

Teachers' attitudes to the integration of students with disabilities into regular schools: Policy to practice?

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Abstract

In Victoria, the right of all children to be educated in a regular school has been Ministerial policy since 1984. However, the issue of integration is problematical because of the ways that practitioners interpret this policy. One of the crucial factors which determines the relative success of integration is teacher attitudes to disability and to curriculum. This paper summarises the findings of our research into teacher attitudes. It is argued that it is folly to develop policies which define "what will be" without careful consideration of "what is".

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From policy to practice

Policy makers determine and disseminate government decisions to be implemented by public servants. The traditional pattern of communication between policy developers and practitioners is one of transmission of expectations: it is the epitome of top-down decision making. Generally, teachers are expected to implement policies as given; but are not involved in defining, redefining or actively constructing new ways of working and understanding education.

It would be assumed that a state government policy on the inclusion of all

children in regular schooling would be a powerful initial step towards enabling all students to experience integrated, appropriate education. However, to assume that change in realised social and academic curricula for children with disabilities will arise from change in policy is to ignore the roles which individuals and social groups play in maintaining the notion of disability in our society - and particularly within the institution of education. As Fulcher (1989: 270) notes, implementation of policy does not automatically follow its creation; for while legislative decisions may force apparent compliance, "law cannot achieve substantive rationality, or goals of the kind implied by free appropriate education". Policies tend to present directions which are couched in unproblematical terms. These are often statements of what "will be", with little recognition of what "is", are likely to have minimal effect on everyday interactions in classrooms. Bringing about educational change first involves both policy makers and teachers in recognising and confronting personal and situational constraints to change. All participants in the process must become aware of the disabling institutionalised structures which help shape and reproduce human attitudes and actions. They must examine their own traditional rôles - as teachers, administrators, parents or other members of the educational community, or as policy and curriculum developers - in shaping the notion of disability. They should also consider the effects of the policy itself - the impact of its existence, its history, its form and possible interpretations, as well as the degree to which it demands innovative human interaction and challenges familiar ways of working.

This paper reports on our research into the introduction of an integration policy for Victorian schools. We have found that integration, contrary to the intentions of the policy makers, is fast becoming another form of specialism - largely because of teachers' attitudes to disability. We argue that these attitudes are closely linked with the traditions of "special" education.

Integration in Victorian schools

While some children with both physical and intellectual disabilities have always been taught in Victorian schools as a matter of course, many have been designated as special school candidates and have thus not had the right to attend local schools of their parents' choice. This is still the case in other states of Australia. However, in 1984, Integration in Victorian Education (Ministerial Review Committee) declared that every child has a right to be educated in a regular school. This acknowledgement was a product of active lobbying by parent groups, but this was part of a wider social movement growing out of the philosophies of the seventies and early eighties which demanded equal access to quality education for all. The fundamental schooling reforms in Scandinavian countries (see Biklen 1985, Fulcher 1989), Australia's Karmel Report (1973), the Warnock Report (1978) in the United Kingdom, and the Regular Initiative Project in the United States (see Reynolds and Wang 1983) were representative of the growth of a "breaking down the barriers" attitude of the preceding years. Development of the Labor Party's Social Justice Strategy (1985) and continuing state budget initiatives throughout the late eighties supported

the process of increasing enrolments of Victorian children with disabilities into neighbourhood schools.

The acceptance of the Review's recommendations as government policy was met with general resistance in schools. Teachers felt that they were not trained to teach children with disabilities, that they would need a level of resource support that the state government could not provide and that they could not cope with a heavier workload. These assumptions were supported by the primary teachers' union, which developed its own policy as a response.

While both documents are superficially similar, and the union policy seems to be supporting the government's stance, subtle differences in wording have led to significant differences in practice. Close examination of union policy illustrates Fulcher's (1989: 270-271) claim that "educational aims and educational reforms are a matter for educators and are not achievable via the kinds of decisions made at government level". For instance, while the Ministry (1984: 13) determined that "every child has a right to be educated in a regular school", the Union policy (V.T.U. 1985: 290.1) stated that "Integration is providing the most appropriate education for each student in the least restrictive setting while ensuring the maximum useful association between students with disabilities and others, to the mutual advantage of both" (emphases ours). Such restrictive clauses were quickly taken up by teachers and administrators, discouraging parents from seeing integration as their children's right. This latter policy, like those of other state governments and teacher unions thus encouraged the previous practices of ascertainment and control over enrolment to be retained.

