The impact of a special school placement on student teacher beliefs about inclusive education in Northern Ireland

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This article, by Jackie Lambe, lecturer in education, and Robert Bones, lecturer in psychology, both from the University of Ulster, provides a useful review of the current state of policy, practice and teacher education relating to pupils with special educational needs in Northern Ireland. The authors use this review to launch their account of their own investigation into the attitudes towards inclusion of student teachers who had experience of working in special schools. Jackie Lambe and Robert Bones drew data from the transcripts of online discussions involving the student teachers. Using direct quotations from these discussions, the authors here reveal the positive attitudes that the student teachers developed towards practice in the special school settings; the confused or negative responses of the special school staff towards policy on inclusion; and mixed views on the promotion of enhanced collaboration between mainstream and special schools. Interestingly the student teachers, while continuing to value inclusion policy from a human rights perspective, also seemed to become more convinced, during their placements, of the contribution that specialist settings can make – and less confident that inclusion can be made to work effectively, given the current systems of teacher education and school organisation. The research in this article draws on the views of a small sample of student teachers – but the reported shifts in their perspectives illustrate some of the key issues to be confronted in the ongoing development of a more inclusive educational system.

Key words: inclusion, teacher education, special schools.

Barriers to inclusion in Northern Ireland

Sharma, Forlin, Lorman and Earle (2006) suggest that the extent to which inclusive policies and practices are successfully implemented is likely to be influenced by historical and social precedents embedded within the existing systems of individual countries. Armstrong, Armstrong and Barton (2000) go further, arguing that the successful pursuit of inclusion may in fact require a struggle against existing cultural and ideological forces which may have legitimised exclusionist practices and policies. In Northern Ireland, despite decades of policy and legislation which set out to embed a philosophy of inclusion throughout all aspects of public life, the segregation of learners at the age of 11 on the basis of perceived academic ability has continued. The quest for the end of 50 years of academic selection for post-primary children might well be construed as part of a struggle towards building an increasingly inclusive education system and moving away from the existing one, which is rooted in conservatism, social class and tradition.

At the end of what is termed in Northern Ireland as Key Stage 2 (ages eight to 11), pupils complete two one-hour written papers, designed to test their abilities in English, Mathematics and Science. The results of these tests are used to select the individual child’s post-primary school. Approximately 33% of learners will be allocated places in an academically selective school (grammar school), while the rest will attend non-selective schools. A small number of pupils who have been assessed as having special educational needs may gain a place in a selective school, so long as they are deemed able to succeed in an academic setting. While the majority of pupils (including some with diverse special educational needs) will attend mainstream non-selective schools, learners with moderate to more severe learning difficulties may attend a special school (Department of Education and Training Inspectorate, 2006).

Critics of academic selection have consistently cited the following as good reasons for its removal: social bias in favour of the middle class, the distortion of the curriculum, the inherent stress placed on very young learners, the increase in the level of ‘coaching’ and the sense of failure and stigma felt by those who fail (Carlin, 2003; Gallagher & Smith, 2000). The selective system has also played its part in reinforcing a social divide with ‘a disproportionate number of schools which combine low ability and social disadvantage thereby compounding the educational disadvantages of both factors’ (Gallagher & Smith, 2000).

In preparation for the adoption of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (DENI, 1998a) (hereafter described as The Code), the Department of Education for Northern Ireland reported as to the practice in mainstream schools for children with special educational needs (DENI, 1998b). It found that while there appeared to be a heavy reliance on withdrawal work to
support learners with special educational needs, there was less evidence of classroom support for differentiation, and that few special needs teachers had actually received any sustained training or held specialist qualifications. Furthermore, it was recognised that the selective system did not easily facilitate the integration of pupils with special educational needs. The Code was designed with the assumption that learners with a wide range of special educational needs would be distributed throughout a school with access to the full curriculum as a priority. The report concluded that in Northern Ireland ‘SEN provision tends to be located outside mainstream classrooms and not effectively linked into classroom practice’ (DENI, 1998b). It went on to recommend a re-emphasis on the promotion and development of strategies for meeting learners’ needs in ordinary classrooms, alongside a review of support services. Additionally, it recommended a review of the role of special schools, with the aim of harmonising work with mainstream schools and supporting training for teachers and assistants.

