

What characteristics of elementary classroom teachers contribute to their professional growth in implementing inclusive classroom practices?

Abstract

Five teachers were interviewed about their beliefs about and practices in inclusion and were interviewed a second time four years later. In the interviews teachers described their work over the preceding school year with two students, one exceptional and one at risk of academic failure. The interviewer covers five topics: initial recognition of the learning difficulties; the program adaptations provided by the teacher; monitoring of student progress; scope of the teacher's collaboration with resource staff, and with the students' parents.

Using the constant comparison method, the interview transcripts were analysed to identify what beliefs and practices characterised gains, or lack of gains, in teachers' narratives from the first to the second interview. It was evident from the first interview that teachers differed in the extent to which they took responsibility for exceptional students. This variable predicted the degree to which teachers made progress by the second interview. Progress was marked by increased depth, scope and complexity of accommodations, use of IEPs as a working document, drawing on resources to supplement instructional opportunities for students, and coordinating instruction with remedial programs. Collaboration with resource teachers and parents also differed across the group of teachers.

Implications are drawn for the role of teachers' beliefs in their development of professional skills for inclusive education, and for how teachers' perspectives about responsibilities affect their response to mandated inclusion policies.

This study examines the level of professional growth achieved by teachers over several years, in a school system that promotes policies for including students with disabilities in regular classrooms. It examines five general education elementary classroom teachers' beliefs about students with special education needs and about their roles and responsibilities in working with them. Teachers were interviewed and asked to describe how they accommodate for their students with special education needs in their heterogeneous classrooms. Each participant's initial and final interview transcripts were then examined to identify the themes of change and stability that emerged in their beliefs and practices over a period of approximately 5 years of professional experience.

With local, national, and international agencies focused on raising standards in schools and classrooms, the increasing placement of students with special needs in regular classrooms, and the accepted view of teachers as being central to student success, there is a need for longitudinal research of this nature.

The teachers who participated in this study were elementary school teachers in Ontario, Canada, who taught during a time of significant policy change. Toward the late 1990s, with the growing understanding of the widespread nature of disability, significant changes occurred in Ontario's special education legislation. In 1998, Ontario Regulation 181/91 of the Education Act was passed in the province of Ontario.¹ This provision is for the integration of students with special education needs and it states that placement in the

¹ <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/hilites.html>

regular class will be the preferred choice where it meets the needs of the student and if requested by the parents. As a result, teachers are required to implement the provisions allowing for the integration of students with special education needs. In reality there is little consistency from school board to school board and from school to school in terms of how special education programs and services are designed and delivered (Jordan, 2007).

Students who have been deemed to be 'exceptional' by an Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) and students at risk of failure are usually characterized as having Individual Education Plans, or IEPs. These plans are created within schools by the special education teacher, the child's regular classroom teacher, support staff who work with the student and students' parents or guardians. IEPs must include specific educational expectations, an outline of the special education services that will be received, and a statement of how the expectations in the IEP will be reviewed. Demeris, Childs and Jordan (in press) estimated that up to 17% of students in Grade 3 without formal designation as being exceptional may be receiving instruction through an IEP.

The new terminology associated with the IPRC and IEP processes, along with other special education terminology, creates a need for teachers to learn both the language and new and evolving ways of working with students with special needs included in their classrooms. Individual school boards are responsible for implementing the legislation and training teachers on the new standards of practice and accompanying language. This study commenced in 1999 when the legislation was relatively new, and concluded in 2004-2005 when teachers were supposedly familiar with both the provisions described above and the concept of IEPs. Accommodating for the needs of students with special education needs is understood as a policy directive throughout Ontario classrooms.

Inclusion and the Role of the Teacher

Classroom teachers are widely understood to be central to the successful inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Expert Panel Report, 2005; Rosenfeld & Rosenfeld, 2004). According to the Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs (2005), Ontario school board statistics reveal that most students with special education needs "spend at least 50 per cent of their instructional day in a regular classroom, being taught by regular classroom teachers" (p. 2). Because of the inclusion phenomenon, classroom teachers today must approach teaching quite differently from how they were taught as students in traditional classroom settings two decades ago.

