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Pre-service teachers’ views about an inclusive education internship:  
A qualitative study
by
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ABSTRACT
In this article, the authors report on a study examining the experiences of teacher interns working with children in inclusive settings. The study was designed to seek answers to three questions: How does an inclusive education internship affect the attitudes of interns towards inclusive education? What are the advantages and disadvantages of working in an inclusive setting as perceived by interns undertaking an inclusive education internship? What coping strategies do interns employ during their inclusive education internship? In order to answer these questions, the authors collected interview data from three interns. These data were analysed using qualitative procedures, guided by the principles of Grounded Theory (GT). The results showed that the data could be grouped within 15 categories of response and that these could be subsumed within three major themes, namely, positive realities, negative realities, and coping strategies. The interns’ stories are then told, by the authors, through these themes and some of the corresponding categories. The authors conclude their article by framing a set of recommendations that has implications for tertiary course designers, practicum/internship personnel, supervising teachers, future interns, and researchers.
Introduction

Teacher education programs that prepare students for employment in schools include significant periods in classrooms. During these periods teacher trainees are engaged in observations, research projects and practice teaching. The aim of these experiences is to assist in the production of resilient, knowledgeable and reflective practitioners. Those who conduct research in this area (see, for example, Johnston & Goettsch, 2000; McMeniman, Cumming, Wilson, Stevenson, & Sim, 2000) use a number of taxonomies of teacher knowledge to chart professional growth and development. The categories of knowledge commonly include content knowledge, curriculum knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characteristics, and knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values.

Experience alone is not sufficient to promote the growth of professional knowledge, dispositions and skills. Teacher education students need to engage in a number of types of reflective behaviour in relation to that experience (Farrell, 1998). Practical teaching experiences may be given a specific focus through the use of assigned tasks or the selection of particular settings. Jobling and Moni (2004) designed activities to enhance the capacity of teacher trainees to teach students with special needs, an area that is not usually emphasised in general teacher preparation programs. Their particular focus was on ‘knowledge of learners and their characteristics’.

As a consequence of such learning in authentic settings, students are able to make informed decisions about their suitability for teaching and those who ultimately join the profession are more likely to be retained. Teacher retention is a critical issue with the Commission on Teaching and America’s Future recommending that teacher
preparation “should be oriented around building subject and pedagogical knowledge, providing clinical practice and entry-level support.” (Rebora, 2003, p. 12).

The research study reported here has a dual focus, life experiences during an extended practicum and the development of insights about an inclusive classroom. It was conducted as part of a ten-week internship included in the seventh semester of a four-year teacher preparation program. The practicum involved classes that included one or more children with special needs. It had a specific focus on knowledge of such learners and their needs and becoming familiar with addressing these needs in the context of a regular classroom. The material that follows examines the literature related to inclusive classrooms.

Literature Review

Although the bulk of the research literature pertaining to inclusive education is pointing to an increase in the positive perceptions of general education teachers towards the concept of inclusion, a body of literature has identified some areas of concern for inclusive practice. For instance, many teachers do not believe that they have sufficient time in both their personal and professional lives to effectively include a student with special needs. They argue that time is required for constructing students’ IEPs, establishing a routine for teaching the general and individualised programs, and developing the required materials and resources for meeting the individual requirements of the included students (see, for example, Brown & Shearer, 1999; Connor, 2001; Cornoldi, Tereni, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 1998). Given these time constraints, some teachers are left feeling that the task is too daunting and ultimately this will have a detrimental effect on the included students in the regular
classroom (Bennett, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997; Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, 2001; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Wright & Sigafoos, 1998).

Studies across the United States of America (USA), Italy, and Australia have also identified other areas of concern for teachers: an inadequacy in both pre- and in-service training (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Westwood & Graham, 2003); a lack of appropriate funding (Westwood & Graham, 2003); the threat of violent attacks, outbursts or behaviours by included students with challenging behaviours (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart, & Eloff, 2003; Forlin, 1997); a paucity of human and physical support (Bennett et al., 1997; Westwood & Graham, 2003); and, a lack of continuation of inclusive programs within the student’s home life by family and carers (Bennett et al., 1997; Engelbrecht et al., 2003).