Further, the Victorian Teachers' Union demanded retention and extension of those very factors which characterise special schooling - withdrawal areas, training of teachers in specific responses to different categories of children and comprehensive resourcing based on assumed needs. It drew a distinction between enrolment (or entering a child's name on a school roll) and admission to classrooms, effectively creating a situation where children could be excluded from regular schooling. The union policy made no reference to curriculum change or to the necessity to adapt education according to the wide range of abilities, interests and experiential backgrounds of all students. Rather than echoing the government's attitude that children have the right to attend regular schools, the union produced detailed policy on possible breakdowns (such as failure to reach consensus) as well as alternatives such as partial integration.

Integration has been a fact of life in Victorian schools for about nine years, yet much of this resistance is still demonstrated in schools. It becomes very public when children with disabilities (although they can be easier to teach than many others) continue to be used as political footballs in industrial disputes over general wages and conditions. Before undertaking this research, we suspected that the existence of policies on special needs, and the union policy in particular, have helped to shape the way in which Victorian teachers perceive their roles in the integration process. We felt that they have served to reify common attitudes to disability and the way it should be "treated" in schools. It seemed to us that in the interests of teachers and other children, emphasis

on special needs has been allowed to overshadow the need to revise curricula, classroom practices and attitudes to the inclusion of all children. Thus the focus of our recent research was on teacher's perceptions of the integration process.

Methodology

In August, 1991, 194 primary and secondary school teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire about integration into regular schools. Half of these teachers had taught children with disabilities, while the others had no direct experience of integration. (However, integration is now a practice in most Victorian schools and has had extensive media coverage, so the latter group would have had indirect experiences and opinions on the matter).

The teachers were asked about their interpretation of the process of integration as well as its advantages and associated difficulties. We had noticed during our interactions with teachers that they did not have the same reticence about coping with physical disabilities as they did with intellectual disabilities. Because of the union policy focus on resourcing, rather than changing curriculum practice, this was a notion we wanted to explore. We sought, therefore, to ascertain reactions to the possibility of the respondents teaching children with different types of disabilities in the near future.

The questionnaires also provided data on years of teaching experience, grade levels taught and the gender of respondents. We were interested, for instance, in determining the validity of Bowd's (1986) contention that teachers who have had experience with children with disabilities have more positive attitudes to the integration process.

A coded-category analysis of questionnaire responses was undertaken. While tallying similar answers gave us a broad picture of teacher attitudes to education, as intended, more detailed questioning through interviews would have enabled a better understanding of reasons for teachers' answers to be obtained. While we did observe general correlations between personal and institutional factors (such as teachers' experience with integration or type of school) and their understandings of the integration process, no attempt was made to undertake a detailed statistical analysis of responses.

Perceptions of integration

In the main, (77% of respondents), teachers understood integration to be the mainstreaming or incorporation of students with disabilities into regular classrooms. In policy terms, they demonstrated little awareness of the unconditional nature of the integration process as recommended by the Victorian Review, adding clauses such as "if the child can cope".

Perceptions of integration varied from an absence of any segregation to situations where children are segregated within the mainstream setting (such as in "opportunity" grades), but most interpreted integration as "normalisation". Some thought of integration as a part-time process involving dual enrolments.

The emphasis by the majority of respondents on mainstreaming suggests that children are expected to be assimilated into the normal practices of

teaching and learning. For instance, some teachers described integration as the "placing of impaired children into a normal educational situation". At first glance, this seems commendable and in accord with government policy. However, very few respondents implied that there is a need for adaptation of the academic environment: generally the emphasis was on meeting established expectations. But as Booth and Swann (1987: xiv) note, "If we see the process of integrating pupils with disabilities as no more than providing access to a system of education whose basic design we do not question, we may simply reinforce the exclusion of other pupils."

The effects on other pupils was of concern to teachers, but in terms of teacher time rather than curriculum change. The time required to develop separate programs, to attend special meetings and to apply for resources were factors mentioned consistently, echoing an understanding of integration as special education rather than the provision of educational activities accessible to all. Teaching time was also a concern, with the most commonly mentioned concern of teachers (34%) being the fear of spending too much time with integrated students, to the detriment of other children in the class. In fact, it is clear from the comments of teachers that many of them consider integration as just another form of special education, with strong emphasis on support for special needs in order to enable children to cope with a limited but run-of-the-mill curriculum. We found that it is also common for teachers to describe integration in terms of administrative, rather than pedagogical, processes. For instance, thirteen teachers, in defining integration, merely outlined the administrative procedures involved in ascertainment and the setting up of support services. Certainly there is extra paper work and meetings associated with integration, so teachers can find themselves caught up in the administrative mechanics of the process.

