

# **SECONDARY SCHOOL INCLUSION**

## **For Students With Moderate To Severe Disabilities**

### **In Victoria, Australia**

Tim Loreman, PhD  
[tlorem@concordia.ab.ca](mailto:tlorem@concordia.ab.ca)  
Faculty of Education  
Concordia University College of Alberta  
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This study, broad based in its objectives, set out to examine the phenomenon of inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities attending regular secondary schools throughout Victoria. Beginning in 1998 and ending in 2001, it attempted to uncover salient issues schools face with respect to inclusion, examined how schools deal with those issues, and looked at how educational practice might be improved.

The field-work component of this research consisted of a mixed-methodology study involving six qualitative case studies and a quantitative questionnaire distributed widely across Victoria. Eight themes common to each of the individual case studies were identified, discussed, and used as the basis for a questionnaire. Each of the eight major themes relevant to the inclusion of students with moderate to severe disabilities in Victorian secondary schools was viewed as a 'curriculum issue'. In doing this it was possible to identify possible solutions to some of the difficulties faced. The identified solutions, in part, point strongly towards changing the role of integration teachers in order to facilitate better training for teachers in areas of curriculum modification and delivery, time and classroom management, and understanding and addressing the special needs of students with moderate to severe disabilities in their classes.

### **Rationale**

Inclusion involves students with disabilities learning with their peers in regular schools that adapt and change the way they work in order to meet the needs of all students. Inclusion is a philosophy based on a notion of social justice that advocates equal access to all educational opportunities for all students regardless of the presence of a disability. In recent years much debate has taken place concerning the viability of inclusion as a realistic educational option for all students, and this debate continues as the research base on inclusion continues to grow and inform arguments. This study represents a further contribution to that growing research base.

The inclusion movement has been based more on ideals and values than research (Foreman, 1996; Jenkinson & Gow, 1989; Parmenter, 1991), and to this point the emerging body of studies relating to inclusion is relatively new and small both on the Australian and international level. What research there is recognises the need for further research, especially research of a qualitative nature (Gow, Ward, Balla, & Snow, 1988; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Nietupski, Hamre-Nietupski, Curtin, & Shrikanth, 1997). In order to contribute to the growing body of research on inclusion, this mixed-methodology study examines inclusion in Victorian secondary schools. The inclusion of children with moderate and severe disabilities represents a significant challenge at the secondary school level and to date there have been few other significant studies into secondary school inclusion in Victoria. To this end a study

employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies such as this one that examines secondary school inclusion in Victoria is both timely and important if the philosophical position that inclusion is an issue of social justice and is practically possible in schools is to be supported.

### Aims

The aims of this study were twofold. The first aim was to explore the issues surrounding the education of children with severe disabilities in Victorian secondary schools. What problems and issues are schools, parents and children having to face throughout the process of including a child with disabilities in a mainstream school? The emphasis here was not only on schools chosen for specific case studies throughout the state, but also on the experiences of a broad sample of other Victorian schools. The second aim of this study was to try and understand and develop theory as to how schools may deal with the identified issues in their everyday practice. In short, what are the issues and how can schools deal with them? The central research question for this study was as follows:

*What are the issues and concerns surrounding the inclusion of children with moderate and severe disabilities in regular classes in Victorian secondary schools and how can schools deal with these issues and concerns in their daily practice?*

### Defining terms

In this study a person with a severe disability is one who is regarded by people who know them well (family, peers, school staff, therapists, and others) as having a severe disability and who, in some cases, regards themselves as having a severe disability. This disability should have a significant impact on the daily life of the individual requiring a high level of extra support and/or therapy. Public students with severe disabilities are those funded by the Department of Education at the highest levels. Students in Catholic schools who would attract that level of funding if attending a public school (i.e. they are eligible for highest level Commonwealth funding) also meet the definition of severe disabilities.

A person with a moderate disability is one who is regarded by people who know them well (family, peers, school staff, therapists, and others) as having a moderate disability and who, in some cases, regards themselves as having a moderate disability. This disability should have an impact on the daily life of the individual requiring a level of extra support and/or therapy. Public students with moderate disabilities are those funded by the Department of Education at mid-range levels. Students in Catholic schools who would attract that level of funding if attending a public school (i.e. they are eligible for mid-range Commonwealth funding) also meet the definition of moderate disabilities.