Including students with special education needs in heterogeneous classrooms often presents both challenges and opportunities for classroom teachers. Pressures such as time constraints, vigorous curriculum demands and increased accountability often compound and leave teachers little time or energy to consider improving their classroom practice. Despite this reality, teachers must be prepared to support students' learning in a variety of ways. This is not an easy order to fill – it requires both a sound knowledge of effective inclusive teaching strategies and the motivation and prioritization on the part of the teacher to implement them effectively. In the past decade a growing number of researchers have begun to address the issue of complexity in teaching in inclusive

settings (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Howes et al., 2005; Rosenfeld & Rosenfeld, 2004)). Others such as Jordan and Stanovich (2004) contend that when inclusion is adequately supported, it may be seen as a “powerful vehicle for professional growth” (p. 41) of teachers.

Accommodating for Student Need

When a student lacks sufficient prior knowledge to comprehend new information, the teacher must provide temporary supports to help the student grasp the concept. These supports are known as ‘scaffolding’ and they are one of many accommodations (services or supports) that can be provided to help a student “fully access the subject matter and instruction as well as to validly demonstrate what he or she knows” (Nolet and McLaughlin, 2000, p. 71). Other accommodations used by teachers in inclusive classrooms include environmental accommodations (i.e. quiet setting for test taking), curriculum acquisition accommodations (i.e. Braille materials, tape-recorded books), content enhancement accommodations (i.e. graphic organizers, study guides, peer-mediated instruction) and alternative response accommodations (i.e. scribing, tape-recorded responses). These accommodations benefit students with special education needs, but they also often benefit other students as well. Accommodations do not alter the curriculum expectation standards for students; they simply provide learning access routes for the student.

Modifications, another strategy for adapting instruction to student needs, involve teaching a student at a different level of difficulty, often by reducing the task demands, or focusing on learning objectives set for a lower grade level. The decision to implement an accommodation or modification for a particular student should be made in conjunction with parent(s), the school special education support staff and (if considered appropriate) the student, prior to being implemented in the classroom. Modifications in particular have significant implications for students and the advantages and disadvantages should be discussed before a decision is made. As cautioned by Nolet & McLaughlin (2000):

Accommodations and modifications should be used only when the instruction in the general classrooms is unlikely to meet the needs of a particular student. To the maximum extent possible, the instructional environment in the classroom should eliminate the need for accommodations and modifications. (p. 89)

Fuchs and Fuchs (1995) describe two types of adaptations, routine and specialized, that are used by general education teachers to support students with special learning needs. Routine adaptations are variations in materials, grouping arrangements and goals usually established at the beginning of the school year. They may be considered “low effort” for the teacher because they do not require significant time to implement or upkeep and may benefit a large number of students. Specialized adaptations are ways in which teachers “modify planned instruction beyond their routine adaptation in light of student difficulty” (p. 441). These adaptations are typically more time-consuming and require more planning and upkeep for teachers because they are individualized to suit specific student learning needs. Fuchs et al. note that teachers are more reluctant to undertake specialized than routine adaptations.

Teacher Beliefs

Teachers' beliefs about the nature of learning and learning difficulties is strongly related to effective instruction in inclusive classrooms (Jordan & Stanovich, 2003; Pajares, 1992; Stipek, Givvin, Samon, & McGyvers, 2001). Teachers differ in the beliefs they hold about their work, their students, the curriculum they teach, and their roles and responsibilities in working with students with special education needs. These beliefs shape daily life in the classroom because they impact the expectations that the teacher holds about particular students and affect both what they notice and what they do not notice about students. Jordan, Lindsay & Stanovich (1997) have found that teachers' beliefs about their roles and responsibilities in working with students with special education needs influenced both the quantity and quality of their instructional interactions with all students.

Despite the significance of teacher beliefs in inclusive classrooms, it is difficult to define them because they cannot be observed and they do not lend themselves easily to empirical research. Adding to the complexity of the issue is the question of whether beliefs lead to practice or practice lead to beliefs. Teacher beliefs are nonetheless a current focus of the literature on effective teaching because they are thought to be the key to understanding teacher practice.

The purpose of this study was to examine how five teachers' beliefs about their roles and responsibilities for students with special needs included in their classrooms, and their described practices with such students evolved over a four to five year period, while they taught in a school and school system that promoted inclusion and provided professional development to support inclusive practices.

Method

The P-I Interview

In 1994 Jordan, Stanovich and colleagues developed the Pathognomonic-Interventionist (P-I) interview measure to illustrate teacher beliefs and attitudes. The narrative interview highlights the range of beliefs along a continuum from 'Pathognomonic' to Interventionist. Interviews conducted in the narrative-style have been supported by a number of educational researchers who describe the benefits of using such inquiry to inform educational experience (Beattie, 1995; Connely & Clandinin, 1996; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991).

