Beyond Disabilities:
Broadening the View of Special Needs and the
Inclusive Education Challenges Facing Primary Teachers

Barry A. Fields

University of Southern Queensland
PO Darling Heights
Toowoomba
Australia, 4350
Abstract

Previous research on teacher attitudes and responses to inclusion has focused predominantly on the pedagogical challenges posed by students with disabilities in regular classes. The special education literature has been slow to recognize the significance of the impact of student diversity on the work of teachers and the reality that classrooms today are populated with children who, while they may not have a recognized disability, nevertheless have a wide variety of special educational needs. This paper reports the findings of an exploratory study on the relative inclusive education challenges posed to primary teachers of a diverse group of students. Teachers were presented with 14 case descriptions of students in the form of vignettes. The students depicted were characterized as having special needs associated with such factors as disability, cultural difference, dysfunctional family background, emotional/psychiatric status, socio-economic disadvantage, geographic mobility, etc. The teachers were asked to rate the students depicted in the vignettes on the level of difficulty they would have in providing an inclusive education for them and to identify what specific characteristics or attributes of the students they would find most challenging. This paper reports the findings of this investigation and discusses the implications of the findings for both pre-service and in-service professional development.
Introduction

Teacher attitudes towards the integration and, more recently inclusion of students with special educational needs have been the focus of much research over the past two decades (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000a; Center & Ward, 1987; Hastings & Oakford, 2003; Jamieson, 1984; Siegel & More, 1994). Such research has established that teacher attitudes are pivotal to the successful implementation of inclusive education, and, while teachers are, on the whole, supportive of inclusive education, their attitudes towards student placement and inclusion, both positive and negative, are influenced by a range of factors. Such factors include the category or type of disability, teacher education, years of teaching experience, experience in working with special needs children and the availability of support services (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996).

While previous research on teacher attitudes to inclusion has highlighted the importance of the above mentioned factors on the successful inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular classroom, there is little research that explores teacher attitudes towards supporting and including students who present a variety of other special learning and/or social-emotional needs. As described by UNESCO (2001), inclusive education means that:

…schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups. (p. 4)

Such a description of inclusive education raises the sometimes overlooked but important fact that inclusive education goes beyond just including students with disabilities, but also takes into account a range of other special learning, social and school adjustment needs. With this in mind, the study reported here will not only explore teachers attitudes towards the inclusion of students with varying types of disabilities but will also survey teacher attitudes regarding the inclusion of students with other special needs, needs that relate to cultural and socio-economic background, emotional/behavioural status, and home/family dynamics, etc.

Teacher Attitudes to Inclusion

Interest in the teacher attitudes to inclusive education is not new. There have been numerous studies conducted over the past several decades on this issue. These studies confirm that teacher attitudes are one of the most influential variables in the success of inclusion initiatives (Hastings & Oakford, 2003). As Avramidis et al. (2000a) point out, for inclusion to be successful, the people at the heart of its implementation, that is teachers, need to be accepting of and committed to its principles and demands. Where this acceptance and commitment is not evident, inclusive education is generally not achieved.
A large scale study of inclusive classroom practices in 15 European countries (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2003) revealed that for teachers to possess positive attitudes towards students with special needs, they must have a genuine willingness to respond to individual needs and to see responsibility for the education of all students as an essential aspect of their work. Where this willingness is not evident teachers are more likely to shift responsibility for the education of difficult or challenging students to others e.g. special education teachers, or to resist making necessary changes to their pedagogy.

Inclusive education, ultimately involves teachers dealing with a larger diversity of students in their classrooms and adapting and differentiating the curriculum to meet the broadened range of student backgrounds, characteristics, interests and needs. Increasingly, educators are recognizing that dealing with the demands of student diversity is one of the most significant issues affecting teachers today (Kilvert, 1997). A range of factors have been found to influence teacher attitudes towards inclusion (Hastings & Oakford, 2003; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; and Soodak, Podell & Lehman, 1998). One factor stands out in this research. Teacher attitudes are strongly influenced by the nature of the disability or special need.