All reviews of inclusion and inclusive practices by the Department of Education’s Education and Training Inspectorate in Northern Ireland should be viewed as limited to the demarcation set by the system of academic selection. Despite the limitations of this system, there is evidence that the Department of Education in Northern Ireland is looking ahead in preparation for change. A recent review entitled The Future Role of the Special School (Department of Education and Training Inspectorate, 2006), which surveyed all 49 special schools in Northern Ireland, focused on the huge challenge for schools in managing diversity within the current educational climate. The review found a need for increased professional collaboration between special and mainstream schools. The report also flagged up the lack of an agreed definition of special educational needs, and the varying interpretations of The Code across Northern Ireland. These are issues that must be addressed so that educational inclusion and cohesion, as envisaged in the Special Education and Disabilities (NI) Order (SENDO, 2005), can be realised.

Those who are responsible for pre-service education will also be required to review and modify existing initial teacher education (ITE) programmes, so that new teachers will be effectively prepared for classrooms that are more inclusive than those that they themselves had experienced.

**Initial Teacher Education in Northern Ireland**

In Northern Ireland, post-graduate ITE is based on a partnership arrangement between universities and schools. The combination of school-based practice and reflective academic study in pre-service education is designed to support the integration of theory and practice during an intensive one-year programme. During this time, student teachers on the Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme complete two school-based practices of equal length (eight weeks each). The system of academic selection that exists in Northern Ireland has traditionally affected the organisation of these, with the initial placement during the first semester being in a non-selective school. It is here that student teachers will have most opportunities to teach learners with mixed abilities alongside those who may have a diverse range of special educational needs. The second placement (during the second semester) is spent in a selective (grammar) school setting, where the focus of the placement tends to be on academic work and on examinations and assessment procedures.

The adoption of the Special Education and Disabilities (NI) Order (2005) into law has brought Northern Ireland legislatively in line with the rest of the UK, making inclusion a pressing issue that now faces the education system. In her study of Northern Ireland headteachers’ perceptions about inclusion, Abbott (2006) found that some believed that those in pre-service education were not fully prepared for inclusive classrooms, recommending that ‘teaching practice should entail student placement in a range of settings that included non-selective and special schools’.

**Pre-service provision for special educational needs and inclusion education at the University of Ulster**

The School of Education at the University of Ulster offers an elective programme in special educational needs and inclusion to support student teachers on the post-primary PGCE programme. The elective was designed to be delivered as a blended programme of face-to-face and online study through the use of WebCT, a virtual learning environment (VLE). There are eight subject-specialist PGCE programmes offered by the University of Ulster, which operates on a split campus (some 50 miles apart). The provision of an online study option for the special educational needs and inclusion elective ensured equality of provision for all student teachers, including those studying their specialist subjects on different campuses.

Discussion (both synchronous and asynchronous), based on the reading and comprehension of key texts, is used to encourage professional dialogue on issues relating to special educational needs and inclusion. This is an important scaffold on which the online component of the programme is built. Assessment of the programme is evidence-based, and participants are required to develop an e-portfolio of all the related work that they have undertaken while in the university and on teaching practice. The portfolio is intended to provide a foundation that will be developed further during their induction year and beyond.

On completion of the PGCE programme, all post-primary student teachers will have gained considerable teaching experience in both a selective and a non-selective school.
However, these experiences have traditionally been limited to mainstream school settings. As there was an awareness of the need to review and improve current practice, and in response to the requests of students, those on the 2006 elective programme were offered the opportunity to complete an additional placement in a special school during the third semester. During the month of May, all PGCE students usually complete a reflective school-based project, usually relating to their specialist subject. The special school placement would replace the school-based project for those students who selected it. Of the 41 student teachers who studied on the elective programme, 15 chose the placement in a special school.

**Attitudes towards inclusion**

Research suggests that perceptions about inclusive education can be affected by the quality of pre-service provision (Lambe & Bones, 2006b; Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000; Wilczenski, 1993). The effect of school experience, which is central to teacher preparation, can also exercise considerable influence on perceived competency and on general attitudes towards inclusion (Lambe & Bones, 2007).

This investigation is the final phase of a 12-month study following a cohort of student teachers enrolled on a one-year post-primary PGCE programme at the University of Ulster. The overall aim of the research was to identify the key factors and experiences that can influence attitude change towards inclusion during pre-service training.

