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# The Perceptions of Secondary Teachers and Students about the Implementation of an Inclusive Classroom Model for Students with Mild Disabilities.

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*Abstract: This research used qualitative methods to gather the perceptions of regular classroom teachers and students with and without mild disabilities (MD) about an inclusive program implemented in three separate classrooms and designed to enhance both the academic and social engagement of a small number of students with MD. Teachers acknowledged that these strategies resulted in improvements in their classroom approach and in positive outcomes for students. Two of the three teachers considered that the strategies resulted in limited academic gains, but provided opportunities for students with MD to enhance their social experience. All students were positive about certain changes to their classroom, particularly in working with their peers, but did not see the classroom teachers' instructional methodologies as being different, despite a series of changes to the classroom pedagogy. Teacher and student discussions about the strategies implemented are presented and the implications for practice, teacher education and future research are discussed.*

## Introduction

Debate over the most effective approaches to facilitate the inclusion of students with mild disabilities (MD) into regular classrooms have gone on for over a decade (Gerber, 1995; Manset & Semmel, 1997; Swanson, 2001; Zigmond, 2003; Fore, Hagan-Burke, Burke, Boon & Smith, 2008). It is assumed that students with MD have been identified as being the most likely beneficiaries of inclusive classroom approaches (Department of Education & Training, Western Australia, 2005), and their segregation has long been regarded as a cause for concern given their academic and social similarities with peers (Dunn, 1968; Will, 1986). However, discussions about the effectiveness of inclusion programs of students with MD within academic literature appear to have reached an impasse. On one hand, Zigmond, Jenkins, Fuchs, Deno and Fuchs (1995) in an examination of several inclusive programs noted limited academic success for students with MD; on the other McLeskey and Waldron (1995), commenting on the same programs, suggest we need to be realistic about academic outcomes and compare these with achievement in segregated environments.

Addressing this stalemate, Carrington (2007) suggested that an inclusive program's success may ultimately depend on the individual teacher's attitude and pedagogical approach. The conundrum facing those who advocate more inclusive approaches is that teachers may not be able to change their attitudes (and in turn overall pedagogy) unless they employ techniques that engage all students (Slee, 2007); and yet, as Vaughn, Klingner, and Hughes (2000) suggest, teachers tend to favour instructional methods that are familiar and are often reluctant to engage in evidence-based classroom practices, regardless of perceived benefits. This paper argues that such research is necessary if the inclusion debate is to move from rhetoric to reality.

There is no shortage of research-based literature. As far back as 1992, Cannon, Idol, and West examined the teaching practices considered essential for students with MD in regular classrooms and provided a set of clear guidelines for 'essential' instructional practice. These guidelines arose from the deliberations of a 200-member expert panel (consisting of teachers, school administrators, program supervisors, teacher educators, and researchers) in a process that sought to establish consensus on teaching practice.

A series of statements on approaches regarded as being essential for students with MD in regular classrooms were endorsed by 95 percent or more of the panel members. These approaches included determining the instructional needs of students through curriculum-based assessments; modify curriculum materials to meet individual students' needs; translating objectives into active learning experiences utilising small groups for direct instruction; and presenting organised and meaningful information, with high levels of repetition and review. Cannon et al. (1992) noted that classroom practices valued by the experienced teachers and administrators who contributed to this research correlated with those practices regarded as being effective in the research literature.

Examining approaches for the inclusion of students with MD, Larrivee, Semmel and Gerber explored six school models in the U.S.A. and concluded that "there are alternate pathways to accomplishing desired outcomes for special needs students" (1995, p. 46). They acknowledged that alternative approaches could produce positive results, but argued that what appeared to be missing in the models reviewed models was a way for regular and special educators to share responsibility for the instructions for students with MD. As Vaughn, Wanzek and Denton (2007) point out (p. 363), the merging of school expertise (including special education teachers, classroom teachers, administrative viewpoints) and a clear appreciation of the structures that this might involve can result in real gains for 'included' students with MD.

Further explorations of inclusive programs for students with MD have included McLeskey and Waldron (2002), who used qualitative methods to examine pedagogical issues that arose from the implementation of inclusive programs in six American primary school settings. Interview responses from teachers and administrators indicate that inclusion resulted in fundamental changes to curriculum requirements, instructional and grading methods, and related expectations of student performance. A common response was the rejection of specialised instructional approaches, as it was felt that these did not "fit into the routine of the general education classroom" (p.52). Furthermore, it was found that the roles of teachers changed as a result of more teaming and collaboration.