### Method

This study was situated within both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. There is a strong argument for recognising the contribution a qualitative perspective on research in the field of disability can make. Sailor and Skrtic (1995) argue that

...we need research that promotes understanding of how teachers interpret their practices in context, how those interpretations affect their practice, and the manner in which they

change...A postmodern study of education transformations thus would seem to require a constructivistic approach, one grounded in qualitative or interpretivist research methods...(p. 421).

A review of 785 articles on curricular research in severe disabilities in six selected journals between 1976 and 1995 revealed that qualitative studies represented only 1.2% of all journal articles. The reviewers called for an increase in qualitative research to address issues that could not be adequately covered by quantitative research (Nietupski et al., 1997). Hunt and Goetz (1997), in their review of research on inclusive educational programs, practices and outcomes for students with severe disabilities found an absence of participatory research, remarking that this absence was 'striking'. Hunt and Goetz (1997, p.25) argue that

The potential for participants to actively contribute to understanding of inclusion practices is great, particularly given the multiple stakeholders who are involved; indeed, participatory research methods may redefine both the research questions that are asked and the traditional role of the researcher...

The above articles argue that it is now time to redress the balance between qualitative and quantitative research in the field of severe disabilities. This study recognised the inherent value of both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms and made use of both. Qualitative research may present a different perspective on some of the issues of inclusion, while quantitative research can back up and extend upon these ideas.

This study was conducted in two phases. The first phase of this research was interpretive. Six case studies of individual students with moderate or severe disabilities included in their local secondary school formed the basis of the first phase. A quantitative questionnaire distributed as widely throughout Victoria as possible forms the second phase. The case studies and questionnaire were the result of collaboration between school staff, children, families, and myself. Interpretation of responses in interviews and from questionnaires, along with written documentation and observations made by the researcher, formed the basis of the results. This research is qualitative because the researcher became directly involved in the lives of those participating in the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sailor & Skrtic, 1995), and participants were included in the study in a collaborative way (Sailor & Skrtic, 1995), especially during the case-study phase where discussion was guided largely by participants. Indeed, responses from participants in the case studies formed the basis of the questionnaire. Results were interpreted at a local level in the form of individual case studies, and wider generalisations were later drawn from the findings of the questionnaire. The quantitative results derived from the questionnaire served to confirm and extend upon the more localised findings.

Data gathering for the case studies involved document analysis, and over 100 hours of observations and semi-structured interviews. In total 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 43 separate participants in rural and urban areas and from Catholic and public schools. The Association of Independent Schools Victoria was contacted but these schools were not included in the study as they felt that students with moderate and severe disabilities generally did not attend their schools due to funding issues. Document analysis involved analysing not only school policy, but also student file documentation, teacher diaries, and written notes where available. Classroom observations in the school of each case study child were made at which notes were taken. One, and sometimes two, interviews with each participant in the study were also conducted where notes were taken and audio recordings were made and later transcribed.

At the conclusion of the case studies questionnaires were constructed based on the qualitative results. These questionnaires sought to measure the degree to which the findings of the case studies were occurring throughout a larger sample of teachers. They also used findings of the case studies to further investigate solutions to some of the concerns and problems expressed in the qualitative phase of the research. After a pilot study, every public and Catholic secondary school with students who had severe to moderate disabilities in their student population was given the opportunity to participate in the quantitative phase of the study. A total of 199 questionnaires were eventually returned.

Qualitative data was coded using the ‘grounded theory’ model of open, axial and selective coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This means that the transcripts of interviews were broken down into smaller component parts or sections of meaning. Analysis of the data began as soon as possible both during and immediately after the interviews using the NUD\*IST (N4) computer program. Data was grouped into categories that were later compared and developed into results for discussion (Bliss, Monk, & Ogborn, 1983). Interview data, observational notes, and documentation all underwent the same process of coding and categorising. The quantitative data from the questionnaire was analysed using the SPSS statistical computer program. Factor analysis, t-tests, Pearson Chi-square tests, and one-way ANOVA tests were conducted as appropriate.