Early in the pre-service year, student teachers on the PGCE programme were asked to give their views on the benefits and challenges that they thought would be presented by inclusive education (Lambe & Bones, 2006a). Inclusion was seen as being important for social integration and building self-esteem, upholding human rights and promoting better understanding of diversity. The students had also, however, expressed uncertainty as to how inclusion would work in practice. As with many experienced teachers, the students perceived difficulties in coping with large classes and in managing resources effectively, and expressed a general concern about professional competency. By the end of the pre-service year, although the students claimed improved personal efficacy, many of their anxieties remained. While purporting support for inclusive education, many students had tempered this with practical concerns that ran alongside a continued attachment to the current system of academic selection with which they were familiar.

**Extending teaching practice experience**

The student teachers who completed the special educational needs and inclusion elective claimed to have positive attitudes towards inclusive education. Extending school-based experience to include the special school sector would not only broaden their practical experience, but also provide an opportunity to reflect critically on issues relating to their own beliefs and values.

Research has also shown that positive attitudes are one of the main predictors of the successful implementation of inclusive practices in the classroom (Avramidis et al., 2000; Bacon & Schultz, 1991). Studies of those in pre-service also indicate more willingness to accept pupils with special educational needs than has been found in more experienced teachers (Forlin, Hattie & Douglas, 1996; Harvey, 1985). Studies of both pre-service and in-service teacher attitudes towards inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms have also shown that attitudes were affected by the quality of preparation received (Lambe & Bones, 2006a; Avramidis et al., 2000; Wilczenski, 1993).

Positive attitudes towards inclusion have been shown to be evident in student teachers early in their initial training, and improving training provision for inclusive practice at pre-service might therefore be the best point to nurture these attitudes (Lambe & Bones, 2006b; Tait & Purdie, 2000; Beare, 1985). This study examines how the attitudes of student teachers towards inclusion may be influenced by a wide range of teaching practice experiences, but specifically by the impact of a period spent in a special school setting.

**Research questions**

The study set out to explore the following questions, with the findings reported under these headings:

1. What do student teachers see as the perceived differences across the sectors in how teachers and learners with special educational needs are supported?
2. What were student teacher observations as to the implications for the implementation of the Special Education and Disabilities (NI) Order (2005)?
3. What are student teachers’ perceptions as to the potential of special school teachers being used to support mainstream schools in the areas of special educational needs and inclusion?
4. What effect did teaching practice in a special school setting have on student teachers’ beliefs and attitudes towards inclusive education?

**Method**

The phase of the research described in this paper was qualitative, and the comments of the student group provide data for the study. During their special school placement, student teachers took part in a series of four asynchronous discussions based around the research questions. These discussion topics were designed to relate closely to their observations and experiences, and to their beliefs and attitudes towards inclusion.

The elective programme was developed for ‘blended’ delivery. The use of the VLE for discussion and engagement in a range of problem-based learning activities is designed to be integrated with face-to-face sessions during time spent in the university. Student teachers at the University of Ulster are regular users of online facilities to support learning. During placement, online discussions are also used to help reduce any sense of isolation, and to enable participants to be reflective by articulating their thoughts and so encourage ‘thick description’(Geertz, 1973). In order to provide for meaningful discourse and yet ensure the discussions were as free-ranging as possible, only limited protocols were imposed. There are
many benefits of using the online environment for qualitative data gathering purposes. Online communication facilities are now increasingly used to encourage articulation, reflection and negotiation. Because participants can access the site at any time, discussions do not need to be time-restricted as they might be in a traditional classroom setting. When appropriate, this can encourage long-term engagement with the topic or theme. Lambe and Clarke (2003) conclude that online conferencing can provide a unique opportunity to foster ‘high quality professional dialogue’ within pre-service programmes. Laurillard (1996) suggests that text-based communications may also promote thoughtful and reflective discussion because the act of writing can require greater reflection than that of speaking. The online discussions were archived and the transcripts downloaded and used as data for analysis. This enabled the researchers qualitatively to explore and clarify any emerging themes.