Teachers with Interventionist beliefs see themselves as being responsible for meeting the learning needs of all students. They assume the locus of responsibility for students with special needs by attempting to reduce or remove barriers to learning for these students (Booth, 2002). At the other extreme are Pathognomonic beliefs. These are beliefs held by teachers who "understand the disability condition to be a pathological attribute of the learner which can be reliably named" (Jordan & Stanovich, 2004, p. 31). These teachers do not see themselves as being responsible for the instruction and remediation of students with special education needs. They tend to place the locus of responsibility for struggling students on school support staff, specialist teachers, parents and sometimes even the students themselves.

More recently there has been an additional element added to the bipolar continuum. It addresses the root cause of discrimination or inequity in schools. The socio-political perspective was characterized by Underwood (2002) and it describes

people who focus on the ‘system’ as being responsible for the exclusion of people with disabilities.

The P-I interview was designed to elicit teacher beliefs about inclusion and about the related roles of classroom teachers in an inclusive setting. The interview also explores how teachers develop in their roles and how they work with colleagues, parents and special education teachers in their classrooms. The phenomenological technique develops in a narrative style with prompting from the interviewer with questions such as “Why did you do that?” and “Did you do anything else?”. Jordan and Stanovich (2004) describe the interview as follows:

Teachers recall their experiences, reporting their perceptions of the students’ characteristics, the decisions they made and their intentions and their reasons for doing so. Teachers also express their judgments about the results, in relation to their understanding of their roles and responsibilities in meeting the needs of their students with special needs. (p. 30)

Five teachers were interviewed and asked to describe their beliefs about and practices in inclusive classrooms and were interviewed a second time four to five years later. In the interviews teachers described their work over the preceding school year with two students, one exceptional and one at risk of academic failure. The interviewers covered five topics: initial recognition of the learning difficulties; the program adaptations provided by the teacher; monitoring of student progress; scope of the teacher’s collaboration with resource staff; and with the students’ parents.

The confidential interviews used for analysis in this study were conducted with teachers individually in a private room in the participating school and took between 60 and 70 minutes each to complete.

Participants

The five teachers’ earlier and later audio recorded interview data and transcripts were used for analysis in this study. All five teachers taught at the same elementary school in the Greater Toronto Area during the time of both the earlier and later interviews and volunteered to participate on both interview occasions. One teacher (T5) taught both overseas and in a northern community after his initial interview in 2000. In 2004 he returned to the same school and again participated in the study. The teachers represented in this study taught various grades from one through eight. Four of the teachers had split grade teaching assignments during one of their two interviews. Additional demographic details for the five teacher participants are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of Teacher Participants by Years of Experience, Grades Taught, and Time Elapsed Between the Earlier (I-1) and Later Interview (I-2)

| | Interview 1 | Interview 2 | Years |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------|
|--|-------------|-------------|-------|

| Teacher (and Gender) | Years of teaching experience(including interview year) | Grade(s) taught | Years of teaching experience(including interview year) | Grade(s) taught | between I-1 and I-2 |
|----------------------|--|-----------------|--|-----------------|---------------------|
| T1 (F) | 1 | 5/6 | 5 | 7 | 4 |
| T2 (F) | 3 | 3 | 8 | 1 | 5 |
| T3 (F) | 6 | 6/7 | 10 | 8 | 4 |
| T4 (F) | 6 | 6 | 10 | 7/8 | 4 |
| T5 (M) | 11 | 4 | 16 | 6 | 5 |

Initial Case Study Analyses

The primary analysis mechanism used in this study was thematic analysis, derived from Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1998). The analysis initially focused on thematically analyzing and one teacher's data. Within-interview analysis of T1's earlier interview transcript revealed patterns in her practice and these were recorded directly onto her transcript. The same inductive process was undertaken for T1's second, later transcript. Between-interview analysis, or constant comparison analysis, occurred when the patterns from T1's earlier and later interview transcripts were compared. This analysis was possible because the interviewers in the earlier and later interviews used the same interview questions to guide the participant and therefore the same topics were covered in both interviews (Powney & Watts, 1987).

