Opportunities for authentic experience and reflection: a teaching programme designed to change attitudes towards disability for pre-service teachers

JOANNE BROWNLEE and SUZANNE CARRINGTON

Teachers increasingly need to manage and interact effectively with a broad range of students, including those with disabilities. Positive interactions require positive attitudes towards children with disabilities. In this qualitative study from Australia, Joanne Brownlee and Suzanne Carrington investigate the beliefs and attitudes towards people with disabilities of 11 pre-service teachers. The results of this study have implications for the structure of teacher education programmes in generic teacher education courses.

Background

One of the dominant influences that has shaped professional definitions and practices in special education around the world has been the medical model (Barton, 1996; Sarason and Doris, 1979). This model has emphasised inability and contributed to a dependency model of disability. Labels such as ‘invalid’, ‘handicapped’ and ‘slow learner’ have sanctioned medical and negative views of disability. In educational organisations today, there continues to be a tendency to reinforce an individual deficit view of special educational needs and disability. This is because the way that teachers relate to teaching students with disabilities and special educational needs is influenced by their past experiences and by how they perceive and define difference and disability in society. Personal definitions and beliefs are crucial because they may legitimate certain assumptions about disability and associated discriminatory practices (Barton, 1996).

Attitudes towards disability

Mercer and Richardson (1975) described historical changes in the way disabilities have been understood over the past century. Initially, people with disabilities were seen as a public menace who needed to be controlled. Later, these people were viewed as educational and social welfare problems who needed to be helped. Some were considered as physically different from able-bodied others with a problem that needed (medical) treatment. Finally, people with disabilities were seen as an under-privileged minority group who needed to be provided with equal access to a range of life opportunities. Indeed, many people who have disabilities believe that the greatest barrier to full participation in society is biased attitudes and behaviour of people who do not have disabilities (Donaldson, Helmstetter, Donaldson and West, 1994). It is because of such negative attitudes that people who have disabilities are often viewed in terms of their differences rather than their needs, which are similar to their peers.

Recently a sociological view of disability has provided a changed understanding of disability and difference that has lead to a new theory or paradigm of disability. Researchers and practitioners are rejecting the traditional ways of conceptualising disability and difference as a medical problem or personal tragedy. The new paradigm assumes that the construct of disability does not only exist within a person but is influenced by the conventions of social expectations and interactions. This means that the construct of disability can be perceived in a way that reflects prejudiced perceptions (Riddell, 1996) because words gain their meaning through social interchange. In different terms, the words that are used to label people who have
disabilities gain their meaning from the way they are used in social life (Gergen, 1991). Consequently, various forms of people’s understandings and perceptions are of significance in social life because they are integrally connected with the activities in which people engage.

It is now recognised that students who have disabilities have been isolated and marginalised in their education. New ideas have developed that engender acceptance and dignity and this new approach has come to be known as inclusive schooling (Ainscow, 1994; Sebba and Ainscow, 1996; Vlachou, 1997; York-Barr, Schultz, Doyle, Kronberg and Crossett, 1996). The new inclusive paradigm assumes a different set of beliefs and assumptions, and demands different practices in schools.

Inclusive schooling

The notion of inclusive schooling has meant that teachers are now obliged to seek ways to instruct all students in the regular classroom. In many instances, the negative effects of these changes in education are magnified when educators are expected to accept new policies and practices without consideration given to their individual personal beliefs and rights (Forlin, Hattie and Douglas, 1996). Regular education was not originally designed for exceptional learners and the need to ensure that learning goals are met for all students is a major challenge for regular schools and in particular for classroom teachers (Forlin et al., 1996). Educators’ beliefs and attitudes towards inclusion have been found to be closely linked with the acceptance of children with disabilities (Forlin et al., 1996; Scruggs and Mastropieri, 1996; Ward, Center and Bochner, 1994) and the success of inclusion (Semmel, Abernathy, Butera, and Lesar, 1991).

Research has shown that school children who interact with classroom peers with disabilities obtain a better understanding of other people’s behaviour, accept individual differences, have increased appreciation of diversity and are less fearful of human differences (Peck, Donaldson and Pezzoli, 1990). However there seems to be little, if any, research conducted with pre-service teachers or in-service teachers on developing positive attitudes to people with disabilities.