It needs stressing, however, that discussion about the positive perceptions of inclusive education by general education teachers is also prevalent in the extant literature. For example, it is evident that teachers are becoming more aware of the benefits that can be accrued by both general and included students through the practice of inclusion of students with mild to severe disabilities. One such benefit is the increase in social interactions between included students and general students (Hendrickson, Shokochi-Yekta, Hamre-Nietupski, & Gable, 1996; Salisbury, Gallucci, Palombaro & Peck, 1995). Some authors suggest that the inclusion of students with mild to severe disabilities is allowing such students to have greater levels of sustained contact with their non-disabled same aged peers, build richer friendship networks, develop more independence towards adult functioning with respect to social competencies, improve interpersonal skills, be accommodated in the same school as their siblings, and, promote their communicative and emotional development (Brown & Shearer, 1999; Salisbury et al., 1995; Sontag, 1997).
There is another corpus of literature relating to the benefits which inclusion provides for general students. Increased acceptance and reduction of a negative stigma associated with students with special needs and the delivery of special educational services, a willingness to form friendships with students with mild to severe special needs, development of responsibility in taking part in the socialisation process of these students with special needs, and the formation of empathy for others, have been identified as views forged by general students through having a mild to severely disabled student included in their classroom (Favazza & Odom, 1997; Hendrickson et al., 1996; Rademacher, Wilhelm, Hildreth, Bridges, & Cowart, 1998; Weiner, 2003).

However, research such as that conducted by Sale and Carey (1995) has identified conflicting views in regards to the benefits of inclusion for both the special needs and non-disabled students. Their study indicated that students with special needs were chosen as the least popular and least liked of their same-aged peers by general students in their classroom. These results were obtained within a classroom context where the students were often placed in an inclusive setting; perhaps indicating that inclusion itself does not change perceptions and preference order with regard to the attitude held by the general student population towards special needs students. This finding probably suggests that there are other variables that affect the development of positive attitudes and actions towards people with disabilities in non-disabled students. The results of the study also indicated that most of the social interactions by students with special needs were mainly with the classroom teachers and support personnel, rather than with their same-aged peers. It has been suggested by Llewellyn (1995, cited by Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002) that children with physical disabilities can also find the social aspect of school difficult, and such children are often bullied by their classmates in inclusive settings.
Research has shown that, in order to manage with the increasingly difficult and intense demands of having an included student (regardless of severity), teachers have developed two separate strategic approaches. The first strategy involves organisation and management. O’Donoghue and Chalmers (2000) outlined the process general classroom teachers in Western Australian schools undertake to manage their class when one member of the class has a severe or profound disability. The process is a sequential one and includes the following steps: first, teachers gather information on inclusion (via in-service and professional development training or through informal conversations with people who have experience in the area); second, these teachers check and scrutinise the information to reconcile their understanding and assess the likely impact of inclusion on the class; third, the teachers then select teaching elements they will change in response to the inclusion (these may be organisational and curriculum changes); and finally, the teachers evaluate the processes they have used and once again modify their classroom approaches accordingly. Other Australian school systems have similar approaches in place to support students with special needs during transition, enrolment, and placement phases (see, for example, New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2006).

Several studies have shown that general classroom teachers who have displayed positive attitudes with regard to making instructional adaptations for students with disabilities are, in fact, unlikely to actually implement these adaptations (see, for example, Scott, Vitale, & Masten, 1998, documented in Harrower, 1999). It could be argued, therefore, that although teachers are aware of actions they might implement in their classrooms for an effective inclusive environment, the increased workload involved in this strategy may prevent the teacher implementing those
actions. This could explain, to some degree, the need for teachers to use the second strategy identified within the literature, namely, *coping*.

Forlin (1997), conducted a study within one region of Queensland, and identified a number of personal/internal coping strategies that general education teachers saw as the most useful when incorporating an included student within their classrooms. These strategies were reported as the following: developing and following plans of action; discussing ideas with specialists and colleagues; drawing on past experiences; looking on the bright side; and, seeking professional help for both the included and general students. However, a list of less useful, but, nevertheless, possible strategies employed by some teachers when coping with inclusion in their classrooms was also revealed as a result of the study. These strategies included taking sick or stress leave, resigning from teaching, using alcohol and medication, and deceiving others concerning the difficulties they were in reality facing.

