A School System and University Approach to Reducing the Research to Practice Gap in Teacher Education: A Collaborative Special Education Immersion Project

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Abstract: This research is a response to the call for more effective practice based knowledge on ways to build inclusive cultures that assist the translation of research-to-practice. It reports on the factors identified in literature as being significant to the successful translation of research-to-practice and seeks to identify important sources of influence from an undergraduate teacher perspective. By investigating a collaborative school system and university generated Special Education Immersion Project, specifically designed for undergraduate teachers, a number of factors are presented as contributors to the gap between research and practice. They include the importance of linkages between teacher preparation programs and the workplace, the length of projects, timely and relevant feedback with a congruence of purpose and positive professional relationships

Introduction

An increasing demand exists for all schools to cater for more students with disabilities within inclusive school communities (Disability Standards, 2005). Preparing pre service teachers to respond to the challenges and complexities of creating inclusive classrooms through the provision of adaptations and reasonable adjustments to improve the learning of all children is a complex task. This paper investigates a school and university partnership purposely designed to prepare pre service teachers for inclusive classrooms.

The aim of the study was to develop a greater understanding of the factors that impacted upon the success of an undergraduate, yearlong, collaborative school and university inclusive education experience. This project responds to the call for educators to strive to enhance inclusive classroom cultures through the use of research-based practices (Ashman & Elkins, 2011; Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), 2000; Foreman, 2009; Innes, 2007; Loreman, Deppeler & Harvey, 2011). It is a collaborative project, funded by the More Support for Students with Disabilities (MSSWD) initiative, which provided $200 million to education authorities to build teacher capacity and sustainability and support their work with students with disability and/or learning difficulties.

The Catholic Education Office (CEO), Sydney, and The Australian Catholic University (ACU), Strathfield, used the MSSWD funds to develop and implement a student-centred project titled The Special Education Immersion Project. This project presented an opportunity for ten 4th year Bachelor of Education Primary pre-service teachers to work with School Leaders and Special Education Mentors in five selected schools. The pilot Special Education Immersion Project was conducted in 2012 and provided a uinque opportunity for final year teaching students to engage with a range of students with disabilities, for the full

school year whilst still participating in their full time university course. This Special Education Immersion Project sought to action the intentions of the MSSWD initiative by raising awareness of the key compenents essential to supprting teachers and building their capacity to address the diverse needs of individual students.

As teaching is a complex and skilled practice (Joseph & Heading, 2010), this research employed prior knowledge of factors that contributed to the successful translation of research-to-practice that were identified from the literature and sought to better understand the complexity of the sources of influence from an undergraduate teacher perspective.

Review of the Literature

As this study is underpinned by the need for educators to enhance inclusive cultures in mainstream classrooms, the definition of inclusion within this study is described as an approach focused on responding to the diversity of student needs in ways that are beneficial to students with (Tomlinson, 2001, 2012) and without disabilities (Foreman, 2009). As such, inclusive education represents a whole-school concern and works to align special education with general education in ways that enhance quality education for all students (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; Tomlinson, 2001; Winter & O'Raw, 2010).

Despite advances in knowledge of evidence-based inclusive educational practice, there remains a significant gap between our accumulated knowledge about what can work in classrooms and the extent to which these practices are used and sustained. This project was influenced by Grima-Farrell, Bain & McDonagh's (2011) examination of the factors that both enable and interfere with the successful translation of research to practice in education settings.

Grima-Farrell, Bain & McDonagh's (2011) conducted a review of the inclusive education literature to examine Research To Practice (RTP) studies from 1967 to 2011. Studies were included if they appeared in a published peer-reviewed journal and identified specific RTP, professional development (PD) or teacher education (TE) factors, that could be beneficial in translating the work of researchers to address the needs of students in primary/elementary and secondary school settings.