Changing attitudes towards disability

Some writers have argued that people who have had high levels of contact with individuals with disabilities have been found to hold more positive attitudes towards people with disabilities (Hastings, Hewes, Lock and Witting, 1996; Jones, Wint and Ellis, 1990). In addition to this, structured experiences (rather than unstructured) with people with disabilities had a positive impact on breaking down negative attitudes. When the person with a disability is similar in terms of age and status, and behaves in a non-stereotypical manner, then stereotypical beliefs and attitudes are more likely to change as a result of such structured interactions (Donaldson, 1980; Carrington and Brownlee (under review); Marini, 1994). Marini (1994) argued that educational programmes are more effective when people with disabilities are shown to be actively participating in community life and are not portrayed as helpless or as victims.

Inclusive schooling has provided a need to ensure that pre-service teacher education courses encourage student teachers to reflect on their attitudes to people with disabilities. We may conclude that structured opportunities to reflect on and question society’s beliefs would allow pre-service teachers the opportunity to examine personal beliefs in relation to people who have a disability. Changes in beliefs and attitudes will only take place if the individual is challenged to see the inadequacy of his or her beliefs. The provision of structured opportunities to evaluate beliefs in relation to alternative views will allow pre-service teachers to grow professionally.

In order to do this, pre-service teachers need to be encouraged to focus on their experiences with people with disabilities and think about how these experiences influence their beliefs and attitudes towards people with disabilities. A change in teachers’ beliefs from a medical or deficit orientation to a more inclusive orientation would require structured opportunities that focus on these experiences and interpretations so that teachers can reinterpret their experience. As Musgrove (1977) noted, ‘consciousness changes when the relationship between self and social experiences is reinterpreted and seen in a new light: when what was formerly taken for granted, unremarkable, scarcely visible, becomes obtrusive and problematical, when old and well-worn distinctions and categories lose their usefulness and new typification and definitions are brought into play’ (p.15). Harrington (1994) argued that an awareness and ability to step back from the context for one’s beliefs and values are necessary steps to being able to critically examine one’s way of viewing the world. This ability is a way to move beyond that view.

The study

This study aimed to investigate student teacher attitudes to disability by providing the students with sustained contact with a teaching assistant who had a severe physical disability (cerebral palsy). The study was designed to encourage pre-service teacher education students to reflect on, and possibly reconstruct, their beliefs about people with disabilities and develop knowledge about disability.

The teaching assistant

Throughout the semester, students interacted on a voluntary basis in the tutorial sessions with the teaching assistant, who will be referred to as ‘Sarah’ in this paper. Sarah has
cerebral palsy (spastic quadriplegia) and is severely disabled. She has difficulty expressing herself clearly but is able to be understood with patience and focused attention. She is currently studying for a Bachelor of Education in Adult and Workplace Education and has considerable experience as a disability awareness consultant. She has also experienced both segregated and inclusive educational settings. Sarah presented formal lectures about her experiences at school and participated in approximately 75% of the tutorials associated with the course. This participation included group discussions and activities with different members of the group. The unit lecturer programmed interactive activities for weekly tutorials over a full semester period. Sarah participated in tutorials and in some cases led the class in discussion of various topics related to the teaching, learning and developmental needs of children with disabilities. In this way, the students involved in this project were not only interacting with a peer with a disability but could identify with her personal experience of inclusion and exclusion and learn first-hand from her perspective of what was required to manage her individual needs adequately in an educational environment.

The participants

The teaching programme took place in a pre-service teacher education course at a large metropolitan university in Queensland, Australia. The students were in the third year of a four-year course leading to a Bachelor of Education. All the participants were female and completing either the early childhood or primary strand of the Bachelor of Education (BA) course. Students were chosen because they had experienced very little exposure to special needs topics but would be required, when teaching, to develop inclusive classroom practices.

Once the group came together for their first tutorial session they were informed of the nature of the teaching programme. In keeping with ethical considerations, students were able to decide if they wanted to remain in the tutorial group or move into another tutorial time slot. No person decided to withdraw from the teaching programme.

Interviewees were randomly chosen from the tutorial name list and contacted by telephone to request their participation in interviews, which took place in the first two weeks of lectures.