In a research synthesis conducted by Scruggs & Mastropieri (1996), research studies from 1958 through to 1995 that surveyed teachers regarding their perceptions of including students with disabilities were examined. The findings revealed that support for inclusion was directly related to the category of disability, with teachers more accommodating of students with mild disabilities than those with more severe disabilities.

Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden (2000b) found that student teacher attitudes towards inclusion were positive, but that their perceived competence was significantly affected by the severity of the children’s needs. Children with behavioural-emotional disorders were seen as more of a concern than students with other types of special needs. Similar results were found by Hastings & Oakford (2003) in their study of student teachers. The main finding from this study was that children with behavioural-emotional problems were considered to have a more negative impact on the teacher and on other classmates than were children with intellectual disabilities.

Studies by Forlin (1995) and Soodak et al. (1998) found that teachers were most willing to include students with physical disabilities and least willing to include students behavioural-emotional disorders. The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2003) also established that behavioural, social and/or emotional problems were the most challenging for teachers within the context of inclusion. Other special needs that were also considered to pose a significant challenge to teachers included specific learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities and multiple handicaps. In line with these findings, Soodak et al.’s (1998) study went so far as to report that teachers in fact discriminate against students with different disabilities, expressing hostility towards students with learning disabilities and behaviour
disorders and greater receptivity towards students with hearing impairments and physical disabilities.

Avaramidis & Norwich (2002) concluded that this variance in teacher attitudes towards different categories of disabilities can be attributed to the perceived instructional and managerial skills required to include these students in the classroom. The types of disabilities that are perceived to bring the most challenges to the daily practice of teachers are in turn those that teachers hold the most negative views of and are least willing to teach and to provide for. Consistently these students are those with behavioural-emotional disorders.

The experiences of ESL and gifted and talented students in the context of inclusion have received some attention in the literature (Siegel & Moore, 1994; Youngs & Youngs, 2001) as have indigenous Australian students (Education Queensland, 1994). Little systematic research has been conducted on the myriad of other student characteristics and background variables that place students at risk in terms of educational opportunity and quality of education.

**Study Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore teacher perceptions of the relative challenge posed by a wide variety of students with special needs and to extend research that has focused predominantly on the attitudes of teachers to the inclusion of students with traditional categories of disability.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study addressed three main questions:

1. How challenging would teachers find the task of providing an inclusive education for a range of students with special educational needs, and
2. How successful would these teachers believe they would be in providing a curriculum and employing a pedagogy that would be inclusive of and responsive to the needs of these students, if they were in their class?
3. What were the major reasons for the difficulties the teachers would have in providing for the needs of the most challenging student with special needs?

**Subjects**

The participants in this study were 36 regular class primary school teachers enrolled in an in-service course in special education at a regional university in Queensland. While the sample is not representative of all primary teachers in Queensland, it is representative of the very large number of teachers who are currently undertaking masters level in-service programs in the state. The majority of the sample of teachers were female There were just 10 males in
the sample. The year level taught by the teachers ranged from year one to year seven, with 13 teachers teaching in a multi-age setting. The average year level taught was four and the average years of teaching experience was six years.

Data Collection Instrument
The teachers in the study were presented with fourteen short case descriptions of students with varying characteristics, behaviours and special needs (see Appendix 1). The case descriptions were presented in the form of vignettes. As argued by Avramidis et al. (2000b) and Avramidis & Norwich (2002), providing specific descriptions of the behaviours and personal characteristics commonly associated with types of special needs, as in the form of vignettes, can eliminate the problem of teachers having multiple interpretations of the same special need type or category. Seven of the vignettes depicted traditional disability categories - intellectual disability, specific learning disability, physical disability, hearing impairment, language/communication disorder, emotional disorder and gifted. The remaining vignettes depicted a range of other special needs including socioeconomic disadvantage, indigenous learner, cultural and linguistic difference, geographic mobility, behaviour disorder, psychological disorder and homelessness.