While there have been numerous American studies examining the instructional and curriculum mechanisms that support students with MD few have been conducted in Australian schools. Center and Curry used commercial curriculum packages as a

way of including 26 students with MD from Years 3 to 6 who had been relocated to regular classrooms in a Queensland primary school. The focus of this research was a 'means by which regular and special education services can relate symbiotically without either losing its unique and necessary function' (1993, p. 218-219). However, apart from a reference to a support teacher taking full responsibility for small groups, there was little description of how the program actually functioned, or how it differed from other classes in terms of instructional programming, data keeping, assessment and management of resources; nor did it reveal the perceptions of the teachers and students involved in the program. There is little later evidence in the literature of what inclusive practice might look like in Australian schools and what teachers and students feel when they are involved in these programs.

O'Rourke and Houghton (2008) used the Student Perceptions of Classroom Support (SPCS) scale to determine the academic and support mechanisms most favoured by 60 secondary students with MD within regular classrooms. The mechanisms considered to be effective were often generic in nature and were generally seen as good classroom practice for all students, for example; the teacher making the class interesting and enjoyable, working with peers on meaningful projects, and having a teacher whom they liked.

On the basis of these findings four support mechanisms considered positive by students with MD were used to develop and implement support interventions in three separate classrooms and year levels (7, 8 and 9) using a multiple baseline research design (Kazdin, 1982) across participants and settings (O'Rourke, 2005).

The four support mechanisms: Team teaching, Interesting and enjoyable classroom content, Clear instructions, and Collaborative learning opportunities [TICC] were applied sequentially in an additive component design (all four mechanisms were eventually present in the classroom and then individually removed in the order in which they were introduced).

The substantial qualitative data obtained during the implementation of the *TICC* support program are examined in this paper. A full description of the support mechanisms and intervention schedule is provided in Appendix 1.

It offers a rare insight into the perceptions of Australian classroom teachers on the inclusion of students with MD and support mechanisms that facilitate this process. Providing further depth to this exploration the perceptions of focus and comparison students are also presented.

## Method

### Setting

The *TICC Support Program* was implemented at a medium sized K-12 Catholic school in Perth, Western Australia during the final term of the year. The secondary campus, where the participants in the study were located had 520 students of whom 38 qualified for special education assistance. In accordance with changing paradigms for more inclusive secondary classrooms, the school had recently moved away from separate core classes for middle-school students (Years 7-9) with disabilities.

**Participants**

The three teachers involved in the research were all experienced in teaching students with a range of disabilities. All volunteered to participate on the basis of personal interest and experience in the area. Prior to engaging in the study, all were given the *TICC Support Program* manual, which articulated key factors associated with teaching in inclusive classrooms. They were asked to use this as a guide for developing inclusive pedagogy during the research.

'**Fiona**' (Year 7) with over 20 years' teaching experience in a wide variety of roles (including early primary, upper primary and middle schooling), had several students with disabilities in her class, including one requiring high support.

'**Barbara**' (Year 8) also had over 20 years' experience as a secondary school teacher. In addition to her teaching, Barbara had a middle-management role and was seen as an important part of the middle school pastoral and discipline process. Barbara's class included several students with disabilities and an education assistant was often present to provide additional support.

'**Daniel**' (Year 9) although an inexperienced teacher, had worked previously as a carer at a setting for individuals with physical disabilities, and this experience provided him with valuable insights into working with students with special needs. The three teachers were interviewed at the completion of each intervention (see Appendix 2).

Six students in the three separate classrooms participated in this study. Three were diagnosed with a MD (described here as focus students) and three were comparisons (selected as 'typical' representatives of their year group). Each of the three focus students selected was eligible for special education assistance.

'**Darren**', the Yr 7 focus student, had significant learning difficulties. He had a diagnosed borderline intellectual disability and ADHD and was three to four years behind his peers in all academic areas. He had required academic support throughout his primary schooling.

'**Susan**', the Yr 8 focus student, had transferred from a nearby primary school only nine months prior to the commencement of this research. During her primary school years Susan completed all core language and mathematics classes within an education support environment. Susan had a mild intellectual disability and her academic skills were three to four years behind those of her same age peers.

'**John**', the Yr 9 focus student was in his second year at the school and had spent most of his time moving between regular and support classrooms. John had developmental dyspraxia which resulted in learning and fine motor difficulties. His academic skills were three years below his peers and, although he participated in regular core subject classes, he was more comfortable in the support classroom.

All three comparison students were academically able and had not received any adverse reports for classroom behaviour.