The data was then analysed thematically in the context of the four research questions. Following a qualitative approach (Vaughan, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996), the researcher specifically searched within the discussion transcripts for the following information:

- key themes or common threads found by researchers reading and re-reading the archived discussion;
- specific phrases or sentences that were used regularly by the students within the discussions, so as to aid the selection of category headings relevant to the research.

A short coding system was created by the researchers. This was based on their understanding of whether the students were: (1) relating new knowledge to prior knowledge; (2) interpreting content through the analysis, synthesis and evaluation of others’ understanding; or (3) making inferences.

Participants were invited to take part in four discussions which were ongoing during the research period (four weeks). Each student took an active part, either by providing a personal analysis where appropriate, or by discussing issues with the peer group. The discussion transcripts were also downloaded by the participants, who used the same process as the researchers to analyse their own words. This formed part of the inter-rater checks undertaken as part of the analysis process in order to ensure reliability and validity of themes. Data gathered from these discussions and findings from these provide the results for this study and the students’ comments are used to illustrate each theme heading and add support to the findings.

Informed consent was an important ethical consideration of the study, which conforms to the guidelines provided by the School of Education at the University of Ulster’s Research Ethics Information Code of Practice (2006). The researchers were required to obtain the permission of the participants prior to starting the research. All participants were fully informed as to the procedures and purpose of the research before engaging in discussions. They were also aware that direct quotations taken from the discussions would be used, but that complete anonymity would be assured. The discussions took place within a closed site, and emphasis was placed on the use of professional dialogue. Names of individual schools were not used and it was made clear to the participants that the identity of schools would be protected. The student placements were either in a severe learning difficulties (SLD) or moderate learning difficulties (MLD) school setting, and this is identified within the results. Seven students were placed in SLD and eight in MLD schools.

Findings

Responses to theme 1: perceived differences across the sectors in how teachers and learners with special educational needs are supported

The majority of all participants in the study concurred that the placement in the special school or unit was more demanding than they had expected. Without exception, they also commented on the high level of support and care that they had observed being offered to all learners in this setting. In particular, most reported positively on what they perceived as the exceptionally close bond that existed between staff and pupils, as the following comments from participants show:

(MLD) ‘I was amazed by the wide range of pupils with SEN in my placement school. For example, in just one of my Year 8 classes I am teaching pupils with the following (some pupils having more than one): ADHD, Aspergers syndrome, epilepsy, asthma, ASD, eating disorders, Hodgkins disease, EBD, cardiac conditions, immune deficiency syndromes, dancing eye syndrome and speech and language difficulties. . . and that’s all in one class!’

(SLD) ‘This is undoubtedly the hardest teaching practice I have done so far. . . The school itself is lovely and the teachers are so good (not only with the pupils but with me as well) and they obviously care passionately about what they are doing. You can really see the bond that exists between staff and pupils.’

(MLD) ‘For me this has been the hardest placement this year although I have had a good experience in all my schools – they all have been so different. There is such a caring atmosphere here, you can really feel it the minute you walk in to the school. I have to say now though that I do now believe it takes a really special kind of person to teach in a special school.’

A considerable number of participants (6 SLD, 3 MLD) also perceived that the special school offered them the potential to be more creative and flexible in their teaching approaches than they had experienced in mainstream school. Participants’ comments included the following:

(MLD) ‘Although I’m teaching for 15 hours a week I seem to be glued to using my subscribed lesson plan much less in this placement. Instead I make
displayed mixed attitudes towards the implementation of the Special Education and Disabilities (NI) Order. They had been surprised by the uncertainty expressed by teachers whom they had met in the special schools. While some had appeared to be well informed about the possible ramifications of the act, others were less so, as the following participants’ comments show:

(SLD) ‘As I am working in an SLD school my lesson plans are in the form of bullet points but these are actually learning targets in line with a pupil’s own Educational Plan. This has been working well as I believe teaching can depend greatly on the form the child is in during any given day. Regimented, inflexible lesson plans as used in my other practices are not just as suitable for me in this setting.’

However, some students (5 SLD, 6 MLD) commented that they felt that more was expected of teachers in mainstream settings where they were not always supported fully; for example:

(SLD) ‘I feel that teaching in a special school can be more relaxed because of the nature of the classes and the lack of exam pressure and of course there are facilities and support in place to deal with problems. In mainstream I found that teachers often had an uphill battle to resolve any issues and get the necessary support.’