Analysis of the RTP literature presented a succinct list of RTP factors that were predominantly generated from commentary articles and related intervention research. This RTP literature acknowledged that researchers have described models used to involve practitioners in the development, implementation and maintenance of empirically validated interventions (Vaughn, Klingner & Bryant, 2001; Vaughn, Klingner & Hughes, 2000). Others have compared variations in the intensity of professional development programs and described models used to deliver research-based education to teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Schumm & Vaughn, 1995). In brief researchers have focused their efforts on working more collaboratively with practicing teachers to improve the trustworthiness, accessibility, usability, attractiveness and responsiveness of research. This study aims to build on the knowledge gained from the RTP literature and identify factors that influenced the success and/or challenges associated with a teacher education experience in inclusive mainstream classrooms.

Project Planning and Structure

Planning discussions involved staff members from the university and school system who were committed to aligning education initiatives that enhanced quality education for students with and without disabilities in inclusive school contexts. Efforts were focused on

ensuring ways to address the needs of school-based stakeholders, including all students, their parents and teachers, school mentors, learning support teams and school principals and undergraduate teachers. The collaborative ACU and CEO planning team aimed to attract dedicated and well-organised pre-service teachers (who are referred to as participants throughout this study) for the pilot phase of the Special Education Immersion Project to commence in 2012. Participants were eligible to apply for the project at the end of the third year of the Bachelor of Education Primary course, as they had met supervised professional experience requirements and could apply for a casual teaching number. Participants were selected if they expressed a commitment to or an interest in inclusive education and they were expected to have completed the *Diversity in the Classroom* inclusive education unit prior to commencing the project.

The structure of the Project required participants to work in schools for four days a week over the full school year. They were contracted to two hours per day during the morning literacy and numeracy session. The Catholic Education Office paid the participants, as contracted employees through the MSSWD Commonwealth grant. This contract required participating teachers to attend funded professional development workshops on inclusive education strategies and resources, induction days and Spiritual Formation Days. As participants were enrolled in the final year of their degree as full time students, timetables for lectures and tutorials were organised to accommodate the Project.

Interested participants applied to be considered for the Project through the university. They were required to participate in a competitive selection process and were interviewed by panel members from the school and university sectors. Ten pre-service teachers met the selection criteria and were allocated to one of five participating schools. The leadership teams of the five schools had volunteered to be involved in the project and host pairs of selected participants for the full academic year. As variables such as transport, location of home and school and personal attributes were considered, only six participants were allocated to schools in pairs. Flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of the participants and schools were considered and one school was allocated a group of three and another school only had one project participant assigned to them.

Project undergraduate participants, school mentors and leaders and the university staff were invited to a two-day induction program in February 2012. These induction days were planned and coordinated by a university staff member, who is referred to as the facilitator of the project, in collaboration with the Head of Diverse learning Needs from the school system. This induction opportunity provided a forum for stakeholders to meet, respond to questions, discuss timetables and expectations in an encouraging and relaxed environment, supported by both the university and school system prior to the commencement of any school-based placements. The role of the facilitator extended for the duration of the project and included the coordination of timetables, professional development activities, ensuring students adhere to project guidelines and enhancing collaboration between school and university staff.

Method

All participants were in their fourth year of a Bachelor of Primary Education course and were part of an education system funded university and school partnership program to promote inclusive education. Participants were employed to work in the area of special education in mainstream schools, for eight hours per week for 38 weeks, whilst completing their primary teaching degree.

A qualitative multi-site case study method (Stake, 2000) and interpretative approach was used to examine participant reflections on their school and university experiences whilst participating in the Project. Data were gathered through individual surveys (mid year) and semi-structured interviews (end of the year) and reflexive journal entries (throughout the

year) with all ten participants. The surveys investigated specific details pertaining to individuals, their setting and roles within each setting and their experiences in using research based projects when working with students with special needs in inclusive mainstream settings. Interview questions built on collected survey data and the interview protocol consisted of the following questions.

1. How have you found the experience? What were some of the strengths of the Project for your students, teachers and school?
2. What were some of the lowest/highest moments for you?
3. What gave you the greatest difficulty/challenges or concern?
4. What have you gained from the experience? Has the involvement changed your views on working with people with disabilities?
5. What is your understanding of the role of an inclusive educator?
6. Can you suggest ways in which the Project can be improved?