**Procedures**

The primary sources of data were through transcripts of semi-structured interviews. Teachers and students were interviewed during the *initial baseline phase*, at the completion of each *intervention phase,* and after the *return to baseline phase* to establish their perceptions of each of the four *TICC Support Program interventions*. All sessions were recorded using a Sony ® TCM-333 Dictaphone, and transcribed

using the open coding method, which involves breaking down the data into discrete parts that are then examined for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Common themes were established using a line by line analysis of the interview transcripts (see Table 1). The interviews ranged from 20 to 45 minutes in length.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Interviewer: | What sort of support do you find most helpful for students with mild disabilities in a regular classroom? | |
| | | Coding |
| Teacher: | I guess having another person to explain it more simply, who can spend more time one-to-one and suit the needs of individuals would be a plus. | *additional staff*<br>*simplification*<br>*more time*<br>*individualising* |

**Table 1: Example of Open Coding of Interview Transcript**

Additional data were obtained from the researcher structured analysis of observations in the classrooms. Visits were made to 80 per cent of the classes in which interventions were implemented. Of these observations over four hours of videotape recordings of the academic and social engagement of each of the three focus and comparison students were also obtained (resulting in over 24 hours of recorded observations). To establish the reliability of the observations a second researcher independent of the research, but experienced in video analysis of student behaviour, reviewed over four hours of classroom recordings (21% of observations). The overall inter-rater reliability was 93% (range 86-100%).

Lincoln and Guba (2007) in their discussion of naturalistic evaluation highlight the importance of prolonged engagement and persistent observation to enhance the credibility of findings. The interviews provided a prompt response to the interventions, while video analysis allowed intensive and repeated examination of classroom engagement and subtle changes in behaviour. Lincoln and Guba also discuss the notion of 'thick descriptive data' (p.19) to assure transferability of generalisations and this has been achieved to a certain extent by using three teachers and separate classrooms. Gersten, Baker and Lloyd (2000) suggest 'it is critical that research teams avoid relying on a single teacher to deliver the experimental approach' (p.7). The following research reports a balance between enthusiasm and indifference towards some of the implemented strategies, which Lincoln and Guba describe as assisting in developing a working hypothesis and keeping the inquirer 'honest' (p.19).

## Results

The interview transcripts provided a basis platform for discussion on the efficacy of the support mechanisms. This material also revealed the disparity between the classroom teachers' intentions and the students' interpretations of these efforts. The qualitative data have been introduced to reflect the teachers' and students' thoughts, before, during and after the *TICC intervention program*.

**Teacher perspectives about the focus students**

Fiona stated that whereas Darren could possibly find more academic success in a segregated support program, socially he was at ease within his class. There appeared to be no real correlation between his academic ability and his capacity to interact with peers: 'His weak academic performance doesn't seem to affect his social acceptability. That's a different ball game. A different set of rules'!

Fiona considered Darren difficult to teach. Earlier in the year he had exhibited behavioural problems, but these were now resolved. She described his inability to engage in classroom activities and listen to instructions in the following way: 'It's sort of like he just doesn't turn on. I mean that's just Darren. I've never struck anyone quite as bad as Darren. To perform at school is not a priority. He's just not interested in it'.

Barbara reported that Susan experienced difficulties in interacting within her class. According to Barbara, Susan was sensitive to the social implications of working with other students with disabilities, but struggled to make connections with others in her class. Barbara surmised that this was the way Susan saw herself in comparison to others:

> In a primary school situation there were probably certain kids that Susan felt comfortable with, but not in a high school situation where students are more aware of their uniqueness and the degree of acceptance during adolescence.

According to Daniel, John preferred to work with students in the classroom who were attached to the support program. Whereas Daniel felt there were practical reasons for this, such as students with MD being able to work together in back-up classes, undercurrents of exclusion existed within the classroom for students with disabilities: 'The kids generally accept the way they are and their abilities, but sometimes there can be little niggles about not wanting them (students with MD and other disabilities) in their group because of their level'.

**Teacher perspectives on inclusion: an assumed responsibility**

The three teachers said they were committed to inclusion and saw it as an assumed responsibility. The response of Daniel (T9) was typical: 'I consider it to be part of the job. I knew that they (students with MD and other disabilities) would be in my class when I started at this school'. He also highlighted that one of the problems with students with MD being involved in two programs (a regular and support program) was that, 'they might be out of class for two or three periods in a row and when they return you have to fill them in as best you can'.

All respondents believed that students with MD could find success in regular classrooms. Fiona suggested that academic and social engagement were both important, 'I think it depends how you define success. If it is defined purely from an academic point of view, they will not meet the standards of the rest of the class, but they can participate in the work and develop social skills'.

The three teachers acknowledged that meeting the needs of all students in mixed ability classes was difficult. The allocation of instructional time was a pervasive tension in all three classrooms. Fiona believed that specific behaviour issues in her classroom restricted the amount of time she had available to work with students with disabilities. She described these difficulties:

> If you have students with learning difficulties in the class, it is important that you have other students with the right attitude that are accepting of these students and highly motivated to achieve themselves. When you have a class like mine it is very hard to spend time with students with special needs because you are forever putting out bush fires.

**Intervention Phase 1: making the subject interesting and enjoyable**

The teachers provided opportunities for all students to engage in their Society and Environment programs by including artwork, quizzes and other high interest level activities. During the *intervention phase,* the Year 7 students made brightly coloured Aztec fans, described by Fiona as 'great levelers, in that you couldn't tell the difference between the top and bottom students'. She saw this has a highly inclusive activity and felt they all looked 'fabulous on the wall'.