We found that while teachers who have been involved in the integration process were more likely to recognise the necessity of providing for different levels of learning within classrooms, emphasis is still placed on the resourcing of "special needs" rather than on changing pedagogical practices. While several respondents commented on the need to create "a least restrictive environment" in terms of physical access and social accommodation, as well as the development of independence, none mentioned equal access to academic opportunities. Swann (1985) points out that technological aids and building design have enabled the ready integration of students with physical and sensory disabilities. However, this does little to guarantee access to appropriate curricula. Many of the respondents stated that they would be prepared to teach children with physical disabilities rather than those with intellectual disabilities. Again, this implies a willingness to adapt the physical environment, as opposed to undertaking the types of curriculum innovations which make education more accessible to all.

The general impression we gained from the questionnaires, however, is that the majority of Victorian teachers support the idea of integration. Experience with integrated students, being female, having less than 11 years of teaching experience and teaching in primary schools were four factors which had a positive correlation with supportive attitudes. These factors are interrelated to some extent and were predictable. Secondary

teachers, for instance, have had less experience with integration, and are more inclined to be male. Teachers, administrators and parents associated with primary schooling have had more experience with children with disabilities: it is only now that larger numbers of integrated students are progressing to secondary colleges. Secondary teachers are more concerned about the achievement of what is perceived as success within particular disciplines, leading to (particularly in maths and science areas) a narrower view of learning.

In secondary schools, much emphasis is placed on students progressing through a structured curriculum at a regulated pace. With its common focus on competitive assessment and striving to meet year-based objectives, the secondary curriculum is often thought of as less flexible than primary expectations. Assessment procedures are more restrictive and evaluation strategies usually favour physically and linguistically able students, with an emphasis on speedy recall of information and fluent expression. Secondary teachers are also more exposed to, and therefore concerned about, social relationships as students strive to establish individual identities. Primary children usually accept differences, whatever their basis, more readily than socially more conscious teenagers. There is not the same emphasis in young children on either conformity or socio-economic and sexual awareness. Nearly all of the teachers (25%) who feared that there would be attitudinal barriers by other teachers, students and the community were teachers from secondary schools.

Experience with integration has been demonstrated to have positive effects on the attitudes of both teachers and fellow students (see, for instance, Bowd 1986, Guralnick 1981, Harasmymiw and Horne 1983, Stainbeck and Stainbeck 1982). This was certainly borne out by our findings, with inexperienced but older teachers demonstrating more fixed, negative attitudes. We found that teachers who had been teaching for 11-25 years were least inclined to accept integration and to demand resources before admitting children with disabilities.

All teachers who commented positively about integration saw the major advantages of integration to be in the social sphere. Every respondent referred to the development of social skills in either the integrated children or their peers. Approximately half of the respondents, for example, mentioned socialisation or a broadening of life experiences or the provision of role models as positive aspects. It was also recognised that not all of the social advantage is for the students being integrated. Two-thirds of the teachers surveyed mentioned that integration has distinct advantages for other students in the school. Many commented that working and playing with peers who have disabilities teaches children to accept and tolerate differences. A small number of respondents (8%) also mentioned that integration has some advantages for teachers in that it encourages them to broaden their teaching skills and to be more flexible in their program planning.

While recognition of these positive factors is commendable, placing focus on the social and attitudinal domain with little emphasis on academic possibilities is symptomatic of the beliefs teachers hold about disability; and reflects the typical curricula in segregated settings. We believe that it a pity that these comments were generally the first and main advantage

cited by teachers, rather than, for instance, access to a broad curriculum. Lack of funding and special training were reasons commonly cited for feeling insecure about involvement in integration programs. This data supports that of Madden and Slaven (1983) who found that the major reason many teachers (in Britain and America) resisted the idea of having children with disabilities in their classrooms was that they doubted their own professional competencies. A belief in the need for specialist training is common in Victoria where integration has become very much a resource issue, with the number of "integrated" children growing remarkably as children who once would have been labelled "slow" or "badly behaved" have been seen as potential drawcards for extra teacher and resource allocations to schools. This has led to a huge increase in the number of children labelled as needing assistance in state schools, despite actual growth in numbers of children attending special schools. Even children with disabilities who were coping well in regular classrooms have been assessed by "experts" for the purposes of proving a need for extra support. There are also strong expectations regarding specialist support and extra staffing with teacher aides as well as the ready supply of special equipment. It seemed that little has changed since 1972, when Shotel, Iano and McGettigan (1972) found that most teachers expect extra assistance and resources if they are to teach children with disabilities. These attitudes - products of how we perceive integration as yet another specialist field - were evident in responses to the questionnaire.

A curriculum issue?