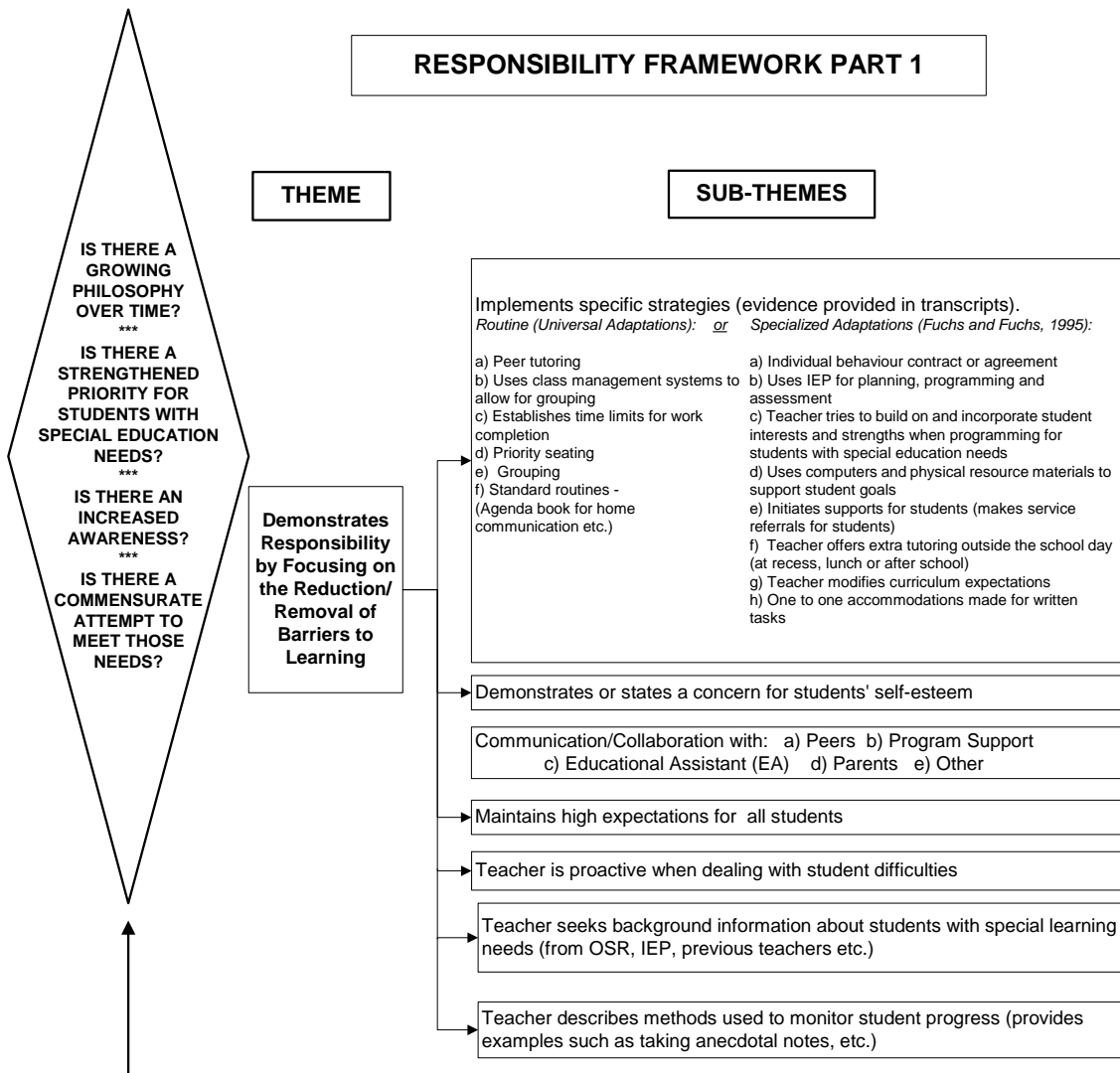
The comparison of T1's earlier and later transcripts led to the sorting and reorganization of her emerging patterns into potential themes and sub-themes in the form of a broad framework structure. This allowed for the visual representation of sub-themes emerging from primary themes. The same process of within-interview and between-interview analyses was then completed for another teacher, using his earlier and later interview transcripts. New themes and sub-themes not already identified in T1's analysis were added to the broad framework structure. The patterns that emerged for both teachers were then compared to each other allowing for additional between-interview and between-participant analyses.