Barbara constructed a large part of her program within the format of a treasure hunt, whereby students pieced clues and snippets of information to achieve individual and group outcomes. This format was a departure from the normal routine and an attempt to engage all students.

Daniel thought he was restricted by the curriculum, believing most students (not just those with MD) found his unit textbook uninteresting. However, with effort he thought he could tap into their interests by, 'increased preparation and getting to know them better'. Although he tried to make the subject more interesting, Daniel felt many students within his class did not connect with classroom content: 'I don't think it would matter what I did in the classroom. Their (specific students) work would not improve if you had bands playing there every day'.

All teachers were asked to monitor their feedback to students in the classroom and to maintain 5:1 positives to negatives ratio. They were given counters to record the number of positives given. However, Fiona and Barbara declined to maintain this approach. Fiona claimed it was 'transparent' and suggested that "you are better off to give ten genuine positives, than 40 walking around the class saying "Oh terrific" when they are not really good'. Barbara considered that focussing on positives was a distraction and that it was already a part of her approach:

> That's the way I tackle my class anyway. If you want to keep kids stimulated and engaged then it must be a feature of your program. You don't set out to count how many times you've been positive or anything. It should be a natural part of your class.

Due to the busy nature of his classroom, Daniel suggested that he often missed opportunities to provide encouraging feedback, and welcomed the focus on positives. He reflected that this feedback was well received: 'The kids thought it worked really well. There was one class where I made a big effort (47 recorded). It didn't sound corny; I think they all appreciated getting remarks'.

Despite the teachers' efforts, the students were more circumspect in their appraisal of these classes. Whereas Darren appeared to notice the efforts of his classroom teacher to make the subject more *interesting and enjoyable*, it was 'the craft activities and that's all' that were seen as enjoyable. Susan (F8) did not see the class topic as interesting, nor did she feel there was a history of stimulating lessons within the classroom. She suggested 'we never do "fun stuff" we just do work'. She could not articulate what 'fun stuff' she might be interested in.

**Intervention Phase 2: Students working collaboratively**

Collaboration among students was commonplace in Fiona's classroom. She believed that students in high school often missed opportunities to learn because they were expected to sit down, listen and keep quiet. She stated that group work assisted all students and that they were able to teach themselves during these situations because 'they speak the same language and they're not as intimidated as when an adult is leaning over them'.

Barbara on the other hand, preferred not to have the students work in formalised groups because she felt that weaker students allowed others to do their work. When she reassessed her approach for the present study, Barbara claimed that collaborative success was dependent on set structures. She stated that in this present study all students were given 'clear guidance and instruction before they actually did something so that within the time frame it was pretty structured'.

Although generally reluctant to have the students work in groups, Barbara acknowledged the social significance of student collaboration: 'well let's face it: on a daily basis we have to work with people constantly whether it's in the classroom or not, so certainly it's something they need to learn'.

Barbara was concerned about the opportunities available in collaborative situations for students with MD and intimated that it depended on how receptive their participating peers were: 'if the other kids in the group aren't socially interactive with the included student, you can't keep kids necessarily conversing with someone who is overly quiet or boisterous'. Throughout the *intervention phases,* Barbara expressed concern about her groupings and felt some students could not 'handle the privilege' of working with friends.

Daniel often used formal group work in his classroom, because he felt it ensured maximum participation of students: 'it benefits the kids who normally don't hand in any work at all; at least they have some ownership in submitted assignments'. He acknowledged, however, that within his classroom it was occasionally difficult for students to work in groups as it was 'too noisy and too ratty'. To ensure that the students maintained focus during group work, Daniel ensured all tasks had a set timeline (as did Barbara). He felt it was better to exclude John from group work because John preferred to work by himself or work with other students from the support program. Daniel suggested that this was a result of John's 'difficulty in being able to interact, communicate or provide input in a group situation'.

The students had various ideas about collaborative assessments, but all acknowledged the potential benefits of the approach. Darren enjoyed working collaboratively and suggested that working with Dominica (the comparison student) was good as she helped him a lot. He claimed that receiving assistance from Dominica was preferable than receiving it from a teacher. When asked to expand on this, Darren said that 'she doesn't say it fast (the explanations). She says it slow'. Although Dominica enjoyed collaborating with Darren, she admitted that she did most of the work on the classroom assessment (a PowerPoint ® presentation).

Reflecting on this experience, she stated: 'I asked him if he wanted to help me or do anything and he just said, "No". I showed him about five times and he said, "I don't want to do it because it is too hard". So I just did it.' Although resigned to Darren's indifference to work, Dominica felt that having a mixed ability class was a positive experience and that she enjoyed giving assistance to others. She commented: 'It's good. You can help those people who need help and you can get help from the kids who are really smart'.