The setting

As part of the requirement of the Bachelor of Education course, students are required to complete a core educational psychology unit. The topics in the unit included theories of learning, motivation, metacognition and self-regulated learning, classroom management, creativity and problem solving, and teaching to difference. This unit was organised so that each week students were engaged in a one-hour lecture followed by a two-hour tutorial session.

The students in the teaching programme were required to engage with the same tutorial content as the other students in other tutorial groups in the educational psychology unit. However, the students in the teaching programme were often asked to reflect on the unit content in relation to special needs issues. For example, when discussing the topic of motivation, students also reflected on this topic in relation to teaching to diversity. A relational organisation for the course content (cf. Biggs and Collis, 1982) was therefore provided by encouraging students to link tutorial content to a special needs framework.

Data collection and analysis

The technique of in-depth interviewing was used to gather data (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander, 1995). In-depth interviewing is described by Minichiello et al. as a conversation with a specific purpose ‘focusing on the informant’s perception of self, life and experience, and expressed in his or her own words’ (Minichiello et al., 1995, p.61). Eleven students were interviewed prior to meeting Sarah (interview 1) of whom eight were interviewed again during the last week of the semester (interview 2). The interviews followed a semi-structured format, were approximately 20 to 40 minutes in duration and were audiotaaped for later transcription. Students were asked to respond to the following questions in interview 1:

- Can you tell me about your experiences with people with disabilities?
- Can you describe an experience you have had with someone with a disability? What happened? Tell me about what you actually did in that situation. How did you feel? What do you expect to learn from this subject?
- What has changed over the semester for you as an outcome of this subject?
- How did this interview process influence you?
- How have the experiences in this subject helped you?

The following questions were used in interview 2:

- Can you tell me about your experiences with people with disabilities since we spoke together in the last interview?
- Can you describe a particular experience with a person with a disability that you had over the semester that stands out for you? Why does it stand out in your mind? Tell me about what you actually did in that situation. How did you feel? How will this experience influence your teaching?
- What have you learnt from these experiences?
- What did you learn from this subject?
- What has changed over the semester for you as an outcome of this subject?
- How did this interview process influence you?
- How have the experiences in this subject helped you?

The interviews were analysed by allowing the categories to emerge from the interviews. This means that the viewpoints of the participants were taken into account before deriving theory. Having theory grounded in the data is preferable because it is unlikely that any a priori theory will be able to
take into account the multiple realities and contextual values that exist. In the current study, the data analysis is more typical of an interpretive-descriptive approach that is both inductive and deductive in nature (Belenky et al., 1992 cited in Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). While categories emerged from the data (an inductive approach), they were delimited to some extent by the literature that informed this research.

QSR NUD*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorising) (Richards and Richards, 1994) was used to assist in this analysis of the transcriptions of the audio tapes of the interviews and written statements. This computer software enables the inquirer to organise large amounts of qualitative information and then look for relationships among the data.

Findings

The findings are organised into three main headings. First, students commented on a range of positive perceptions of the teaching assistant, Sarah. Second, they described the effectiveness of their current teacher education programme. Third, they discussed the effectiveness of the interview process in terms of their personal learning. Each of these areas will be described in turn. Interview statements have been edited to improve readability.

Students’ perceptions of the teaching assistant

Students made a range of predominantly positive comments about interacting with Sarah. Eight described how the interactions with Sarah were generally a positive experience for them, for example:

‘I thought it was great! I’m fairly used to dealing with special needs kids. What I found really interesting was the rest of the people in the class … I was blown away that they had no idea … Sarah was inside by herself and I thought poor thing, she just wants some company, so we dragged her outside with everybody else. All my friends went “Oh, isn’t it a bit strange” but by the end they said to me “She’s just like us isn’t she?” … I think it has really opened the eyes of some of the others in the class and it’s been good for me to see that not everybody has had experiences that I’ve had.’ (interview 2)

Six students believed that the experience of interacting with Sarah provided them with first-hand knowledge of disabilities, as exemplified below.