Data from multiple cases are considered more solid and compelling than the investigation of a single case (Herriott & Firestone, 1983; Yin, 2003), enhancing the articulation of why the experiences occurred as they did. The data collection approaches were replicated at each setting and responses were recorded and fully transcribed. Collectively the data collection opportunities combined to gain details, on the specific factors that had an impact on the collaborative university and school-based experience. Members of the research team independently coded the data sources for consistent themes and then came together to compare them. Analysis using triangualtion of data sources and inter-reliability was employed to reach consensus on the key themes. In brief, all results were analysed within individual participant cases and compared across the total project participant cohort.

Results

The purpose of this study was to determine those factors that influenced the success and/or challenges associated with a year-long, collaborative, inclusive education teacher education experience. Three consistent themes emerged from the collected participant data. These themes were identified as being critical to both the research to practice literature and the responses of participants in the Special Education Immersion Pilot Project. The consistencies in the claims made by the participants support and expand upon the factors and themes presented as critical to research becoming practice in the RTP literature. These themes include: the effectiveness of teacher education; support and communication amongst peers, school and university stakeholders; and responsibility and positive relationships.

The Effectiveness of Teacher Education

All ten participants suggested that teacher education efforts were most beneficial when they directly responded to teacher need through an approach that is clear, practical and consistent. All participants shared thoughts on the benefits of the school and university-based partnership program and its contribution to the sustainment and effectiveness of their individual practices. Comments about the depth of understanding of the practical elements of teaching and the expectations of new career teachers were shared. Participants described the usefulness of the partnership in a number of ways. The resonating consistent notion shared by participants was that the partnership was effective as the aims of the university were the same as the school system aims. This congruence of purpose went beyond the structure of the teacher education course. Participants commented on their ability to communicate with each other, the university facilitator and their school mentors beyond set opportunities via the phone, electronic media and through casual impromptu conversations. This consistent open communication was described as being mutually beneficial to all stakeholders, including the

participants, school students and school-based staff. It was purported as effective as what was learnt at university could be put into practice at schools and trialed the next day.

Elizabeth and Sam's response reflected the comments of all research participants:

We were able to directly access university staff, who provided us with additional ideas and specific knowledge which could be implemented the very next day. We could then access feedback from both school and uni staff while it was still fresh and relevant. (Elizabeth)

Being placed in schools allowed us to place the high university standards into our teaching. This helped us become more valued by school staff and then we could go back to uni and ask uni staff any questions all within the same week. (Sam)

Support and Communication Amongst Peers, School and University Partnership Stakeholders

Participants consistently referred to their university and school partnership experience in their comments pertaining to support and communication. They described how their experience was enhanced as their school-based teachers and their university-based facilitator worked together to maintain links between theory/research (researchers' perspective as identified in the literature and presented by the university facilitator) and practice (classroom teachers' perspective).

All participants again referred to the benefits of being able to access the university facilitator, teacher mentors and each other as concerns and questions arose. The ability to contact each other via email, phone or Facebook to seek assistance or resources beyond set meeting times was described as an invaluable support by the total participant cohort. Participants also described that consistent communication with peers in the project was vital to the success of their experience as they could share stories, trails, strategies, project details, challenges and strengths of their individual experiences. Sam's comments reflected the sentiment of others as she explained:

Working collaboratively started at uni with project members. We started by sharing our goals, visions and understanding of inclusive practice. From there we experienced consistent ongoing support and communication from school executives, mentors and teachers. (Sam)

Participants reported on the comprehensiveness of the project and its effectiveness. Comments that the support provided by the university facilitator merged with the support of school-based mentors successfully to provide consistent, relevant and timely feedback, which was crucial to the success of her experience. Statements that the university staff and unit content provided participants with real expectations and the skills and knowledge to collaborate and effectively communicate key learning with school-based staff were repeated. All participants were united in reporting that this Immersion Project opportunity strengthened their depth of knowledge and skills on ways to implement school-based projects that directly responded to identified student needs. It was suggested that collaboration could have further been enhanced through the sharing of the knowledge gained with other university and school-based staff. No participant commented on notions of support based on the number of participants placed at individual schools.