Susan (F8) also enjoyed working in groups. When asked to expand on the reasons for this, Susan said, 'because I can ask someone for help'. She suggested that Tanya (the comparison student) and her other group members were her friends (despite there being very little observed interaction). When the researcher told Tanya that Susan saw her as a friend, Tanya was surprised. She claimed that Susan had appeared uncomfortable during their interactions in class and reasoned that this was because 'we never see each other'. At the same time Tanya acknowledged that she had been friendly and helpful to Susan on occasion.

John hinted at the sense of exclusion he felt. He summed up his feelings towards group participation in the following interview passage:

Interviewer: Do you like working in groups?
John: Mmm - sometimes.
Interviewer**:** When don't you like it?
John: Hmm - I don't know.
Interviewer: So when do you like it?
John: When it's a fun activity.
Interviewer: What if you had to work in a group where you didn't know the people well?
John: Yes it's tricky - it's not that good because I don't belong.
Interviewer: How? Is it scary?
John: I don't know.
Interviewer: Is it because of what people might think?
John: Probably.
Interviewer: Well, what might they think?
John: That I don't know anything or something like that.

After several phases of collaborative work, John was again asked for his perspective on group work and whether any classroom friendships had emerged. It is evident in this interview segment that aspects of friendship are possible during collaborative learning situations between peers with and without disabilities:

Interviewer: Last time I asked you if you had friends in the classroom you weren't too sure. How about now?

John: A couple …I don't know if they're friends.

Interviewer: Well, people that you get along well with during class.

John: Probably Tom (comparison student) and another student (name of a student in the collaborative group) and (students from the support program).

Tom thought that John might have developed this impression because when they worked together they engaged in basic interactions. He commented, 'I just asked him questions like what he was doing in the holidays'.

Although there were indications of positive behaviours that resulted from the collaborative learning situations, both John and Tom were uncertain about the benefits of this classroom structure. Tom suggested that working in groups was positive, but there were problems that were sometimes difficult to overcome: for example, "the last couple of times it (group work) hasn't worked out that well because someone did the work and I didn't do the work I needed to do." John suggested he preferred working by himself, "because I get more done." When the interviewer reminded John of a class where he had shown obvious enjoyment and had received a prize on the basis of collaborative efforts, John reflected that this was because 'it was a good activity'.

**Intervention Phase 3: co-teaching arrangement**

All participating teachers believed that inclusive classrooms benefited from co-teaching arrangements. Fiona was not particularly concerned about sharing her teaching load, as long as the ability to make choices (on a range of issues such as teaching style and classroom management) existed and the students were learning something. She considered this approach could be successful for students with learning difficulties in her Year 7 classroom if only to 'have a break from the same old teacher'.

A co-teacher arrangement was not common in Barbara's classroom, but she saw potential gains for weaker students from a more collaborative teaching approach and considered the equal standing of teachers a key ingredient, stating:

> Team teaching is an excellent approach for weaker students because you can still be working collaboratively supporting each other and going in the same direction but at a different rate and you can anticipate things because your expectations are realistic. There's nothing very threatening, at least I hope there wouldn't be. You can work together side-by-side and no one is better than the other.

Daniel felt the co-teacher assisted in ensuring that group interactions remained on task. He suggested that this classroom configuration helped to maintain a positive environment, stating that 'it is a very noisy class and you could be forever getting angry with them, but I think the two-teacher aspect definitely helps everything in the class'. He felt that improved organisation between co-teachers would enhance classroom outcomes and if it was to be a permanent arrangement, a more formal approach would be needed: 'I think if that was a situation that was going to work all the time then the two teachers need to work together really closely. (Teachers name) and I aren't that organised with each other and sort of rock up and say OK we're doing this and we're doing that'.

Despite the informal relationship he had with his co-teacher, Daniel was pleased that they combined so well: 'I'll say one thing and (teacher's name) will take it further and they (the students) really enjoy it. I think that (teacher's name) explains it better than I do'.

The focus students said they enjoyed having two teachers in the classroom; interestingly, however, the comparison students preferred a more traditional approach. Darren appreciated having two teachers in the class and suggested that it was 'because I don't like going to Mrs (teacher's name) and showing her my work at the front. She has lots of people around her desk and she can't help other people so another teacher could help me'. He then stated that he enjoyed working with the school's two support teachers. When asked to describe what was the difference between his classroom teacher and the support teachers, he said simply, 'they help a lot'. Dominica suggested that she would prefer one teacher, although she acknowledged that two could be of assistance to some students. She suggested that a potential benefit was for students to be able to ask the support teacher questions rather than the regular classroom teacher because 'it was embarrassing asking the teacher all the time when you still don't get it'.