Even though many experienced teachers, who are competent in the management of the normal range of student abilities, expressed doubts about their ability to provide effective and adequate education for students with mild to severe disabilities in regular classrooms, it is surprising to find that very little research has been undertaken into the development of pre-service teachers’ views towards inclusive education.

Researching within a British context, Hastings and Oakford (2003) found that attitudes towards inclusion were affected by the nature of the special needs of children, with emotional and behavioural problems seen in the most negative light by pre-service teachers. Reber and others (1995) also found that pre-service teachers’
views towards inclusion were significantly different depending on the nature of a student’s disability.

Shade and Stewart (2001) carried out a study in the USA in order to determine whether a single special education subject can significantly change pre-service teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion. The study indicated that a single subject studied at university was beneficial to pre-service teachers. In fact, the attitudes towards the included students’ behaviour and the self-concepts of the pre-service teachers improved significantly.

The findings of the Australian studies have shown that a mixture of a single subject and a partially-guided practicum had a positive impact on the attitude development of pre-service teachers towards inclusive education and people with disabilities per se (see, for example, Carroll, Forlin, & Jobling, 2003; Konza & Harris, 1994). The research suggests that by the end of their respective courses, pre-service teachers are less frustrated about not knowing how to help, are less fearful about and show less pity toward people with disabilities, develop confidence and competencies in providing inclusive education, and are more likely to notice the person rather than the disability.

However, it must be noted that the partially-guided practicums undertaken by the pre-service teachers in the Australian studies were no more than two hours in length and were supervised by the regular classroom teacher. None of the students was given responsibility for the whole classroom, but rather single students and small groups. It is equally important to note that these studies drew mostly on quantitative techniques and did not delve deeply into why and how attitude shifts occurred.

The results of a recent qualitative study by Withers and Cocklin (2003) into the effects of an inclusive extended practicum on pre-service teachers’ attitudes
differed in its findings when compared to the previously-mentioned Australian studies. The study focused on three pre-service teachers’ post-practicum reflections of attitudes towards inclusion following a ten-week practicum where they were given full responsibility for their respective classrooms. The study’s findings indicated that the relatively little support received during a practicum of this type impacted negatively on the three students, with one student left considering a change in career. It needs to be emphasised, however, that the views of these students were only canvassed after the practicum rather than before and/or during.

A review of the relevant literature points to the need for more research that targets pre-service teachers and their experiences with respect to inclusive education. More specifically, this research should focus on the attitudes of these pre-service teachers as they begin, participate in, and complete a self-directed and lengthy practicum, and the day-to-day realities of undertaking such a practicum. In order to fill a related void in the literature, the research needs to concentrate on the coping strategies that these pre-service teachers employ in and outside their classrooms during this time. Consequently, the current study is directed at answering the following questions:

1. How does an inclusive education internship affect the attitudes of interns towards inclusive education?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of working in an inclusive setting as perceived by interns undertaking an inclusive education internship?
3. What coping strategies do interns employ during their inclusive education internship?
Method

Participants

This study drew on the responses of three pre-service teachers (interns) who were enrolled in the 2004 Charles Sturt University (CSU) Internship Program. In the fourth and final year of the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course at CSU — Riverina, pre-service teachers participate in an internship program. The internship is undertaken in term two of the New South Wales (NSW) school year, with the interns taking full responsibility for their class during the ten-week term.

Each intern is assisted by three support personnel — a mentor, a project teacher, and a liaison lecturer — whilst undertaking the internship. A mentor is an experienced teacher appointed by the intern’s school as the designated support person for the intern. The project teacher is the class teacher released from the intern’s class to carry out a professional development project approved by the NSW Department of Education and Training (NSWDET). Each intern is allocated a liaison lecturer from CSU. This lecturer visits the intern when required and assists with school-university reporting functions.