(SLD) ‘I have found working in the unit a much simpler life than in mainstream. For a start you have class sizes no bigger than eight and a team standing on “backup” ready to help and support you as a teacher.’

One recurring response was surprise that many teachers in special schools did not have specific training in special needs education (7 SLD, 5 MLD). Some also reported that there was a perception within their placements that teachers in mainstream schools were given more training and support for special needs education than those who actually taught in the special school. Two participants commented:

(SLD) ‘I was really surprised at the lack of training the special needs teacher receives. My teacher told me that mainstream teachers receive more training such as going on courses etc. than special needs teachers receive and she was concerned about this. She also said she feels there is better provision in mainstream schools for special needs.’

(MLD) ‘Most of the teachers in my school seem to have no specialised qualifications in SEN. That really surprised me. My class teacher said she had first worked in a primary school before coming here but she didn’t have any special qualifications. She says she has learned everything she knows on the job.’

Responses to theme 2: implications for the implementation of the Special Education and Disabilities (NI) Order

By the end of the special school placement, student teachers displayed mixed attitudes towards the implementation of
towards increased collaboration and support for mainstream schools, while continuing to maintain a role as a discrete provider. It stated:

‘Special schools, in the future, will be expected to provide a range of interventions which address low support needs, commonly occurring needs, rarely occurring needs, and high support needs.’

(5.5.1)

Attfield and Williams (2003) describe a collaborative intersector approach whereby the skills and knowledge found in special schools could provide outreach centres for mainstream classes. This message, however, had already been flagged by the Department of Education (NI) in the earlier 1998 report and again in 2006. It would seem that in the intervening nine years there has been a continuing vision for such collaboration. However, it does not seem to have become a practical reality embedded across the system. The student teachers discussed the potential for such collaboration based on their observations and experience. Some expressed the view that teachers in mainstream schools would benefit from support from special school teachers (4 SLD, 4 MLD), even if they found it difficult to see how this could be organised effectively:

(SLD) ‘I think that the teachers from this school would be very good at advising mainstream teachers on how to cope with different special needs. They have such amazing skills in observation and differentiating. I’m sure that they would be able to cope with a large mainstream class including some with special needs, but I don’t see how they would be able to use their expertise to the maximum when they already have classes of their own.’

(MLD) ‘I believe the idea of outreach teachers may be the answer to this one and this is happening already in my school. One of the teachers visits some mainstream schools each week, monitoring progress of particular pupils and giving advice, support and helping with developing teaching strategies alongside the class teacher. I do not know how it would work on a daily basis and it couldn’t work with every teacher because they have their own classes too, but think that the teacher in the mainstream must benefit from this sort of help.’

Some students, however, had less positive views as to the perceived benefits of special school staff supporting those in mainstream schools (3 SLD, 4 MLD). The main difficulty they perceived was in how they could effectively support the full spectrum of learners within a large classroom. The following examples show some of their concerns:

(SLD) ‘I think it is far more difficult to deal with a child (or children) with SEN in a classroom of 25 or more especially when you might have no other adult support. I would say that the teachers from special schools can certainly be used to explain different conditions and so on, and how they can (in theory) be dealt with, but I really don’t think they would really understand the teacher’s role in the mainstream system. As I see it, it’s a different job. Teachers in mainstream schools have to juggle much larger classes and they have to provide good support for all their pupils and that includes those who are very able as well as those who have special needs. They may also have to think about teaching an examination syllabus at the same time.’

(SLD) ‘From my experience in this school where the pupils have severe learning difficulties I can clearly see how much easier it is to cope with seven to a maximum of nine 11- to 16-year-old pupils in a class throughout the day as opposed to 25 to 30 pupils in mainstream school with a classroom assistant who might not be very good or is just attached (like glue sometimes) to just one pupil. I have found that the teachers and classroom assistants here in my placement school have much more free time once they have the children settled. But how would they really cope in a mainstream school with larger class numbers and the whole spectrum of learners to support?’

(MLD) ‘For most of the pupils I have seen the special school is a really safe place with smaller more intimate classrooms. The standard set is really teacher-dependent of course but I just don’t think that the same teacher in a mainstream school on their own with a class of 30 could possibly hope to understand the difficulties of supporting such diversity.’