Of the 194 respondents, only one defined integration in terms of pedagogy. While many used the official government/union definition of a process of "increasing" and "maintaining" educational access, only this teacher implied that integration involves changing teaching practices to make curriculum content and skills more accessible for all children. While access, in terms of educational opportunity, and success are the key implication of the Ministry's policy, the union policies and interpretation by individuals has led to a major change of focus.

A major factor which affects how willing a teacher is to teach all children is self interest. Because teachers and administrators have had some choice in the matter in the past, or at least been protected by traditional formalised ascertainment procedures, they expect to maintain the power of selecting their pupils. The vestiges of this power is evident in the maintenance of a distinction between enrolment and admittance. Similarly, either partial enrolment or substantial withdrawal is used to reduce classroom contact hours, and responsibility for designing "lifeskills" activities is often given to an integration aide or designated teacher. Such allocations mean that administrators and teachers can maintain a supportive veneer while taking minimal responsibility for educating children in a manner which assumes that they have viable, productive futures. Meanwhile the children's energies are used largely in contexts of marginalisation and exclusion while their parents are encouraged to think of this as an appropriate form of schooling and a practice which is in the child's best interest. At the same time, other children (our future teachers and parents) are being given the same messages through the hidden

curriculum, which Fitzclarence and Giroux (1984) define as the messages, values, and ideologies that are transmitted tacitly to students by schools, through curriculum, classroom relations, or modes of instruction.

It is understandable that teachers continue to think of children with disabilities as belonging in a different pedagogical category from other children - and then as being members of further disabled sub-sets with common learning abilities, appropriate teaching strategies and educational needs. Educational bureaucracies and many teacher training institutions continue, through the provision of "special" settings and "appropriate" professional courses to imply that these children have educational requirements which cannot be met by classroom teachers. Professional bodies of specialists (psychologists, guidance offices, tertiary educators, support personnel and teachers aides), as well as teachers who have undertaken courses in different educational "treatment" of some children have hard-won territory to protect. Vast schemes (with their attendant personnel) of health, welfare and education support depend upon the retention of traditional notions of handicap. This raises the question of whether much of what is being achieved by State departments legislating for integrated education is being undermined by growing support for special settings and specialist support.

Professional literature on teaching for particular disabilities abounds. This material is founded on, and assures its market by promoting, gross generalisations and assumptions about how different disabilities will affect learning styles and abilities. Given this socialisation, together with the fact that most teachers have not grown up alongside people with disabilities because they have been isolated in their own "educational" institutions, it is not surprising that many teachers think that they are not trained to teach children with disabilities. Patterns of pedagogy are ingrained in our psyche, reproduced from generation to generation by the way teachers act and the way students experience schooling. Since traditional curricula are rarely challenged, teachers are largely unaware of "patterned inequalities, institutional power, ideologies (and) ... the internal dynamics of how a system works and for whom the system is not functional." (Everhart 1979: 420).

Even the "mainstreaming" literature generally focuses on special strategies for coping with difficult cases, as opposed to research on teaching strategies which both provide and maintain effective learning for a wide range of children with diverse backgrounds, interests and abilities. And focus on special strategies tends to imply that teaching practice is distinct from curriculum.

Conclusion

It might be expected that implementation of policies would result from communication of expectations through written documentation, but we would argue that school discourses and teacher's preconceptions are also powerful determinants of practice. Within general policies, and within constraints of institutional practice, there is room for individuals to make substantive changes to the educational experiences - the realised curricula - of students. It is possible for an administrator or teacher to understand the intentions of policy makers very clearly but to interpret

policies in such a way that the rights of children are affected. The attitudes teachers have toward the integration process and to different types of disabilities, we argue, is a major factor in determining the educational experiences of children with disabilities. Furthermore, we suggest that the willingness of practitioners to implement an integration policy substantively is affected by teacher's knowledge of the special education process.

We recognise that it is a mistake to attempt to separate teacher's understandings of policies from their attitudes to disabilities or from the practices of schools as institutions. All three areas are inextricably entwined. Personal, institutional and wider social notions of disability are similarly linked - social constructions which we continue to reify through policy making, schooling and teacher education.

It seems that the existence, form and interpretations of government and union policies have been more effective in creating another specialist area in our schools, rather than leading to the development of educational access for all students. While teachers continue to regard integration as being another form of specialism, with "special needs" being met through the provision of extensive resourcing, the intentions of the policy makers will be distorted and withdrawal systems will be perpetuated. While the Ministry of Education has been successful in increasing and maintaining numbers of children with disabilities in regular schools, it is obvious that attitudes of teachers towards integration are affecting the educational provisions being made in schools.

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