Other strengths of the university and school partnership that were identified by all participants were the full academic year length of the partnership and the way collaboration was promoted and exercised. The presence of participants in retreats and school-based professional development experiences that were focused on enhancing inclusive cultures, and were also supported and attended by the university facilitator, were identified by all

participants as being essential in enhancing research to practice and practice back to research initiatives.

Participants also shared comments about the importance of a common language that was understood by all. This use of explicit language that aligned with the underlying theme of inclusion was said to increase the comprehension of key project features, enhancing clarity and accessibility amongst stakeholders. The congruence of communication and meaning-making of inclusion was said to be enhanced through the use of clear communication, feedback and shared goals among the participants, university and school staff.

Responsibility and Positive Relationships

The sustainment of research-based projects in school applications are enhanced when communication and feedback from many stakeholders (from all levels) is ongoing and substantive (Grima-Farrell, 2012). Participants consistently identified the need for shared accountability and a positive attitude to and from stakeholders. The benefits of positive approaches, expectation, attitudes and shared responsibility were highlighted in following comments:

"I love the responsibility from the project. It increased depth of understanding. Our mentors have faith and trust in us, which is very comforting." (Nancy)

> *I found that one of the biggest things I'll take out of this experience is to ensure that as a teacher, I may be the only positive relationship that my students may have. If I ensure that I am always of a caring and approachable nature, I may be able to improve the outcomes of my students in ways, which are highly advantageous and positive. (Sam)*

> *These past three terms have been an absolute joy, it has been dynamic, challenging and ever so rewarding. That is why it is so hard to put my experience into words as it was so varied and diverse. But one thing is for certain; I have enjoyed every minute of it. I think back to the beginning of the year when I was confident that I had acquired a set of knowledge and skills. I remember feeling that there wasn't much out there that I didn't know. How wrong I was. The main thing that I have taken out of this project is that a teacher is just as much a learner as their students. I have evolved not only as a teacher but as a person. The reflexive nature of this experience has allowed me to analyse and critique every facet of myself. I have learnt to be a more patient person and to empathise with the needs of not only my students but with every stakeholder in the school environment. (Nick)*

> *I went from being a prac student who really wasn't regarded very highly, to someone who was having meetings with executives and whose opinion actually mattered. (Enya)*

All participants articulated the need and benefits of various forms of support and positive relationships. Other strengths of the project that were reported predominantly related to the participants having direct long-term links with students and their ability to address the needs of these students. Comments about increased status were also linked to the participants becoming an integral part of the school life and the recognition and appreciation of their efforts by school-based staff. In brief, ensuring that all participants have good relationships and feel a sense of belonging is crucial to the development of inclusive classroom practice at primary, secondary and tertiary levels (The European Agency for Development in Special

Needs Education, 2004).

Challenges

Along with the strengths identified as a result of the implementation of the pilot phase of the Immersion Project, a number of challenges were described. These challenges referred to concerns about time, commitment management, structure and the need for flexibility. Participants were in schools for two hours for four days per week during the morning block. They identified some restrictions as a result of this time frame and expressed the need for flexibility to address these concerns.

> *I find one of the biggest problems is that there is never enough time to get through anything substantial in the morning block. (Yuri)*

> *There were a lot of interruptions to our morning sessions. Through this experience I have learned that I do not need to be so pedantic about sticking exactly to what I have planned, as the student/s will play a huge role in the direction that the lesson takes. It has also been incredibly hard work to juggle University classes, working, Assignments, family life and a social life this year, but I would not change a thing. (Anna)*

> *Each morning this week we had a liturgy performed by a different year group focused on each day of Holy Week. This was a very spiritual experience as I have never been at a school during this period with most practicums taking place later in the year. However it did impact on our teaching time which although disappointing is unavoidable. (Nick)*

> *I feel overwhelmed sometimes when teaching as I only get to see a snapshot of what these students are learning and find it hard to imagine how I would organise the program for such a diverse group of students. But I find it very rewarding working with these students and helping them with their learning. (Yuri)*

Often challenges were identified and coupled with a positive comment as noted in the previous statements. Overall, the greatest concerns shared by participants were student centred and framed around time structures. Sam's strong comment considers the strengths and challenges experienced. It remains student-centred and reflects the sentiment of most participants.