Not every student saw the sharing of expertise and experience as a one-sided activity. Because they are generally smaller than mainstream schools, special schools may not have subject specialists to call upon to fulfil their obligations within the curriculum, and may benefit from support from mainstream schools. One respondent studying on the geography PGCE programme described her experience on a placement in an MLD school where she was the perceived ‘expert’:

(MLD) ‘During this placement I have been asked to teach all of the geography classes and to create new resources for the school as there are no geography teachers. As a result I am now teaching 12 classes a week and helping out with the teaching of numeracy and literacy. Is this a case of the mainstream teacher supporting the special school? I wonder have the Department of Education thought about that one!’

Responses to theme 4: Beliefs and attitudes towards inclusive education after school-based experience in a special school

After the special school teaching placement, there was less evidence of unequivocal support for inclusion by the student group. Placements in the three sectors had provided a broad knowledge base on which to develop an informed personal
rationale. In the discussions, students were able to compare, contrast and reflect on the difficulties of putting theory effectively into practice. All continued to support the philosophy of inclusion as part of a human rights and equality agenda. They also felt, however, that special schools must continue to play an important and discrete role within the system, because they believed that many children might be badly served in mainstream schools as they presently exist.

Participants expressed the following views:

(MLD) ‘While I feel the idea of inclusion is still good in theory, I am really now very apprehensive about the outcome or how it will work in practice. I worry some of the kids I know now in this special school would be lost in mainstream. I think you can still be excluded even when the system is trying to be inclusive. Thinking about my other placements I just don’t see any way we as teachers could really make sure that every child is accepted.’

(MLD) ‘I believe that many children with SEN will suffer if they end up in the mainstream school.’

(MLD) ‘I was 100% in favour of inclusion before this placement but my attitude definitely has altered. Many pupils simply couldn’t cope with mainstream schooling . . . society as a whole needs to change, not just schools.’

(SLD) ‘I can’t help but get the sense that the contact with the special school has actually made us all less positive about inclusion . . . am I wrong about that too? Are special schools havens compared to the cut and thrust of mainstream?’

(MLD) ‘At the beginning of the year we were all very evangelical about inclusion and the majority of us said that no difference should be made between pupils. I’m not really sure now that all children really could cope within a fully inclusive classroom – at least not in the schools I have been in. Some would need significant help which I think might only serve to flag up difference.’

(SLD) ‘My views have changed a great deal what I think about inclusion. Before this placement I would have been all for it, but after being in the special school I would say no to inclusion. The pupils here are clearly here for a reason and the more I work with them the more I see why. Many of the pupils can’t cope even with the very supportive special school setting and have to go home half day.’

All of the students recognised the importance of teacher attitude towards inclusion, and this was consistently cited in the discussions as being central to its success. Students’ views included the following:

(MLD) ‘From what I have observed inclusion can only hope to work if all teachers are well prepared, well trained and committed. Some teachers I have seen this year had very low expectations of their pupils. I saw teachers who when they couldn’t handle the class didn’t bother trying to teach them! If the teacher has low expectations then how are the pupils supposed to feel?’

(SLD) ‘During this placement I have made an important realisation: inclusion will only ever work if every teacher supports it. All it takes is one teacher who is not bothered about the progress of a particular pupil and the system will fail. Most of us on the PGCE felt that while all teachers should be trained to teach SEN children, many would choose not to have to if given the choice. I’m afraid these people, whether they like it or not, need to be ready to teach SEN children in the near future and I mean TEACH them, not just tolerate them.’

(MLD) ‘We need to embrace the idea of inclusive education right from the early years. On this placement I really think that I have just accepted the children the way they are. I’ve also noticed that when I asked some of the teachers in school what needs the kids have they didn’t know because they don’t see a disability anymore they see a person. I know that sounds strange but I thought that in many ways that was a very positive thing.’

Discussion and conclusion

This research provides some insight into student teachers’ attitudes to inclusion, on completion of their pre-service year. By this stage, they had gained teaching experience across all school sectors and for this reason were able to offer some informed commentary on the main issues relating to inclusion and the role of the special school. The small size of the study does however mean that any generalisation must be tentative. Furthermore, it should be recognised that a supportive and enjoyable experience in any school type is likely to increase positive attitudes towards it. Additionally, the researchers acknowledge that a special school placement offers only a particular viewpoint and as such may be a limited means of supporting and exploring a full understanding of inclusion and effective inclusive practices. This study did not set out to influence attitudes towards inclusion. It did, however, attempt to observe and report on the reality of the current arrangement for schooling in Northern Ireland and the effect that this may have on the attitudes of early practitioners.