**Intervention Phase 4: explaining the work simply and clearly**

As a result of having taught lower primary, Fiona had learnt not to assume students had background knowledge and always deconstructed content into workable 'bits'. She suggested that questioning techniques and encouraging groups to discuss the classroom task themselves were methods she used to ensure all students understood classroom exercises.

During this phase, the three teachers implemented more structured activities (with rewards). According to Daniel this had an immediate impact on John: 'I don't know whether it was the task or whether John was getting used to working in that situation or if Tom was communicating more with John, but it was interesting and John was definitely more animated than his usual class routine'.

Both Darren and Dominica discussed the nature of support, the type of help they received and the way it was administered. For Darren, the way work was presented was fundamental to his classroom participation. Although he appeared disinterested, the observations and interview responses showed that this behaviour allowed him to avoid participation when classroom content appeared difficult. When asked to discuss his tendency not to listen, Darren commented, 'it's just that I don't understand, so I don't listen'.

**Reflections on the TICC support program**

When the participating teachers were asked to reflect on their classroom experiences during the TICC Support Program, Fiona commented that students in her classroom may have noticed that she had included more artwork during the term. She hoped that students were also aware that she maintained a more positive approach. When asked how the program had affected Darren, Fiona felt he had gained a lot from his partnership with Dominica and that this sort of peer influence was incredibly important.

Barbara considered that Susan had developed socially to some extent, but not academically during the program. She acknowledged that there was little talk between Susan and her peers but considered that, 'they are all a lot more comfortable with each other and it's a really good stepping stone to bridging that sizable gap in the future'. When asked to reflect on why Susan appeared so reluctant to interact, Barbara said it had a lot to with Susan's general disposition: 'unless someone says, "come on Susan" she won't take the initiative to actually include herself. I think a fair bit of it is to do with her nature and also what she has been used to'.

When Daniel was asked about John's progress over the term, he responded:

> His motivation has been a lot better and hopefully with that comes the education and purpose for him at school. Yes, he has definitely had a good term, not just in his grades but in his enjoyment. I think he has been a lot happier.

Daniel concluded that the more structured activities (that included quizzes on information from earlier lessons) may have influenced John's responses and the improved engagement may have been as a result of "challenges being appropriate to him."

Daniel further suggested that this experience might result in John being 'keener' to work within other groups and that this experience was a starting point. At

the same time he conceded that there were students in the classroom who would still be resistant to working with John. Daniel referred to a peer's consistent poor attitude to John and other students in the support program stating, 'if you said, "John you can work with (student's name)", she would say "aagh" [sic]'! He went on further to say that students in his classroom still preferred to work with their friends and this was always difficult for students with MD who invariably had a restricted social network. He referred to a situation where students had to be excluded from the class while John gave a group presentation because they giggled throughout. This type of behaviour had been prevalent throughout the year and Daniel felt this worked negatively against successful inclusion.

## Discussion

Given the limited number of students and teachers involved in this study, it is not possible to make generalisations from the findings; however, they revealed a snapshot of the perceptions of both the teachers and students on issues related to inclusion, and the effectiveness of strategies designed to engage students both academically and socially. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, this study adds to the limited research base on attitudes of secondary teachers and students in Australian schools towards inclusive classroom strategies.

### Teachers' perceptions of the TICC Support Program

The classroom teachers involved in this study were overwhelmingly positive about inclusion and the strategies implemented within the program. While the teachers said that they maintained encouraging attitudes towards the focus students and accepted that this was a part of current teaching practice, they highlighted the difficulties that exist within heterogeneous classrooms, particularly when students are involved in both regular and support programs. The teachers intimated that involvement in two separate programs had the tendency for these individuals to lose continuity in their courses and not to develop relationships that would assist in their classroom social experience.

The participating teachers were generally enthusiastic at meetings and interviews; however, consistent 'slippage' between experimental conceptualisation and execution (Gersten et al., 2000) was evident throughout the *intervention phases.* For example, while all three teachers acknowledged the benefits accruing from more interesting and positive classrooms, they often failed to connect this acknowledgement with their planned classroom content. For example, they justified their adherence to more traditional 'chalk and talk' lessons on the basis of their perceptions that students had not been responsive to their previous attempts at innovative approaches. Responses such as, 'it wouldn't matter what we did' and "students see teacher positives that are not fully earned as transparent', appear contradictory to what O'Rourke and Houghton (2008) found when measuring students with MD perceptions on positive delivery of interesting content.

Other features of the intervention program, such as the inclusion of a co-teacher and collaborative learning, were viewed as positive by the regular classroom teachers, but were not implemented in a manner reflecting best practice (as outlined in the program manual). Interestingly, teachers acknowledged in post-intervention

interviews the difficulties associated with the implementation of these support strategies, such as the need for more collaboration between themselves and the co-teachers, and the tendency for the focus students to produce less work than other group members in the collaborative situations, but did not appear to be cognisant of the need to address these issues. If teachers are not prepared to employ changes to accommodate included students during a research situation (when support and expertise are available), it is hard to imagine that they would make them during regular day-to-day lessons.