The teachers in the study were asked three questions in respect of the vignettes:

1. If this student were in your class, how challenging would you find it to effectively cater for and respond to the student’s learning, behavioural and/or social needs?
2. Given a goal of inclusive education is to provide a curriculum and to employ a pedagogy that is inclusive of and responsive to the needs of all students, how successful do you feel you would be in achieving this if this student were in you class?
3. Focusing on the student you identified as the most challenging in respect of providing for their needs (Question 1), what would be the major reason for your difficulty?

Participants rated the first question on a five point Likert scale from 1 - ‘Not Challenging’ to 5 - ‘Extremely Challenging’. A similar five point Likert scale was used for the second question, with 1 being ‘Very Successful’; and 5 being ‘Not Successful’. The third question was posed as an open-ended response item.

RESULTS
The results for the first question: “If this student were in your class, how challenging would you find it to effectively cater for and respond to the student’s learning, behavioural and/or social needs”, are summarized in Table 1.
Table 1

Perceived Degree of Challenge in Responding to Student Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th>Distribution of Teacher Ratings</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie (Intellectual Disability)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony (Specific Learning Disability)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca (Physical Disability)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul (Sensory Impairment)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh (Communication Disorder)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brendan (Emotional Disturbance)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise (Gifted &amp; Talented)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenny (Indigenous)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron (Behaviour Disorder)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla (Mobility)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hashim (Cultural Difference)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly (Psychological Disorder)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal (Socioeconomic Disadvantage)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda (Homeless)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Five students stood out as being a major challenge to teachers when posed with the responsibility for providing for their learning, behavioural and/or social needs. These were Cameron (Behaviour Disorder), 4.17; Hashim (Cultural Difference), 4.17; Brendan (Emotional Disturbance), 2.92; Rebecca (Physical Disability), 2.64; and Josh (Communication Disorder), 2.11.
Difference) 3.86; Holly (Psychological Disorder) 3.81; Paul (Sensory Impairment) 3.58, and Lenny (Indigenous) 3.19. Least challenging to the teachers in the study were Katie (Intellectual Disability) 1.97; Louise (Gifted & Talented) 2.03, and Josh (Communication Disorder) 2.11.

The results for the second question: “Given a goal of inclusive education is to provide a curriculum and to employ a pedagogy that is inclusive of and responsive to the needs of all students, how successful do you feel you would be in achieving this if this student were in your class” are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Perceived Success in Providing an Inclusive Education for Students with Special Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th>Distribution of Teacher Ratings</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie (Intellectual Disability)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony (Specific Learning Disability)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca (Physical Disability)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul (Sensory Impairment)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh (Communication Disorder)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brendan (Emotional Disturbance)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise (Gifted &amp; Talented)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenny (Indigenous)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron (Behaviour Disorder)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla (Mobility)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hashim (Cultural Difference)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The five students identified as the ‘most challenging’ (Question 1) were also identified as the students for whom the teachers in the study expressed the least positive view about their capacity to provide an inclusive education (Question 2). The order remained largely the same, with the exception of Holly (Psychological Disorder) replacing Hashim (Cultural Difference) as the second student for whom the teachers expressed a difficulty in meeting a major goal of inclusive education. Cameron (Behaviour Disorder) was identified as the student posing teachers with the most difficulty.

The teachers in the study were asked to identify the key ‘difficulty’ they would experience in providing for the special needs of the student they rated as the most challenging. Ten reasons were identified and these are summarised in Table 3.

