though not significant, could indicate that field practice and closer contact with disabled students has produced a more realistic picture of what awaits them in the classroom.

Limitations of the research study

As this was the first time a special education unit had been offered within the Bachelor of Teaching at the Australian Catholic University, new ground was being explored. The instrument used was not able to be trialled and some items have been found to be ambiguous. Other items reached ceiling effect at pre-test level and were not good discriminators of change. Using a true/false response system also limited the measurement of the responses.

Benefits

Benefits derived from implementing this special education unit as a joint venture were far reaching.

The Australian Catholic University benefitted in the following ways:

- The inclusion of a unit on special education for all Bachelor of Teaching students provided a more complete and well-rounded course;
- Students were able to gain hands-on experiences in teaching disabled students integrated into regular schools through practice teaching episodes set up specifically for this purpose;
- A partnership with BCEC consultants was developed throughout the planning and implementation of this unit.

Benefits from the point of view of Brisbane Catholic Education included:

- Young teachers will enter the teaching profession with a raised awareness of the wide range of abilities of children that they may be asked to teach;
- These teachers will have had some experiences of ways of teaching students with special needs and been exposed to skill development in this field;
- Future inservice provision on teaching special needs students will be able to use previous experiences as a basic foundation upon which to build knowledge and skills.

The benefits of the unit for students included:

- An increased knowledge, attitude and awareness of special needs children;
- The opportunity to observe and work with special needs children and their teachers in regular schools;
- Contact with special education consultants from the employing authority who will, in future, support the young teachers in the field.

A unit evaluation, conducted at the completion of the unit, was very positive. Suggestions of improvement from students, lecturers and tutors will be carefully considered, and appropriate changes made before the unit is conducted again.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS THAT DEVELOP PARTNERSHIPS

Organisations that develop partnerships which lead to enhancement of services for both are obviously worth exploring. Development of partnerships such as this one can provide:

1. Access to a greater pool of experience, knowledge and expertise leading to an enhancement in the quality of outcomes.
2. Contact with the needs and desires of the recipients of the services, in this case schools, is gained through another avenue. Consultants servicing the schools can provide valuable insights for the teacher education authorities to utilize in course and unit development.
3. Cost effectiveness is preserved as short-term contracting of staff for the conduction of small projects requires a minimum of full-time permanent staff. A preventative model reduces the future need for inservice provision.

4. The fostering of good relationships between two organisations with

different purposes, but with a shared vision, is healthy for both. Ultimately, both organisations want well-educated, competent teachers in the workforce.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to describe a unit within the Bachelor of Teaching at the Australian Catholic University Queensland. The formation of a partnership between personnel at A.C.U.Q. and B.C.E.C. enabled the unit to be produced and implemented. An exploratory research study examined changes in students over the duration of the unit. And finally, the implications for organizations who utilize resources through partnerships such as this one, were examined.

“Integration of special needs children can be intensely satisfying, extremely challenging, and rewarding for all involved. Or it can lead to frustration, loss of confidence, and creation of handicap. Through the efforts of researchers there is much information to indicate the pathways for success. Administrators and practitioners have it within their power to make the necessary changes, most of which require time, effort and organization, rather than monetary commitment.”

(Curtis, 1989)

TABLE 1

Comparisons of Mean Scores of Changes in Students' Knowledge & Attitudes

| FACTOR | N = | Mean | Standard |
|--------------|---------|------------|-------------|
| Deviation | t | | |
| Value | Degress | of freedom | Probability |
| (two-tailed) | | | |
| KNOW | 1 | | |
| 2 | 80 | | |
| 73 | 11.05 | | |
| 12.71 | 2.15 | | |
| 1.63 | -5.33 | 151 | .000* |
| ATTD | 1 | | |
| 2 | 80 | | |
| 73 | 16.37 | | |
| 17.34 | 3.46 | | |
| 3.68 | -1.67 | 151 | .096 |
| COMP | 1 | | |
| 2 | 73 | | |
| 59 | 1.68 | | |
| 2.47 | 0.91 | | |
| 1.35 | -3.99 | 130 | .000* |

| | | | |
|------|-------|-----|-------|
| KNEX | 1 | | |
| 2 | 79 | | |
| 73 | 2.05 | | |
| 2.26 | 0.84 | | |
| 0.68 | -1.67 | 150 | .097 |
| ATTE | 1 | | |
| 2 | 69 | | |
| 57 | 3.30 | | |
| 3.17 | 1.44 | | |
| 1.41 | 0.50 | 124 | .616 |
| CHNE | 1 | | |
| 2 | 75 | | |
| 65 | 3.66 | | |
| 3.60 | 0.52 | | |
| 0.52 | 0.75 | 138 | .456 |
| ATDP | 1 | | |
| 2 | 68 | | |
| 56 | 2.27 | | |
| 2.78 | 1.42 | | |
| 1.37 | -2.00 | 122 | .047* |
| BRDF | 1 | | |
| 2 | 75 | | |
| 72 | 3.84 | | |
| 3.83 | 0.40 | | |
| 0.50 | 0.09 | 145 | .929 |

NOTE:

| | | |
|------|---|---|
| KNOW | = | knowledge of disabilities |
| ATTD | = | attitudes regarding disability |
| COMP | = | beliefs about personal competence |
| KNEX | = | knowledge and experience of the disabled |
| ATTE | = | attitude to teaching disabled |
| CHNE | = | willingness to change to meet individual needs |
| ATDP | = | attitude to disabled persons |
| BRDF | = | beliefs about human rights of the disabled and their families |

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