The 2004 Internship cohort was approached by the researchers in the first week of term one, 2004, during an initial lecture about the internship. They were informed about the study’s purpose, what their participation would entail, and that their participation would be entirely voluntary with the right to withdraw at any time. From a group of eight volunteers whose classrooms satisfied particular selection criteria (viz., age, gender, class level, and number/type of included students), three interns were chosen as participants. The final selection decision was made partly on the basis of travel and associated costs in collecting data from the participants. A profile of the three interns (including pseudonyms) is presented in Table 1 below.
Table 1

A profile of the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Year Level</th>
<th>Number of Students with a Disability/Type of Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seamus</td>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>1. Severe ADHD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Behavioural disorders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elise</td>
<td>41-45</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1. Intellectual disability and communication disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Physical and intellectual disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belle</td>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Procedure

The researchers chose to conduct a qualitative study as it would be more sensitive to the lived realities of the interns, consider the interns’ development, and concentrate on the meanings the interns placed on the events, processes, and structures of their inclusive education internship (Gay & Airasian, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Smith (1987, cited by Wiersma, 2000) argues that qualitative research is based on the notion of ‘context sensitivity’ — the belief that the particular physical and social setting has a large bearing on human behaviour. This is an argument consonant with the purpose of the current study.

Several techniques, namely, interviews, a reflective journal, and telephone conversations, were used to help gather data. The interviews conducted with the interns either followed a semi-structured or an unstructured format. Not only did this approach permit a better understanding of what each intern was feeling and thinking about his/her internship and inclusion, it also helped to maintain flexibility, thus allowing information to be pursued from whatever direction seemed to be appropriate.
The unstructured format, for example, allowed for questions to be individualised to establish in-depth communication and responsiveness (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002).

The interviews with the interns drew on information obtained from each of the intern’s reflective journals. The interns participated in three interviews; one at the start of the internship (Weeks 1-2), one midway through the internship (Weeks 5-6), and one at the end of the internship (Week 10). The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were run by one of the researchers (subsequently referred to as the investigator). All the interviews were audio-taped to facilitate later transcription and analysis (Wiersma, 2000). Brief notes were also taken as an accompanying record of any significant non-verbal activity.

Journaling is a popular form of data collection in qualitative studies (see, for example, Bentley-Williams, 2000; Creswell, 1998). As a result, the interns were provided with a journal and asked to record their feelings, experiences, concerns, strategies, and any significant events related to inclusion and the internship. Reflection, and the subsequent reporting of those reflections in a journal, was encouraged through three processes. Schön (1987) identified two of these processes; ‘reflection on action’ and ‘reflection in action’. The interns were asked to reflect on things which happened in their classroom after they had occurred (reflection on action). They were also required to think in the moment about the issues that were emerging as they taught (reflection in action). A third reflective process encouraged was the proactive ‘reflection for action’. This required reflection about past and present experiences in the classroom, and the development of strategies and aims for the future, whilst also identifying what these incidents meant for future growth (Conway, 2001).
Throughout the internship, telephone conversations were also carried out as a means of maintaining contact between the investigator and the interns. The telephone conversations served as a way of establishing times and places to conduct interviews, allowed the investigator to establish a rapport with each of the interns and gain a small insight into how each intern’s internship was progressing, providing a direction for future interviews.

Ethical issues were dealt with according to processes outlined by both CSU and the NSWDET. Guidelines relating to competence, anonymity, confidentiality, consent, and data storage were strictly followed (see, for example, Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000; Fassinger, 2005; Haverkamp, 2005).

The data collected in this study were analysed using principles of GT. Because “... grounded theory makes its greatest contributions in the area [where] little research has been done” (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986, p. 71), it was deemed appropriate that GT be used to guide the data-analytic process in the current study due to the limited literature on the topic of inclusive education internships. GT was also considered to be the most effective way to tell the interns’ stories the way they expressed them (Fassinger, 2005).

The first stage of the GT data analysis involves identifying categories and their properties and this process of identification is known as coding (Dey, 1999). The categories are then ‘sensitised’ in order to provide a “meaningful picture” that “helps the reader to see and hear vividly the people in the area under study” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 37-38, as documented in Dey, 1999).

In the first instance, the data were coded using open coding. In this process the data are “… broken down into units of meaning (concepts), label[ed] (often with words close to those of the participant), and interrogated” (Fassinger, 2005, p. 160).
The next coding step is known as \textit{axial coding}. During this process the data are put back together in new ways by making connections between categories and grouping these categories into more encompassing categories (Fassinger, 2005; Glaser, 1992). The final coding step is termed \textit{selective coding}, which is “the process of selecting the core categories systematically relating it to other categories validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116). This process is followed until theoretical saturation is reached; that is, where no additional data are being found or achieved to enrich a category (see, for example, Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It needs to be stressed that the data-analytic process was carefully audited in line with the procedures outlined by Fassinger (2005).