### Table 3

**Reasons for Identifying a Student as Most Challenging**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher time the student requires</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative impact on other students</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of professional support</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress created by the student’s behaviour</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant disruptions to instruction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High level of individual support required</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of professional knowledge</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-female attitude</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance of cultural differences</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrealistic expectations that teachers should be able to manage difficult student behaviour</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study, albeit exploratory in nature, confirm earlier findings on the relative challenge and difficulty teachers have with providing an inclusive education for students with emotional or behavioural problems. The student rated the most challenging – Cameron, presented a cluster of behaviours and characteristics that were stereotypical of oppositional-defiant disorder. In many ways this finding was not unexpected, behaviour management is rated as the number one professional concern of teachers (Vinson, 2002). Further, the literature on student behaviour problems and behaviour management consistently point to aggression and defiance as the most challenging student behaviours to deal with in the classroom (Fields, 2004).

Holly, who exhibited many of the behavioural characteristics of Bi-Polar Disorder was rated third most challenging and second in terms of the students the teachers in the study signaled out as the ones they would have the least success with in providing an inclusive education. There is a growing recognition in Australia of the number of school children in our schools who have psychiatric disorders (Nurcombe, 2005). This is a ‘new’ category of special need for which teachers, along with other professionals, are expected to provide support. Few would deny that teacher education programs around the nation, at the pre-service and in-service levels, barely acknowledge the nature of this problem let alone provide training for teachers in this area.

Two of the five ‘most challenging’ students were distinguishable by their cultural characteristics and differences. The concerns expressed by the teachers in this study about their capacity to cater for the needs of these students, reflects (1) a growing awareness of the increasing cultural diversity of the student population in Australia, (2) the impact of this diversity on efforts to provide an inclusive education for all students and (3) is most likely a signal that more needs to be done in both pre-service and in-service teacher
education to better prepare teachers to more appropriately respond to this classroom reality (Fields, 1999).

Of the five students identified as the most challenging and the ones teachers felt the least positive about their capacity to provide an inclusive education for, just one had a recognised disability. This student was Paul, who was hearing impaired. It should be pointed out that in Queensland, for example, behaviour disorders of the type exhibited by Cameron (Conduct Disorder) are not recognised as a disability area for which formal special education support is provided. The least challenging students, as identified by the teachers in this study were Katie (Intellectual Disability), Louise (Gifted & Talented) and Josh (Communication Disorder). All of these students have recognised disabilities or special needs for which most state education systems in Australia provide formal educational support. These findings represent a strange anomaly i.e. special education support is more readily available for students whom teachers are more confident that that they can provide an inclusive education for, and less readily available for children teachers have the most difficulty with.

Over that past two decades the shape of special education in Australia has changed considerably both in terms of its place and status within the broader education system and in terms of its guiding principles e.g. social justice and inclusivity. What has been slower to change is special education’s student clientele. The focus continues to be on traditional disability groups. The needs of disabled students are great and they warrant all the support they can get. But there is a larger group of students in our schools whose needs, in many cases, are just as great but who do not have the formal recognition and organised support they and their teachers arguably need. The credibility of special education would appear to be very much on the line today if efforts are not made to broaden its horizons and to rethink what students it advocates for and is prepared to support.

References


Center, Y., & Ward, J. (1987). Teachers’ attitudes towards the integration of


Appendix 1

Vignettes

Case Study #1

Katie has significant problems in retaining information and as such her achievement across all curriculum areas is very low. In comparison to her peers, she is very socially immature and has a low self-esteem. She has few friends and is overtly rejected by many of her classmates. Katie’s parents are overly protective which has resulted in her having limited social/recreational experiences.

Case Study #2

In early primary school Lenny showed considerable potential, but of late his achievement and motivation have deteriorated. School attendance has been erratic and along with a number of other indigenous students at school he has been involved in fights in the playground and vandalism of school property. His parents are defensive and critical of teachers when they are contacted about Lenny’s behaviour.

Case Study #3

Tony has a very short attention span and who experiences a specific difficulty in learning to read which creates problems in several subject areas. He is normally a well behaved student but at times is prone to impulsive behaviours and hyperactivity. He is of normal intelligence and comes from a supportive, middle-class family.