The apparent failure of teachers to follow and implement the guidelines provided in both the program manual and regular meetings may be attributed in part to their rejection of the recommended practices, but time constraints were also a critical factor. Vaughn, Hughes, Schumm, and Klingner (1998) describe time as the 'pervasive predator' for teachers and suggest they (the teachers) are consistently skeptical of classroom practice that takes too much time, regardless of the promised benefits.

Producing highly motivating lessons, individualising tasks, providing graphic organizers, and planning collaborative teaching roles all require an investment of time, a commodity that is often in short supply. Future studies on inclusive support models for students with MD might target mechanisms for which the investment of time is not such a critical factor or for which additional time can be provided for these teachers in recognition of the greater need for lesson preparation.

Feedback was consistently positive in regard to co-teachers, which points to the importance of special education staff (as used in this research) collaborating with regular classroom teachers. Recent research has examined new arrangements in co-teaching, with an emphasis on collaborative scheduling, whereby special education teachers take on the role of itinerant 'trouble shooters' (Walsh & Jones, 2004). This process requires regular and special education teachers to liaise with each other and determine when and how they can work together. Given the demands placed on regular classroom teachers, the increased planning time necessary to improve the strategic effect of co-teaching arrangements is a matter that requires serious consideration by school administrators.

**Student perceptions of the TICC support program**

From the focus students' perspective, the most critical support they received in this study appeared to be collaborative learning opportunities.

Both John and Susan believed that working collaboratively led to the formation of friendships, whereas Darren suggested this type of assistance was more beneficial academically. Both viewpoints (establishing friendships/social support and providing opportunities for clarification) are consistent with previous research and emphasise the importance of these types of collaborations in inclusive classrooms (Bowen, Richman & Rosenfeld, 1998; Klingner & Vaughn, 1999).

However, both the focus and comparison students suggested there were difficulties with the collaborative classroom approach. These included ensuring parity in their work efforts (apparent in the collaboration between Darren and Dominica), and the students with MD not being accepted within their collaborative groups. It would appear the types of structures that facilitate more positive outcomes (as outlined by Johnson & Johnson, 2003) in collaborative learning situations need to

be consistently emphasised to all students if the effectiveness of this approach is to be enhanced.

Although the difficulties associated with collaborative efforts in mixed ability classrooms have been acknowledged within this study, the poignant reflections by John about the tenuous development of friendships in his class serve as a potent reminder of the need for appropriate structures to be employed. John's classroom demeanour appeared typical of many students with MD who have revealed through a number of studies higher levels of loneliness (Heiman & Margalit, 1998) and greater frequency of rejection (Vaughn, Elbaum & Schumm, 1996) than their non-disabled peers. Structured efforts to enhance the social experience of these students, appears to be an often forgotten aspect of inclusion.

Students saw the addition of co-teachers as beneficial, but often viewed it as similar to that provided by a teacher assistant. Given that co-teachers often assume supportive roles in inclusive classrooms (Baker & Zigmond, 1995), this response is not surprising. It may be, however, that the present study did not provide adequate time for the focus students to develop an understanding of the support provided in a collaborative teaching relationship, and to deduce how this differed from that provided by a teacher assistant. Future research, using longitudinal methods, should examine the effectiveness of co-teaching compared to teacher assistant support in an inclusive classroom.

Despite teacher attempts to create a more stimulating classroom content and to maintain efforts to present the work clearly, the focus students did not perceive major changes in teaching within their classroom. Only tasks without a written component were perceived as enjoyable and all focus students suggested that additional explanations were always necessary (despite classroom teachers being confident that content had been broken down sufficiently). Given the disenfranchisement that many students with MD experience throughout their school careers (Raymond, 2008), programs that provide opportunities for them to become more confident and self-determined are vital. Many features of the *TICC Support Program,* such as providing appropriate supports and seeking active participation, were designed to enhance a more self-determined approach (Field & Hoffman, 2002), but these practices may be required for longer periods of time than the current research if students with MD are to discern real differences in classroom pedagogy.

## Conclusion

The Curriculum Council of Western Australia is committed to a pedagogy that respects the variety of learning abilities and styles in classrooms. This approach is supported by the Disability Standards of Education (2005) which highlights that education providers must make reasonable adjustments that 'assist a student with a disability to participate in education and training on the same basis as other students' (2005, p.44). This represents a movement away from traditional classroom approaches towards a system in which accommodations are made for 'the different starting points, learning rates and previous experiences of individual students or groups of students' (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 1998, p.17). The challenge therefore clearly exists within Western Australian secondary schools to embrace more heterogeneous classrooms.