\textbf{Results}

The open coding revealed 105 categories. At the end of the first stage of axial coding, these categories were delimited to 28 categories. The subsequent analyses showed, once theoretical saturation was reached, that 15 categories of response were evident. These categories and the three themes that they fall within are presented in Table 2.
Table 2

*Themes and final categories emerging from the data analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Positive realities</td>
<td>Important support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consistent classroom practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internal compass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Negative realities</td>
<td>Divergent experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative classroom behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unsupportive school culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Practicum stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Coping strategies</td>
<td>Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relaxation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Essential communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-help</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three themes and their corresponding categories will be illustrated by drawing on parts of the interns’ stories. Each theme will be highlighted, but, for the sake of brevity and to tease out the relevance of the themes to the research questions posed, only some of the categories will be discussed in the following section. These particular categories have been bolded in Table 2.

*Theme 1: Positive realities*

*Important support*
Although support networks should be in place to assist the interns within a school environment, there are many others who can contribute to the school’s learning and support community. For example, Seamus was given extra support via the NSWDET regional office. His school was provided with a behaviour specialist and this specialist worked with several of the students in his class. The second intern, Belle, had a trained aide in her classroom each morning and she considered herself “… very lucky to have her” as the aide was a constant source of support. Initially, Belle thought that the presence of an aide would be confining, frustrating, and result in confusion. However, the reality was the opposite. As the internship progressed, Belle began to view the collaborative role she developed with the aide as critical to general classroom and individual student success. In fact, Belle remarked how her development as a teacher, and growing advocacy for inclusion, was rooted both in the relationship she struck with the aide and the positiveness achieved within a collaborative classroom.

The external support for the interns was just as important as the internal school support network. To exemplify, both Belle and Elise saw the University as a reliable source of support. Not only did they gain a sense of comfort and security from knowing that their lecturers could be approached about difficult matters, they also could draw on the support of peers enrolled in their university course.

Positive impact

Generally speaking, the interns were apprehensive about what they might encounter in their respective classrooms. However, it became apparent through the course of their internship that apprehension turned to more positive thoughts. These positive views were principally shaped by the way the general students in the
classroom responded to the included students, in both the classroom and in the playground, and how the interns’ relationships with an included student developed throughout the internship. Belle, for instance, described how her Kindergarten students longed to work and socialise with her two included students. This is apparent in the quotation that follows.

“They would fight to who would sit next to them. It brought a close feel to the class… having them so happy to be around the girls… I don’t think the kids thought that she was any different”.

For Elise, however, establishing a positive relationship with her included student was a difficult and, at times, daunting task. Elise was the most anxious of the three interns, especially during the first few weeks of the internship. In fact, it was not until the final few weeks of her teaching stint that a positive relationship was fostered between her and her included student. This point is illustrated in the ensuing extract.

“I had a good relationship with [him]. On the last day he told me that he didn’t want me to leave and that he didn’t think he would like me when I first came but he found out he did… It was really lovely. It blew me out of the water. It was nice to hear”.

As a result of their internships, all three interns came to the same realisation about inclusion and how to implement inclusive education policy in their classrooms. This realisation is evident in the two quotes below.

“To me, being inclusive is just there, doing the same work. It’s just going to be on a different level”. (Belle)

“… the whole idea of inclusiveness is the fact that they go into a classroom and that they get treated like all the other children as possible and they have the same learning opportunities”. (Elise)
Professional growth

As a consequence of their internship, the interns showed a significant amount of growth as teachers. They all learnt a great deal about the realities of working not only in an inclusive classroom but also in a ‘normal’ classroom on a full-time basis. To illustrate, dealing with students who had behavioural and emotional disorders was an eventuality which Seamus had never encountered previously, nor had he been in a position where he was a full-time unsupervised teacher for such a length of time. For him, it was learning about how to manage the behaviour of these children in which he grew most as a teacher. As Seamus grew in this area of his professional development so did his successes and confidence as a teacher. The students began to respond to him and his behaviour management strategies and a mutual classroom respect developed. He also contributed to IEP meetings and became the prime-mover for several after-school activities.