Case Study #4

Josh is a hard working polite boy. He stands out because of a very obvious speech disfluency. He repeats sounds, words and phrases, as well as drawing out sounds. Whenever he stutters he blinks continuously. He gets frustrated with children and teachers who finish sentences for him. Some older children tease him and this visibly upsets him. Any tasks related to oral presentations he finds overwhelmingly difficult.

Case Study #5

Cameron is very negative in his attitude towards school and school teachers. He always needs pushing to get him to do any work in the classroom. He is frequently rude in the manner in which he responds and often he is openly defiant. He blames others for his behaviour and can be spiteful and vindictive. At home he acts in much the same manner. From the time he was very young he was allowed to get away with defiant and uncooperative behaviour.

Case Study #6

Rebecca experiences involuntary muscle spasms down the left side of her body. She is able to move around unaided but her capacity to participate in a range of physical and fine motor activities is limited. Rebecca requires considerable individual support to learn and her speech is jerky and slurred. She has a small circle of friends and comes from a supportive family background.
Case Study #7

Carla is new to the school and this is her third new school this year. She lives mostly with her father now who is constantly relocating to find employment. Carla has missed a lot of school and her achievement level across most subjects is quite low for her age. It's always an issue as to what grade she should be placed in. She finds making friends difficult and those who are friends with her are irritated by her always talking about where she and her mother and father used to live.

Case Study #8

Paul has difficulty hearing and understanding spoken language. He has poor reading comprehension and poor speech production. He is frequently frustrated and irritated by lesson tasks and is socially immature. Paul's parents strongly reject any consideration of transferring him to a school with a special education unit. They are both very demanding in what they want done in the way of support for Paul.

Case Study #9

Outside Hashim’s school “Lebs rule” is graffitied on the wall. Hashim is a member of a group of about ten boys who hang out together in and out of school. He calls it a friendship group. Hashim struggles with his schoolwork and can’t see himself ever getting a worthwhile job, a problem his older brothers have experienced. In class he is loud and often rude. He believes he is disliked by his teachers, particularly female teachers and he recounts several instances of being racially taunted by police.

Case Study #10

Brendon is very low achieving and requires a considerable amount of one-on-one attention. His speech and language development is delayed and he has difficulty relating to other students. During class time he compulsively fiddles with pens and pencils. Any changes in routines cause him to become unsettled and angry. Concerned about his progress, Brendan’s parents have employed a tutor to assist him with his school work at home.

Case Study #11

Holly is totally unpredictable and highly distractible. She goes through several mood changes in a single day. The situation is the same at home and she is receiving medical help. At times she is full of energy, impulsive and loud. She is prone to ‘explosive rages’, the management of which exhausts her teacher. At other times she is quiet and withdrawn. Her ability is difficult to assess, but her achievement levels are very poor.

Case Study #12

Louise has an exceptionally detailed general knowledge and a verbal proficiency well above average for her age. Her academic achievement is mostly of a high level but she sometimes performs inconsistently. She is generally cooperative but sometimes can be stubborn when torn away from tasks that interest her. She is also a perfectionist and very self-critical which often leads to high levels of frustration. Louise’s parents are very supportive of her and are always pushing for her teachers to take her beyond the regular curriculum for her grade level.
Case Study #13

**Crystal** has been described as a ‘square peg in a round hole’. She just doesn’t fit in very well at her school. Her performance in school is very poor. Homework is rarely completed and basic school materials e.g. exercise books and pens, need to be provided to her. Her school uniform, when she does wear one, is worn and dirty. Her unemployed single mother is very young and seems not to be able to cope with the demands of raising her three children.

Case Study #14

**Miranda** is essentially a homeless child. While she lives with her mother and stepfather on occasions, but after a short while she finds the experience unbearable. She drifts from accommodation at a friend’s place, to temporary shelters run by church groups, to living on the streets. She attends school because it provides some stability and continuity in her life, but she feels alienated from most teachers and many of her peers. Achievement is rock bottom, although she displays considerable ability in some areas that interest her. Her health has deteriorated and she is known to engage in antisocial behaviour with other street kids.