The findings of this study suggest that while there was general support for strategies perceived to be effective by students with MD, there needs to be more

awareness of how these can be implemented and the collaborations that may be required to maximise their impact in the classroom.

For regular classroom teachers to implement inclusive strategies like those in the *TICC Support Program* consideration must be given to: (i) the types of supports given to regular classroom teachers to allow the effective implementation of best practice in mixed-ability classrooms; (ii) the training necessary to ensure teachers develop skills commensurate with students' needs, both within the context of inclusive classrooms and the general curriculum; and (iii) the structures and resources required in mixed-ability classrooms that will enable students to gain maximum benefit from best practice strategies.

## Appendix 1: TICC Support Program

### Initial Baseline

The baseline observations were conducted in the typical arrangement in each individual's regular (SOSE) classroom. Within these classrooms the focus students worked independently of any formalised support.

#### Intervention Phase 1: Making the subject interesting and enjoyable

The three participating teachers had each prepared Society and Self (SOSE) programs based on the classroom curriculum that reflected high interest subject matter. These included a topic on Aztec Civilisation in the Year 7 classroom, the Australian Environment in the Year 8 classroom and Earthquakes and Volcanoes in the Year 9 classroom.

Teachers were provided with the following guidelines in the *TICC Support Program Manual* in regard to implementing this intervention phase:

(i) Positive comments should outnumber negatives by at least 5 to 1 (hand-held counter was given to each teacher to ensure a high number of positives were delivered);

(ii) the classroom delivery should be enthusiastic;

(iii) both the teacher and students should move about the classroom;

(iv) all student feedback should be accepted by the teachers with interest;

(v) stimulating visual aids should be used;

(vi) exciting demonstrations should be included where possible;

(vii) topics that reflect student interest should be selected, and

(viii) humour should be used when teaching.

#### Intervention Phase 2: students working collaboratively

The participating teachers used collaborative learning to varying degrees in their general practice, but were asked to maintain this approach in all classes from Intervention Phase 2 through to 5. Teachers were given the following guidelines:

(i) protocols should be established with students in regard to working in

groups (e.g., quiet talk is necessary, stay with your group);
(ii) clear expectations of performance and outcomes should be provided to students;
(iii) assurances should be given that the presence of a student with low academic ability would not penalise the group;
(iv) appropriate roles for all students should be established, and
(v) concrete rewards be established.

**Intervention Phase 3: co-teaching arrangement**

Teachers were given the following guidelines:
(i) Establish rules between the regular and special education teacher regarding classroom management, presentation of curriculum, and position in the classroom, and,
(ii) establish parity between teachers, to be modelled in all monitored classes, thereby optimising the benefit of having two teachers.

**Intervention Phase 4: explaining the work simply and clearly**

Teachers were given the following guidelines:
(i) Provide a simple study guide for all students at the beginning of the topic;
(ii) start each lesson with a clear objective;
(iii) present an overview of each lesson using a colour overhead;
(iv) leave instructions on the board as a constant reference;
(v) ensure that students are engaged when instructions are being given out or a presentation is being given, and
(vi) provide clear examples to assist all homework.

## Appendix 2: Schedule for semi-structured interviews of classroom teachers.

- What do you think about having students with learning difficulties in your class?
- Is it possible for students with low academic skills to find success in a regular classroom?
- What sort of support do you find most helpful for students in mild disabilities in your classroom?
- Is it important that you maintain overall control of each student's program or do you see others involved?
- Describe your class's social climate.
- Describe the academic mix in your class.
- Do you think of social outcomes in your class when you think of support or are academic outcomes the main focus of your class?
- How do students with learning difficulties generally perform (both academically and socially) in your class?
- Do you see yourself as a positive and interesting sort of teacher? Do you think the students would see you in this light?

- Do you try to tap into the students interests or do you think you are restricted by the curriculum?
- Do you find the day to day classroom curriculum interesting?
- Do you think interesting classes would engage students more?
- How do you think being involved in this study impacted on your program?
- In an attempt to make this program interesting and enjoyable what strategies did you employ?
- Do you think the students would have noticed any changes in your approach (in respect to making the subject more interesting and enjoyable)?
- Did you notice anything among your students as a result of any support variables introduced during the study?
- I think that _____ had a reasonable term. What do you think?
- How important do you think peer influences are for (student name)?
- It is obvious in watching these videos that for (student name) their social interactions occurred during the task itself. Do you think social development is a key for all students within the curriculum?
- When interviewed the comparison students said that having students with disabilities in the class was not a problem. Do think this sums it up pretty well at (school name)?
- None of these students were expressed strong opinions about team teaching. Do you think if it was planned more all students could see the benefit of it, not just those who needed extra help?
- How do you see the role of the Teacher Assistant in the class? Do you think it largely depends on the individual and how experienced they are?

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