It is important to note that this was the first inclusive education practicum placement for all the interns. This meant that they lacked a great deal of experience working with students with specific special needs. The only focused training they had received to work with these types of student came from their compulsory special needs subject in their second year at CSU and from lecturers’ tips in other subjects.

One area in which Belle and Seamus commented that they grew as teachers was in the area of professional reading. Both these interns undertook research in order to better understand general requirements for working with included students and to glean specific information about different disabilities and associated teaching modifications. Belle drew extensively on books and videos supplied to her by her mentor and her project teacher. She also read reports from the physiotherapist about a student’s condition, progress, and the evaluation of an action plan. Seamus sought
resource material from the Internet and the NSWDET behaviour specialist. Interestingly, by the mid-way point of their internships, both Belle and Seamus no longer saw inclusion as being an additional task to regular teaching per se.

**Theme 2: Negative realities**

*Divergent experiences*

Elise offered many comments about her limited teaching experience and the comparatively wide experiences of her project teacher. Her project teacher’s experience in this school was seen as a real advantage given previous contact with students during non-class time and knowledge of the school’s human and physical resources. Not having an established knowledge of, and relationship with, the included students before starting the internship was viewed as a difficulty by Elise. She contended that the slowness in achieving her goal of making the class work effectively and positively as a team was related to her not being armed in the first place with specific context-based skills and understandings. Elise was also somewhat negative about her previous university coursework and how this did not adequately and effectively equip her for an inclusive setting.

“… I have to say as far as university, yes I don’t think that I learnt that much on how to deal with students with diverse needs”.

A lack of experience regarding long-term planning was a key influence on Seamus’ views about inclusion and the internship. Even though he spent a considerable amount of time researching information that he could incorporate in his teaching, he found programming for an inclusive classroom difficult and somewhat intimidating. As a result of his programming difficulties, Seamus had to complete an
additional but short-term practicum (observation only), following his internship, to learn more thoroughly about long-term planning, assessment, and reporting.

Unsupported school culture

As reported earlier, having support throughout a longer-term inclusive practicum/internship was important to help the interns cope with the intense demands and pressures. However, for Elise, her internship was conducted within a school where she received relatively little internal support. Elise felt that she was isolated in the school and received minimal support from her mentor, project teacher, and the teaching staff. The following extract sheds light on this claim.

“I have had no support. I am totally isolated there… Look, I don’t have a pigeon hole. I don’t have anywhere to sign on. I don’t get included in anything. I go to the staff meetings and I sit there and someone takes minutes and they don’t even write that I was in attendance. They have a special luncheon for the staff next week and apparently the canteen is making quiche for the staff. There is a big notice on the board with everyone’s name on there except mine. I thought, oh, I mustn’t want quiche”.

As a result of her disconnection from the school, Elise undertook self-imposed isolation. This was in order to protect herself from the negativeness she felt when she attempted to become an active part of the school community. The excerpt below is typical of Elise’s comments:

“I don’t go down to the staff room. I stay in the classroom for recess and lunch. If I do duty I go out and do duty and go straight back to the classroom because I don’t, I just don’t like it down there. It’s such a hostile environment”.

CSU Research Output 21
http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au
Elise had a part-time aide in her classroom. However, the support she received from the aide left Elise with more nervous tension than support. During Elise’s internship, the aide, and her support allocation, was under review by the school and, as a result, the aide spent a lot of her allotment writing detailed notes about her duties and experiences rather than offering support to Elise and her students.

A lack of support from parents was a constant source of concern for both Belle and Seamus. For instance, when Belle had parent helpers in her classroom she felt like she was under constant scrutiny and did not receive support from them at all. For Seamus, it was the lack of support from the parents of his included students that caused him the most annoyance and dissatisfaction. He saw that without parental support, it became more difficult to work with his included students. Seamus argued that as the parents showed less and less interest in their children’s schooling and the feedback he was providing, their children’s classroom misbehaviour was exacerbated.