## Results

### Qualitative Phase

The six case study students were from a mixture of Catholic (2) and public (4) schools and were located in both rural (2) and metropolitan settings (4) in Southern Victoria. The data produced six ‘portraits’ of the students concerned and was organised into themes through a process known as ‘counting’ and ‘coding’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994). While in my opinion the ‘portraits’ were valuable in their own right as being rich in context and specific individual experience, clearly more needed to be done with them if it was going to be possible to generate discussion and form some research conclusions for further investigation. The NUD\*IST qualitative computer software was used in the construction of the individual students ‘portraits’, and this program was once again employed to assist in the analysis of themes common across the case studies. Eight strong themes emerged from this analysis, although many of these themes were interrelated while some remained discrete. These eight themes were reported under the following broad labels:

- Curriculum and Academic performance. This theme discussed the academic difficulties faced by students with intellectual disabilities that were almost non-existent for students who had only physical disabilities. Many teachers were having difficulties delivering a multi-level curriculum, and inappropriate curriculum seemed in part to be responsible for the poor academic performance of some students.
- Social difficulties. Most students involved in these case studies had difficulties making and keeping friends, and were viewed as having poor social skills.
- Parental involvement. While parents were involved to differing degrees, their general level of partnership with schools was low.

- School ethos and attitudes. The attitudes of staff and the general educational and social environment of a school with respect to its valuing of diversity seemed to influence of the success of inclusion.
- Funding and resources. Teachers felt they were under resourced and under funded, indicating that if more money were available it would be spent on more aide time. Catholic schools with less funding seemed to be coping at least as well with inclusion as their higher funded public counterparts.
- Teacher issues. Teachers felt under-skilled, under-trained, and pushed for time when it came to educating students with disabilities. Classroom observations revealed a heavy reliance on traditional teacher-centred instructional techniques. The assistance of integration teachers was valued.
- Aide issues. The work of aides was highly valued by many teachers and parents, but less so by many of the case study students. Aides were often present regardless of whether they were needed for a particular class, and often the way in which they worked served to socially isolate the students with disabilities.
- Personality of the student. This was seen by teachers as being the biggest factor influencing the success or failure of a student's inclusion. Students with personality traits that were seen to be positive generally did better than other students.

#### Quantitative Phase

The eight themes were used as the basis of a questionnaire that was developed and sent out across Victoria to as many schools and teachers of students with moderate to severe disabilities who were willing to participate. After first checking with school principals for willingness to participate, a total of 350 questionnaires were sent out of which 199 were returned. The questionnaire had two main functions. The first was to see if the results of the case studies, in general terms, were in line with the experiences of teachers throughout Victoria. The second function was to see how many of the issues and concerns raised in this research could be dealt with so that the practice of inclusion in Victorian secondary schools could be improved. The responses of teachers in the case studies gave a strong indication that a lack of training may account for many of the difficulties schools are facing with inclusion. With this in mind the second part of the questionnaire sought to confirm the suspicion that teachers needed more training, and to see what form this training might take.

The results of the questionnaire clearly confirmed that the eight main themes that emerged from the case studies were also strong issues for students with disabilities in many schools throughout Victoria. Teachers also reported having difficulty adjusting their teaching to meet the needs of students with disabilities in their classes. Figure 1 demonstrates the reliance of many secondary teachers of students with disabilities on traditional expository teaching techniques. General literature on inclusion suggests that these techniques are generally ineffective with students with disabilities, arguing for a more child-centred approach (Falvey, Givner, & Kimm, 1996).