> *This is one of the most important lessons I will take from my experiences in this program. To always remember to have positive and real expectations of all my students. The moment I give up on a student is the moment I should give up my profession. (Sam)*

Discussion

An analysis of the data showed that the participants engaged in a range of teaching and inclusive education professional development experiences while they worked in authentic school contexts during the final year of their degree. Three dominant themes emerged from the analysis of data sources to support and expand upon the RTP literature. These themes include: the effectiveness of teacher education, support and communication amongst peers,

school and university stakeholders and responsibility and positive relationships. The key themes substantiate the significant components identified in the RTP literature as ways to overcome the theory to practice binary to support school students with disabilities and their future teachers.

The Project highlighted the benefits of a sustained year-long professional experience for pre-service teachers, school and university staff and students in linking theory and practice in a comprehensively planned and collaborative approach. The participants' reflections also revealed the many benefits of learning alongside each other and supportive mentors (formally and informally) within authentic whole school inclusive education contexts whilst maintaining open communication with the same university-based facilitator. The Project demonstrated the many benefits and some challenges that resulted from providing an alternative collaborative teacher education experience. Such projects have exhibited the capacity to generate mutually beneficial outcomes when all three key themes are connected. The role of the university-based facilitator proved pivotal in maintaining such connections and in the prevention of any issues becoming causes of anxiety or concern for school staff and under graduate participants. Through maintaining transparent, timely and ongoing communication with all stakeholders, whilst ensuring that the project remained focused on addressing the needs of individual students in inclusive school-based settings, the congruence of purpose and positive professional relationships contributed to enhancing the knowledge and skills of the students and the ten participants.

Conclusion

Undergraduate teacher participants who were in their final year of university and were working in inclusive school settings supported and built upon the RTP literature as they reported on the factors that contributed to the success and challenges of their individual immersion project experiences. The importance of the role of a facilitator from the university was highlighted by all participants as being instrumental to the smooth implementation of the Immersion Project. This facilitator consistently enhanced communication with ACU and CEO executive, school-based staff members and the Participating Teachers. This genuine engagement provided opportunities for collaborative connections on multiple levels through attendance at retreat days, professional development days and involvement in key aspects of the project. The consistency of one key support person from both the school and university setting, who knew the expected trajectory of the project, could coordinate the school-based practical requirements, and facilitate the data collection, proved to be essential to the success of the pilot phase of this project.

Collaborative partnerships between school and universities that provided longitudinal experiences for undergraduate teachers and were supported by the key project facilitators were consistently identified by participants as being paramount in bridging the RTP gap. Such partnerships have the capacity to merge skills and knowledge presented in university settings with essential school-based practice experiences that promote relevant and timely feedback, making educational settings more responsive to the needs of students with and without disabilities.

Teacher education has again displayed that it has the capacity to promote partnerships and the use of research-based practices when units in a preparation program are intentionally linked with extended practical experiences to reinforcing key ideas and skills. When such teacher education initiatives directly respond to teacher needs through clear and consistent aims, explicit language and approaches, the well articulated bridge between research and practice may be further reduced. This congruence of purpose, language and positive professional relationships were identified by participants as the most important contributors to the success of the project.

If school and university partnerships such as the Special Education Immersion Project have the capacity to contribute to reducing the well articulated gap between theory (researchers' perspective as identified in the RTP literature) and practice (classroom teachers' perspective), the increased implementation of such projects may contribute to undergraduate teachers feeling sufficiently prepared to address the needs of individual students. Such collaborative university and school partnerships may also increase opportunities for research-based practices to be used to support current teachers in their capacity to address diverse student needs and enhance inclusive classroom settings. Further research into the impact of the number of participants at individual school settings in such projects and the influence of this immersion experience on the participants as first year mainstream classroom teachers would be beneficial.

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