‘You have to get different people’s perspectives on what is happening, although the tutors have worked with disabled people, you have got to get their point of view as well about the subjects. It’s really beneficial having someone like that in your class.’ (interview 2)

‘You learn about cerebral palsy, about the trouble she went through to try and get into a school. We understand, a bit, really, how their life has been.’ (interview 2)

Four students believed that Sarah helped them to develop more knowledge about people with disabilities. These students were expressing the view that direct experiences with a person with a disability helped them learn more about disabilities. These views are exemplified in the following comments:

‘She interacted well and gave her ideas and things and told us about her CP [cerebral palsy], and explained about it.’ (interview 2)

‘Our own perceptions as well have changed, like I guess we can see that it’s valuable and bringing her experiences in education has been valuable for her, and can be for other people … So I guess when I see Sarah, and being able to interact with her, I knew that I could be comfortable with her. I felt that when I am teaching, when I am in a similar situation, I know that I will be able to work it out. Even if it is just between me and a child. We’ll be able to get comfortable with one another.’ (interview 2)

‘It was interesting to have her there and getting to talk to her and finding out what life has been like, and what she’s achieved.’ (interview 2)

There were four students who further commented that they came to believe that Sarah was just like a ‘normal person’.

‘They seem to be treated differently but we’re all different … you can see that she is not different. If you are not having the experience, you don’t really know.’ (interview 2)

‘It was a really interesting experience. I think, to me, all I saw was that she was just another uni student.’ (interview 2)

‘You actually meet someone and see that she is a person and wants the same things out of life we do.’ (interview 2)

Seven students recognised the difficulties associated with Sarah’s expressive verbal abilities, but were able to adjust to this over the semester. Only one student found it hard to understand her throughout the entire semester.

‘I was really trying to listen. I just treated her like any other tutor that was up there, really. I just really had to concentrate on her speech.’ (interview 2)

‘It takes a while to get used to it. In a way I find it better though because you really have to concentrate on her and you’re not distracted. You’re really focused on what she’s saying.’ (interview 2)
'When we first met her a few students remarked that she was very hard to understand, the way she spoke. She was in the beginning, her personality won you over. She’s such a warm person with a sense of humour and she made fun of her disability. That broke any tension at all, she made us all so comfortable.' (interview 2)

Overall, the interactions that these students experienced with Sarah were valuable because they were able to gain some direct experiences of interacting with a person with a disability. These experiences not only increased comfort levels but also helped the students to gain knowledge about people with disabilities in general and look beyond the disability to the person.

**Effectiveness of the current teacher education programme**

Students made a range of comments about the effectiveness of their teacher education course in preparing them for inclusive classroom settings. On the whole, these comments reflected a view that the current Bachelor of Education course did not adequately prepare them for teaching to diversity.

Nine students in interview 1 and four in interview 2 believed that not enough information about disabilities was available in the course. For example:

‘I don’t really think we cover enough in the course. In foundations we only cover what the disability is, and the basics of it. You don’t actually get exposed to anyone with a disability.’ (interview 2)

‘I think there should be a whole subject on how to deal with children with disabilities. Because when we go out there as teachers we don’t really have that much information on what to do for specific disabilities and how to cater to those students’ needs. It’s not just frustrating for ourselves, but also for parents of the children.’ (interview 2)

‘They have tried to cater for it in various subjects and fit it into how, if a situation were to arise … with a child in an inclusive setting, the ways of dealing with that. But I feel it’s very limited and very general, and not specific enough.’ (interview 1)

Two students felt that the course was deficient because they believed that they required practical experiences to help them in these future roles as teachers.

‘I think we need some practical experiences that will help us before we go. Apart from this, I haven’t had any real personal experiences with disabled people at all. How am I meant to go out into the classroom and know how to interact or what support they are going to need or where to get support from? Things like that.’ (interview 1)

Therefore, when students were asked for their input about what could be done to improve the teacher education course, a number of students commented that the teacher preparation course should involve some form of direct practical experience or practical knowledge relating to teaching students who have disabilities (five in interview 1; two in interview 2).

‘Even one little subject out of the whole four years! We’ve got these crazy subjects on fitness, health as well. I would much rather do a more practical subject something, something like this.’ (interview 1)

‘Things like this [sic]. Get a chance to spend time with somebody who’s got a disability or somebody who is a teacher of a child with a disability, just to give us a few hints or just to talk to us about it. To sort of try and get rid of that feeling of what would I do?’ (interview 1)

‘A combination of the lectures where we learned about the disability, but then relate that a lot more to teaching implications and even physical contact as well. Even if we had a prac at a special school and do case studies and have more contact. I know I am not the only one who feels uneasy teaching special needs. It will show when we are out there.’ (interview 1)

Apart from this practical orientation, some students (five in interview 1; two in interview 2) also believed that a separate, compulsory subject devoted to teaching to diversity was needed, with three other students in interview 2 commenting on a general need for more information about teaching to diversity.