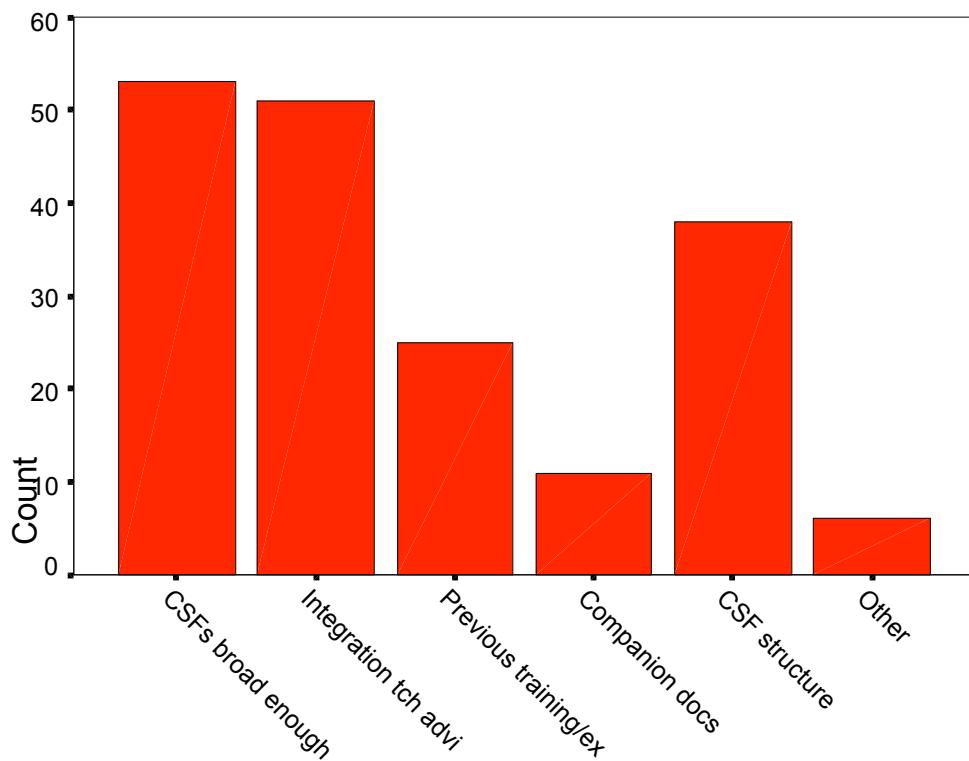
**Figure 1: Teaching styles used in secondary classrooms with students with disabilities**

Teachers also admitted to having difficulty in modifying curriculum to meet the needs of students with disabilities, with 42.2% of respondents to the questionnaire reporting that they do not modify curriculum at all. Curriculum modification was more likely to occur with integration teachers as 71.4% (25) of integration teachers reported modifying the Curriculum Standards Frameworks (CSFs) compared with 51.0% (75) of subject teachers. **Table 1**

#### **Do Teachers Modify the Curriculum Standards Frameworks (CSFs)?**

	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
<b>Yes</b>	104	52.3
<b>No</b>	84	42.2
<b>Missing</b>	11	5.5
<b>Total</b>	199	100.0

Teachers who did modify the CSFs cited three main reasons. These related to the structure and goal content of the CSFs as well as assistance provided by school integration teachers.



Why teachers are able to modify the CSFs

**Figure 2: Reasons for teachers being able to modify the CSFs**

The questionnaire results clearly demonstrated that integration teachers felt better trained and equipped to implement inclusion than regular teachers. They felt that they had more expertise in this area than regular teachers both in terms of the day-to-day practice of inclusion in a classroom, as well as in terms of some of the more theoretical or philosophical sides of inclusions.

**Table 2**  
**Mean Scores from the ‘Practice’ and ‘Theory’ Variables**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
PRACTICE	181	2.53	.75
THEORY	187	3.17	1.01
Valid N (listwise)	176		

\*Note: 1=excellent, 2=good, 3=fair, 4=poor, 5=very poor.