While acknowledging its limitations, the study did show that the effect of teaching experience in a special school setting had influenced the attitudes of these student teachers towards inclusion, and not always in a positive sense. Research has shown that negative professional attitudes towards inclusion are often based on perceptions of a lack of personal efficacy (Avramidis et al., 2000) or the belief that the education of many learners with special educational needs should be the responsibility of ‘the specialist’ (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan & Shaw, 2000). If teach-
ers are to be equipped to fulfil the Government’s expectation that they should all teach learners with special educational needs (DFES, 2004), then this has clear implications for improving provision throughout teacher education (Ainscow, 1999; Slee, 2001).

The sample group of student teachers upon which this study is based had considered themselves to be strongly in favour of inclusion prior to the placement in the special school. By the end of the four-week placement, feelings appeared less emphatic. Their concerns were mainly focused on their perceptions of mainstream schools’ current ability to support many learners with special educational needs effectively. The special school was seen as being smaller, more intimate, better resourced and, importantly, a much more individually supportive environment for many learners. Surprise at the apparent lack of specialist training of many special school staff did not affect their positive attitudes towards the special school environment as being the most suitable for some learners. The findings also indicate that student teachers’ views tended towards what might be described as a deficit-based perspective of learners with special educational needs. However, perceptions were also based on knowledge of practice that they had previously experienced in mainstream schools. This appeared to have a strong influence on attitudes.

The Inclusion Charter (1989) supports an end to educational separation on the grounds of learning difficulty or disability. While making the proviso for individuals to have some time-limited placement with a clear and specific purpose in a separate setting, the clear message is that inclusion is the ultimate goal. This is underpinned by the belief that a child’s holistic learning and development is best served in a mainstream setting. Inclusion has a philosophical rationale based on human rights, equal opportunities and social justice (Armstrong, Armstrong & Barton, 2000). Acceptance of this philosophy can only be rendered effective if all those involved in education believe in this ideal, so that there is a growth in ‘strong, supportive and collaborative school cultures’ (Ainscow, 2000). Presently many mainstream schools in Northern Ireland may be far from achieving this, and it is this reality that may have affected the attitudes of the student teachers who participated in this study. Inclusion needs to be seen as a broader concept than that of the integration of learners with special educational needs, reflecting a shift from concerns about supporting the rights of learners with impairments to a focus on all young people who are marginalised within society. The Department of Education (NI) has yet to define how the model of inclusion will be adapted for the context of education in Northern Ireland, but it will undoubtedly require some significant reconceptualisation (Slee, 1996). While some schools have already made considerable progress in moving towards integration and the implementation of inclusive practices, others have not yet risen to the challenge.

Forlin et al. (1996) suggest that those in pre-service who may only have had minimal contact with pupils with diverse special educational needs are often more positive and optimistic about inclusion than many more experienced teachers. However, this does not automatically mean that they see ‘full non-separatist inclusion’, as described by Norwich (1997), as the best means of supporting such learners (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). In this study, student teachers’ reluctance to promote the full-scale removal of learners with special educational needs into the mainstream was almost entirely based on their concern that the mainstream school settings that they had experienced were not yet the strong, supportive, collaborative environments that they felt were required. Experience always has the potential to make a pragmatist of the idealist, and, in this study, students’ beliefs were tested in the light of their own school-based experience.

Pugach (1995) cautions on the dangers of launching inclusive classrooms without first engaging in dialogue with prospective or practising teachers, or those who prepare them. Without this, she believes that making the transition to new frameworks will be much more difficult to achieve.

The findings of this study suggest that for these student teachers, positive attitudes towards inclusion were only one factor in ensuring its successful implementation. Reviews and reports on practice will be largely ineffective unless they can impact directly on other key factors, such as the organisation of schools, and on teacher education. The findings also indicate that attitudes towards inclusion and inclusive practices may be positively affected by consideration of resources and class size, and the provision of the same level of classroom support for learners in mainstream classrooms that the student teachers found available in their special school placements.

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