At the conclusion of the two initial case study analyses, determining who was responsible for students with special education needs emerged as a dominant theme. Therefore, the broad structure of themes and sub-themes was re-examined and re-organized into a framework based on responsibility for students with special education needs.

Validation of the Framework

The remaining teachers' interview transcripts were then examined using within-interview thematic analysis and the constant comparison method. Each teacher's analysis was compared to both the previous analyses and to the Responsibility Framework to amplify and reduce existing themes within the framework. When the interview transcripts for all six teachers were reread, the framework evolved into a vertical framework with positive indicators of growth represented in the upper half of the framework while negative indicators were represented in the bottom half. Eventually all of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the teachers' data analyses were represented and the framework became saturated.

The Responsibility Framework emerged directly from the responses to questions asked in the interviews, and is presented in Figure 1.



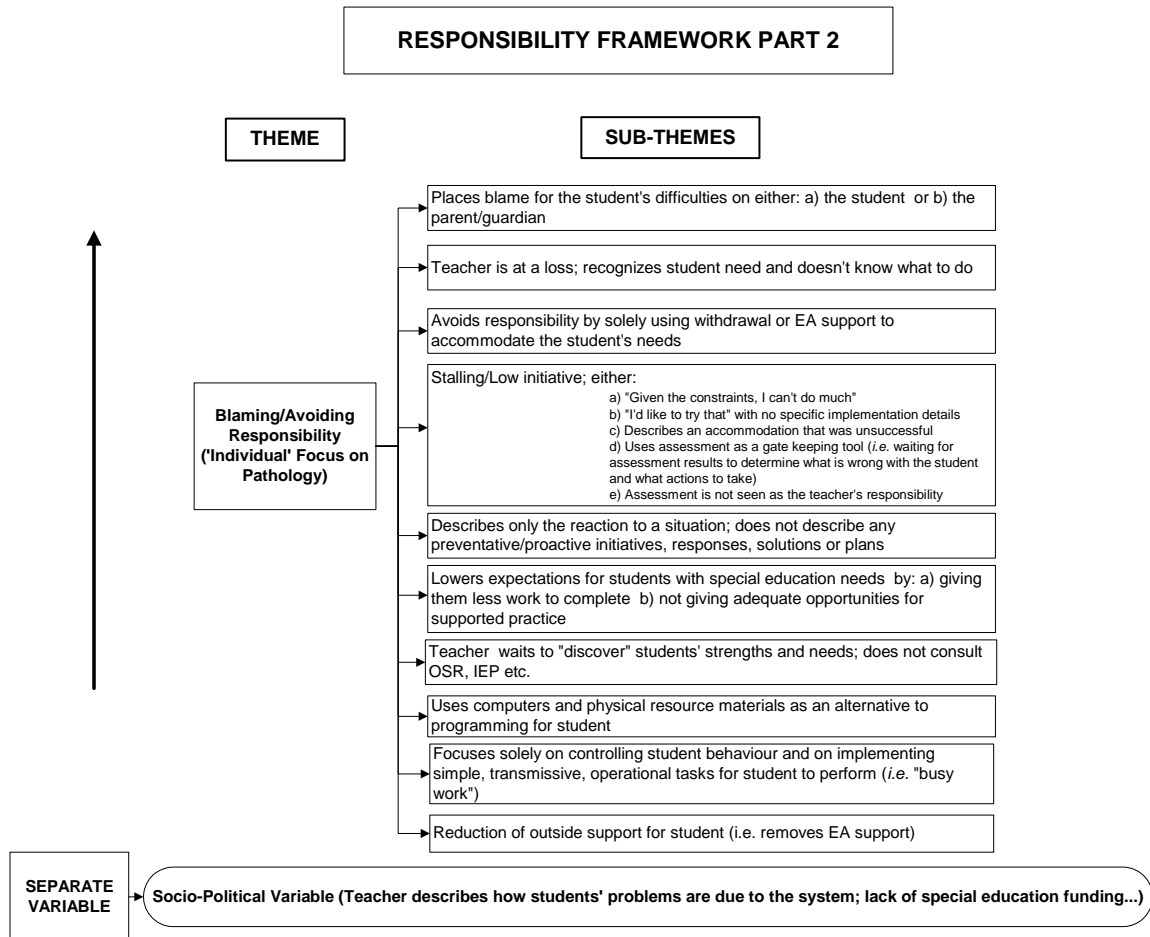


Figure 1: The emergent analytic framework

Results

It was evident that the five teachers' initial interviews differed in the extent to which the teachers saw themselves as responsible for meeting the needs of their students with special education needs. This variable was later shown to be predictive of the degree to which the teachers made progress by the second interview. Progress in teachers' professional growth was marked by increased depth, scope and complexity of the accommodations they described, their use of IEPs as working documents and as collaborative tools, how and when they drew on resources beyond the classroom to supplement instructional opportunities for students, and whether and how they coordinated their instruction with remedial and supplementary programs. Collaboration with Program Support teachers and parents differed markedly across the group of teachers, although in the case of one teacher this may not have been related to beliefs about inclusive education since he described his teaching philosophy as focussing exclusively on the development of student self esteem.

One key purpose of this investigation was to identify patterns in the beliefs that teachers held about students with special education needs, about their roles and

responsibilities in teaching these students, and in their descriptions of their practices in working with these students. In light of the fact that they taught in a school board that supports inclusive education, it was hoped that teacher participants would demonstrate a shift towards describing more inclusive teaching practices.

Three variations of the responsibility theme emerged from the teacher data: teachers who consistently viewed the responsibility for remediation of students with special education needs as being with the students themselves, the family, or other school support staff; teachers who believed that the students were their responsibility and that they needed to find ways of supporting the struggling students; and finally teachers who viewed “the system” as being responsible for these students.