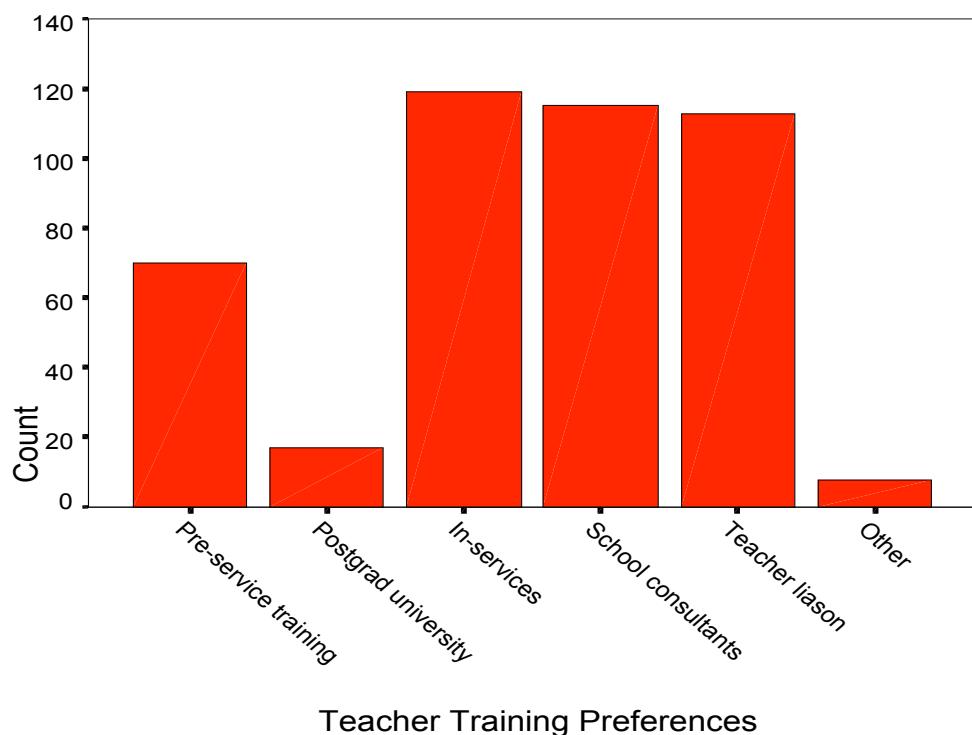
Table 2 shows that the mean response of teacher ratings of their knowledge and skills on the components of teaching ‘practice’ was between ‘good’ and ‘fair’. The data suggests a mean rating of ‘fair’, with a slight tendency towards ‘poor’ for participating teachers’ knowledge and skills in the ‘theory’ area.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the level of reported need of training and whether or not a participant was a subject teacher or an integration teacher. There was a moderate difference in the scores between subject teachers ( $M=2.16$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ) and integration teachers [ $M=2.83$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ;  $t(2,186)=-2.99$ ,  $p=.01$ ]. The magnitude of the

differences in the means was moderate ( $\eta^2=.06$ ). This means teachers were more likely to agree that they required more training than were integration teachers.

A further independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare levels and skills and knowledge within the ‘practice’ variable and whether or not a participant was a subject teacher or an integration teacher. There was a significant difference in the scores for subject teachers [ $M=2.71$ ,  $SD=.69$ ] and integration teachers [ $M=1.89$ ,  $SD=.58$ ;  $t(2,174)=$ ,  $p=.000$ ]. The magnitude of the differences in the means was large ( $\eta^2=.21$ ). This means that integration teachers rated their skills and knowledge with regards to ‘practice’ higher than subject teachers.

When asked what form teachers would like further training to take, many indicated a preference for school-based training through in-class consultation, in-services, and liaison with other teachers.



**Figure 3. Teacher training preferences.**

## Discussion

The results indicate that many schools seem to be having some difficulty in restructuring for inclusion. While not precluding the employment of some inclusive practices in specific instances, the general onus seems to be on the student changing to meet the needs of the school. This seems to be more indicative of ‘integration’ programs than schools that promote ‘inclusion’. The traditional focus of integration has been to help the student with a disability conform to the norms of the school, whereas inclusion programs try to construct environments where all students can be successful regardless of ability (Loreman, 1999; Sailor & Skrtic, 1995).

The tensions between the capacity of schools to restructure for inclusion and the ability of the student to conform to the school environment was evident throughout the case studies. For

example, the personality of the individual student was seen to be a crucial factor affecting the success of school programs. In light of this it seems that many schools have more of a focus on changing the behaviours of an individual student than modifying the way in which they operate. Furthermore, secondary school teachers were found to primarily utilise traditional expository teaching techniques with little chance for group work and student participation. There was also a strong feeling amongst teachers that they were there to teach subject content instead of using a more developmental approach to teaching students. Academic success was dependent on the individual student and their intelligence or commitment rather than appropriate instruction at school. Students unable to cover the set material for a subject were often disadvantaged. Curriculum was often not being modified according to recommendations from the Department of Education, Victoria. These findings support those of an earlier study of integration in Victoria conducted by Grbich and Sykes (1992) Teachers cited the inflexibility and irrelevance of the curriculum as reasons for this, however, their own lack of skills or willingness with regards to varying teaching methods may also be a contributing factor.