‘I don’t think it should be an elective. There are so many other things you want to know about, and this is something that’s real in the classroom. It’s something that there’s a lot more awareness of and trying to integrate these children into the classroom instead of segregating them as much. So I think we should plan for these children.’ (interview 1)

To summarise, students considered that their teacher education course was not preparing them adequately for teaching to diversity and believed that a mix of both practical experiences and a compulsory special needs subject would provide better training for inclusive education.

**Effectiveness of the interview process**

All of the students who participated in interview 2 commented on how effective the interview process was in facilitating reflection. This is exemplified in the following quotes:

‘I think it made me reflect on the questions a lot and also internally what they mean to me. It shows you really what you’ve learnt when it comes to it. It was good being able to do the interview because you can see how
you have changed, how your views have changed in that short period of time and how your ways of thinking also change towards these people."

'It made me think more about things and about how I feel like when I go [sic] out now when I see someone with a disability I’m more aware of what my feelings are. I used to get really nervous before. I saw that person as the disability and not a person. I always wanted to change that.'

'It made me think about it a bit more. It did promote discussion in my group because three of us were interviewed and we sat down and went over our views together.'

The comments about the effectiveness of interviews are valuable and indicate that the opportunity to discuss beliefs and experiences is an important component of the change process for these students. It may be important to offer students some direct experiences of interacting with a person with a disability as well as facilitating reflective practices that may help in the reconstruction of beliefs and knowledge.

**Discussion**

According to the eleven students in the study, the face-to-face contact with Sarah facilitated the development of knowledge about people with disabilities and more positive perceptions of such individuals. Many of the students became more comfortable in interacting with Sarah and commented that, over time, they began to look beyond the disability to see the person. The fact that Sarah was also a student studying at the same university meant that the pre-service teachers could relate to her on a similar level with common experiences. Most of the students became more familiar with Sarah’s speech patterns and were able to adjust to her style of interacting during the semester.

This study also indicated that the interview reflections have been important in facilitating positive attitude change. The students spoke of the benefits of reflecting on their own beliefs and attitudes before, during and after the interview process. Some students indicated that the issues had been topics of conversation between friends and were able to recognise the positive changes in their attitudes during the time of the teaching unit and structured experiences with Sarah.

In general, the pre-service teachers believed that the teacher education course needed to include more practical experience and practical knowledge about inclusive schooling. Indeed, it is clear that students in this study did not feel they were being adequately prepared for their roles as teachers in inclusive classroom settings. Perhaps, the teaching approach described in this study needs to be incorporated into teacher preparation courses on a broader scale to help pre-service teachers adjust to the expectations of the new inclusive paradigm in teaching.

A limitation of this study was the lack of data collected from Sarah, the teaching assistant. It would be interesting to document the changes in interaction between the students and the teaching assistant from the teaching assistant’s perspective. In the last two decades there has been a shift towards a recognition of disability research that empowers people with disabilities (Ward, 1997). Researchers such as Minkes, Robinson and Weston (1994) and Morris (1998) have written about the importance of empowering individuals with disabilities by seeking their views. It is therefore evident that in future studies of this type, the voice of the person who has the disability needs to be ‘heard’.

Educational policy has moved beyond the medical and dependency models of special education to a new paradigm of inclusive schooling (for example, Ainscow, 1991; Sebbah and Ainscow, 1996). This paradigm requires that teachers possess positive attitudes towards inclusion, which may be facilitated by high levels of contact with people with disabilities (Hastings et al., 1996; Jones et al., 1990). This study has sought to provide pre-service teachers with direct experiences with a non-stereotyped person with a disability, in order to facilitate improved knowledge and attitudes towards people with disabilities. However, the findings are preliminary, and certainly more work needs to be done on a larger scale to further investigate the impact of such programmes on student teachers’ beliefs about inclusion and disability. It is hoped that the teaching programme reported in this study will enable the pre-service teachers to match classroom practices to inclusive educational policy more effectively.

**References**


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