There was preponderance for three of the teachers in this study to assign blame to the students who were not successful. These beliefs, in keeping with the language presented in the literature, were therefore referred to as pathognomonic beliefs. These teachers shared characteristics in their descriptions of practice and are therefore presented here as a group. All three teachers discounted the value of students’ IEPs and they did not consult IEPs for planning purposes. They also consistently described how they implemented routine (low effort) accommodations. Two of the three teachers assigned parents as the main implementers of remedial techniques. In addition, these three teachers’ transcripts were marked by their lack of collaboration with staff, Program Support, Educational Assistants and parents. When the longitudinal data was considered, the three teachers who held these pathologizing beliefs did not describe beliefs or practices that change very much over time. They may have provided somewhat richer descriptions of the accommodations that they implemented at the time of the second interview, but they continued to hold the students who were not learning responsible for their lack of progress and primarily ascribed them as having motivational problems.

In contrast to this group of three teachers was T1. This teacher further defined and validated the themes presented above by the contrast of her own responses. Her themes were relevant to this study because she provided data that was antithetical to the pathologizing beliefs. As the mother of three children who themselves have disabilities, she maintained the belief throughout both interviews that she was responsible for meeting the needs of all her students. In this teacher’s first interview she described how she already assumed considerable responsibility for students in her class who had special education needs. Her longitudinal analysis suggested that she continued to make significant gains in refining her practices to reflect her beliefs by the second interview. She described working collaboratively with peers, school staff and members of the school community in both interviews. T1’s progress was also marked by her descriptions of accommodations in the later interview that exhibited the increased depth, scope and complexity of her inclusive beliefs and practices. For example, in the first interview she described how she did not consult students’ IEPs, while in the later interview she reviewed IEPs and other student documents. In her later interview she also described how she coordinated instruction by speaking with the previous years’ teachers and Educational Assistants, “I spoke to his last year’s teacher and she talked about levels...the kind of help he was receiving from Program Support from an EA standpoint and from the teacher’s standpoint.” (T1-2, p.2)

The analysis of the fifth teacher included in this study looked very different. In his interviews he discussed how his travels shaped his beliefs about teaching. In

describing the focus of his instruction he discounted academics altogether and focused solely on student self-concept. He was anomalous compared to the other four teachers and there were no observable patterns in his beliefs, other than the fact that his beliefs and practices remained stable over the course of his longitudinal data.

Of the four teachers whose patterns of belief were linked to their practice, one was interventionist and three were pathologizing. Change only occurred in the one teacher who initially believed that she was responsible for meeting the needs of all students. The teacher with interventionist beliefs assumed the locus of responsibility for her students with special education needs. The three teachers who held pathognomonic beliefs described practices that remained stable over time.