One theme that particularly reflected the tensions between school restructuring and student conformity was that of funding and resources. Both Catholic and Public school staff expressed a desire for more funding to support students with disabilities. Despite this, schools seemed to be managing with some teachers in the case studies indicating that funding was adequate to support their student. The two Catholic schools involved in case studies seemed to be coping particularly well, with one school in particular doing an outstanding job according to the student, her mother, and school staff. Students with disabilities in Catholic schools attract Commonwealth government funding but no extra funding from the Victorian government. This means that in almost all cases students with disabilities in Catholic schools receive approximately 75% less funds than do their counterparts in State schools (Catholic Education, 1999). Despite this large financial inequity, the Catholic schools under examination seemed to be at least as successful at including students with disabilities as their State counterparts.

It may be possible to explain the success of some schools regardless of levels of special funding by looking at the issues of 'school ethos and attitudes' and 'aide issues'. Schools with a strong positive school ethos in favour of valuing diversity and helping others seemed to be more successful in including case study students. These were schools that seemed to be taking steps towards restructuring the way in which they work so that all students are able to participate. This positive ethos can be reflected in staff attitudes towards teaching students with disabilities. Where positive attitudes existed amongst school staff, a more inclusive environment seemed to result.

Although schools regretted the fact that there were perceived funding inadequacies to meet the needs of students with disabilities, when asked how extra money could be spent many teachers cited increased time with a teacher aide as being desirable. The perception of staff (and some families) that more time in class with a teacher aide would improve participation and learning for a student with a disability is interesting in light of contrasting evidence in this study and in the general literature that the presence teacher aides in a classroom, while important in some respects, had their drawbacks and were not always required to support student learning. Once again the tension between school restructuring and student conformity becomes a factor. Teacher aides tended to position themselves close to the student with a disability and work directly with them. This is not only socially isolating but is also not always felt to be academically helpful for the student, a finding supported in other

international studies involving teacher aides (Giangreco, Edelman, Evans Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Gormley & McDermott, 1994). The use of a teacher aide at such 'close range' may indicate that the content of class has not been adequately modified to meet the needs of all. At one school, where no teacher aides were employed, teachers managed their work through modifying classes and pairing the student with other capable and helpful peers as well as allowing the student time during the school day outside of scheduled classes to work with the integration teacher and catch up on work. The emphasis at this school was not so much on the student 'keeping up' with her peers, but instead on classes being designed to meet her needs.

Parents received little attention from staff in the case study data, and questionnaire results indicated that meetings between parents and teachers were infrequent. Many teachers had only briefly met the parents of the student with a disability they were teaching. This is a strong indication that parents are not viewed as equal partners in the educational process by schools. This again is an indication that the secondary schools have not adequately restructured for inclusion. The notion that family involvement is important to the success of students with disabilities in regular schools is now widely accepted (Dempsey, 1996; Friend & Bursuck, 1999; Hayes, 1998; Jorgensen, 1995; Strickland & Turnbull, 1990), however, this does not seem to be occurring to any significant degree in Victorian schools.

Teacher training can help to address many of the issues teachers are facing when it comes to including students with disabilities in their regular classes. It is also believed that training in this area makes teachers better educators of all students, not just those with disabilities (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000). When asked about what type of training they would prefer, teachers indicated that they would like more 'on the job' type training (see Figure 3). The most popular type of training amongst teachers was 'in-services' (61.7%). Almost equally as popular as in-services was the idea of a consultant in the classroom assisting the teacher (59.6%) and time to liaise with other teachers who were knowledgeable in this area and who could provide help and support (58.5%). This provides a strong argument for training to take place in schools, especially as postgraduate university programs both rated below 10% as the preferred training option for teachers. It was also felt by many (36.3%) that younger teachers could benefit from the inclusion of this type of training in pre-service teacher education programs, an area that is largely ignored by most Victorian universities. It is also interesting information for universities who may need to consider the way postgraduate courses are run and the teacher perception of their value.