It is however difficult to generalize these findings to larger teaching contexts because of the small sample size of teachers. It is possible that T1 expressed her commitment to students with disabilities based on her own family experiences and that this may be a factor in her growth over time. Robinson (in preparation) found a similar relationship in eight teachers between their personal (familial, social) experiences with disability and an interventionist teaching philosophy. Day et al.'s (2006) notion of teacher identities and how the "events and experiences in the personal lives of teachers are intimately linked to the performance of their professional roles" (p. 603) may also help to explain T1's analysis and account in part for her progress and growth.

The final goal of this study was to determine if the teachers' descriptions of their beliefs and practices changed from the first to the second interview. There was little to no apparent change in three of the five teachers examined in this longitudinal study, and as noted above these three teachers put forth similar profiles. There were however, slight shifts and increases in the use of inclusive terminology in all later teacher interviews. Although this suggests that there was a notable increase in the general awareness of inclusive practices and terminology such as accommodations and other inclusive teaching strategies by the time of the second interview, there was little evidence of the use of new strategies, or of the three teachers more effectively differentiating instruction for students with special education needs.

Discussion

Three of the five teachers in this study did not show any change as a result of teaching in a school system that promotes inclusion. These three teachers did not view themselves as being responsible for meeting the learning needs of students with special education needs and therefore acted accordingly by failing to adapt instruction and accommodate for student need. On the other hand, one teacher did view herself as being responsible for meeting the needs of all learners in her classroom, and she not only created a more inclusive classroom environment for all students, but continued to describe using more inclusive practices over time.

It is important to consider what the results of this study imply for inclusive schools and moving teachers forward in their beliefs and practices. The likelihood of teachers spontaneously improving and becoming more inclusive seem to be improbable. The results suggest that it is difficult to create growth and change in inclusive teaching practices.

The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs (Ontario 2004) states that:

It is imperative that inclusion means not only the practice of placing students with special needs in the regular classroom but ensuring that teachers assist every student to prepare for the highest degree of independence possible. (p.2) The statement above begs the question, “How do we ensure that teachers do assist students?” The results of this study suggest that in order for inclusion to be successful teachers must view themselves as being responsible for the learning needs of all students, regardless of ability. Given that teacher beliefs are difficult to change and that research indicates a connection between effective instruction in inclusive classrooms and teachers’ beliefs (Jordan & Stanovich; Stipek, Givven, Samon & McGyvers, 2001) we must consider possible interventions and improvements that can be made. This study has implications for the need to explore different kinds of interventions such as professional development opportunities, structured mentoring programs and participation in professional learning communities to change teacher beliefs and ultimately change their classroom practices. Encouraging research by Howes, Booth, Dyson and Frankham (2005) suggests that active teacher learning is central to the process of developing a more inclusive school. They found that some teachers in their study were committed to inclusion, but appeared unaware of the exclusive nature of some of their actions. A process of social learning was put in place which explicitly set out to “raise questions and disturb preconceptions” (p.135). As teachers participated in critical conversations about barriers to learning, they rediscovered their motivation to help all students learn and ultimately became more inclusive.

The results of the current study also have implications for beginning teachers and prospective teachers in faculties of education. It is essential that all teachers create classrooms that are as accessible as possible for all students. Despite the fact that today’s classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of student needs, many teachers find themselves struggling because they have had insufficient instruction in how to accommodate for a variety of learning needs. Many faculties of education in Canadian universities do not even require that prospective teachers take courses in inclusive education, despite the fact that they will inevitably be responsible for teaching students with special education needs in their classrooms. In their Review of Teachers’ Qualifications Report (2006), The Ontario College of Teachers recommended that faculties of education make special education a required component of their programs, but the recommended change has yet to be implemented.

Conclusion

In this study, only one of the five teachers described using a variety of accommodations and modifications in her classroom and this teacher implemented a broader variety at the time of her second interview. The other four teachers tended to rely on using a few “routine” accommodations that were fairly easy to implement and maintain (Fuchs et al., 1995). These teachers also failed to use a richer variety of instructional strategies and accommodations over time.

A growing body of research supports the idea that teachers who teach students with special needs become altogether more skilful teachers because they develop more

effective diagnostic skills and acquire a broader repertoire of strategies (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Stanovich & Jordan, 2004). Inclusive teachers are able to better understand and teach students who learn in ways different from their peers. With inclusion becoming a more universally accepted model for meeting the needs of diverse learners, there is a need to continue studying teachers' perspectives about their responsibilities as inclusive educators. If we hope to create truly effective classrooms we must ensure that teachers have the tools they need to provide learning access routes for students and that these tools are used effectively and consistently.

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