On the questionnaire teachers rated themselves as being 'good' to 'fair' on questions relating to practice and 'fair' to 'poor' on questions relating to the variable 'theory'. Items that fell under the banner of 'practice' relate to things teachers must know or skills they must have to be able to effectively include a student at the classroom level. They are practical considerations for the classroom. Items that fell under the banner of 'theory' included non-immediate skills and knowledge such as transition needs of students with disabilities and needs of families and siblings of students with disabilities. Subject teachers rated themselves considerably lower on these items than did integration teachers. These results demonstrate that subject teachers in particular do not feel that they have strong skills and knowledge in either of the areas of 'theory' or 'practice'. Training in each area is required, however particular emphasis in any training program could first be given to the variables that fall in the realm of 'practice' as these elements form the 'basics' of inclusion. Skills and knowledge in the 'theory' area are important too, but as many of these issues are non-immediate they could wait until the 'practice' areas are addressed. Specifically, these areas include:

- General characteristics and needs of students with disabilities
  - Assessment strategies for use when working with students with disabilities
  - Teaching students with disabilities specific learning strategies
  - Social skills training
  - Adapting the physical environment for students with disabilities
  - Adapting and modifying assessments for students with disabilities
  - Adapting and modifying the curriculum for students with disabilities
  - Adapting and modifying instructional procedures for students with disabilities
  - Classroom acceptance of students with disabilities.
- (adapted from O'Shea & O'Shea, 1998)

Given that teachers have indicated a strong preference for 'in school' training with a more 'hands-on' and practical orientation to it, the question arises of how to best provide this to teachers. The results of this questionnaire suggest that the answer already lies within schools. Integration teachers were less likely to agree that they needed further training to develop skills in how to teach student's with disabilities. Indeed, with a mean of 2.83 integration teachers were almost neutral on the subject. Integration teachers were more likely to modify the CSFs than subject teachers, and they were able to provide effective assistance to other teachers in assisting them to modify the CSFs. When rating skills and knowledge in training areas for inclusion integration teachers rated themselves as more knowledgeable than subject teachers in both the 'theory' and 'practice' types of questions, and this difference was considerable. Teacher experience was also found to play a role in the areas of 'theory' and 'practice' skills and knowledge, with more experienced teachers indicating higher levels of skills and knowledge than less experienced teachers.

Taking these factors into consideration it would seem that an effective approach to training for teachers would be to have this training done 'on site' by the school integration teacher. This, however, would require a serious shift for many schools in the way in which integration teachers are viewed and the way they do their jobs. As trainers, integration teachers would need to run in-services, provide in-classroom consultation and assistance for teachers (a role many already perform), and act as facilitators for teacher liaison. The case studies demonstrated that currently integration teachers tend to act as 'managers' of the inclusion process. They organise assessments and equipment for students, coordinate teacher aides, and perform any number of 'management' type tasks. Comments written by some integration teachers on their questionnaires indicate that they also do some remedial withdrawal classes with students. Some of the integration teachers involved in the case studies also did this. While withdrawal classes may provide a valuable service to the student, the need for this type of remediation may be reduced if teachers are better able to meet their needs in regular classes. While the role of 'manager' needs to be performed by someone (and the integration teacher is probably best placed to do this), some of the time devoted to withdrawal classes or other teaching duties could be committed to staff training. This time would not only help to allow integration teachers to organise in-services or liaison opportunities for after school when everyone can attend, but would also give them the opportunity to consult in classes and provide practical and meaningful advice on inclusive practices to subject teachers. Given that more experienced teachers rate their skills and knowledge in key inclusive education training areas as being better than that of less experienced teachers, schools may wish to give priority for this type of training to teachers with under 10 years experience, although this will almost certainly depend on the context of the individual school.

## **Conclusion**

A conclusion that can be drawn from this study, then, is that schools may want to consider changes to the role of integration teachers in their school from that of mainly inclusion ‘managers’ who might also do some teaching in 1:1 or small group class withdrawal situations, to educational leaders who have a focus on training other staff on how to implement inclusion through school-based consultations and in- services. In doing this the need for withdrawal classes may be seriously reduced, and teachers may learn skills for inclusion in identified need areas such as delivering a multi-level curriculum, modified student assessment, fostering a positive social environment in the classroom and school, inclusive instructional approaches, teaching social skills, working in partnership with parents, and the effective use of teacher aides.

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