**Practicum stress**

During the internship there are many factors which the interns needed to deal with other than those directly involving the classroom-based experience. For example, both Belle and Seamus had to travel away from home to undertake their internship. This posed a number of financial difficulties, for example, paying two lots of rent for their permanent home as well as their temporary lodgings during their practicum. Throughout this time they also made frequent car trips home to visit family and friends, costing them additional money in petrol. Added to this, was also the pressure of having to leave their part-time jobs for ten weeks.

In addition to these sorts of financial pressure, daily physical exhaustion was faced by the interns themselves. As a beginning teacher, a lack of experience and
other knowledge results in late nights programming, making resources, and thinking through strategies to employ in the classroom. This meant that the interns were spending many nights staying up late preparing for their classrooms, particularly to meet the individual needs of certain students. This was also a common theme across weekends with the interns, who would go out to their schools and work in their rooms throughout most of the weekend. Trying to mix family life with these internship demands was difficult. With a great deal of additional work being carried out by the interns, lack of sleep soon followed, and as a consequence, they became extremely exhausted. This constant exhaustion caused them a great deal of stress. Belle stated that she was “exhausted all the time” and that there were days when she found it hard to get out of bed. There were days towards the end of term when she found she had a “short fuse” when faced with problems with her students. She was aware that this was partly a result of her constant exhaustion. All the interns commented that the ten weeks was a very long time for a practicum. Belle argued that the practicum should have been about seven weeks and this would have helped to reduce stress and potential burnout.

Theme 3: Coping strategies

Relaxation

For all the interns, relaxation was a basic way to cope with the stress and demands of working in an inclusive classroom. While a majority of these relaxation techniques were individual to each intern, there were some which they all had in common. One of these was appropriate rest and proper sleep. Sleep was essential for each participant to cope with the demands of a long day or a day yet to come. The ensuing comment is indicative of the need for, and importance of, sleep.
“I’m usually right once I sleep on it, but sometimes when I go home I am really frustrated”. (Seamus)

Taking time out was another common approach to relaxation. Time out was specific to each intern. For instance, Belle relied on affection and private time with her partner. She found this ‘wind down’ period especially soothing after a long day.

“It’s nice to come home and cuddle someone… I need a hug so much when I get home… it’s so nice to have someone there”.

Seamus used a mix of meditation and martial arts to calm himself when he reached home. Periodically he played some golf with close friends to further relieve stress.

Essential communications

Communication was another prominent coping strategy identified by the interns. Communication ranged from formal verbal discussions to more informal conversations with peers, family, and friends. These conversations allowed the participants to reduce the stresses, pressures, and difficulties which they were facing.

For the interns, the main people with whom they communicated about their experiences in their inclusive classroom were other interns. For Seamus and Belle, they were at an advantage, as compared to Elise, as they shared a house with other interns who were placed in nearby schools. This meant that once they reached home, they instantly had someone that they could talk to and could also relate to them. The quote that follows from Belle illustrates this point.

“I get home every night and it’s really nice to have four other people here and we just go: ‘well, this… happened to me today’, ‘well, you think that’s bad,
this happened to me today,’ and it helps you put it into perspective and maybe my day wasn’t that bad”.

For Elise, communicating with other interns was also an important mechanism for coping with her classroom. Throughout the practicum, Elise indicated that she “talked a lot to other friends that were interns”. The idea that the interns were most comfortable talking with other interns is an interesting one. The reasoning behind this choice is most clearly indicated by Belle:

“Having the other four people to talk to everyday was an advantage; being able to let everything out. Whereas, if I was here [home town], no one else in my life would want to hear about it, because the only people who want to hear about it are teachers. There is no way you would want to sit there and listen about someone else’s job all day. We are the only ones who can understand each other’s pain. So it was really good, having that support there, especially being away from home”.

Self-help

All the interns seemed to use self-help strategies as a way of reducing stress. The main strategy was to keep things in perspective and to focus on positive experiences or even accentuate the positive. According to Seamus, when you keep things in perspective, you also begin to think more positively about your life in general as well as your specific day-to-day classroom experiences. In fact, he drew some inspiration from several of his included students, especially in the way they had overcome or were confronting personal hardship.

Experience within classrooms of any description, let alone inclusive ones, was not a luxury which the interns had in order to help themselves cope with their new
demands and pressures. Alternatively for them, it was positive reinforcement and feedback from other school personnel such as project teachers, mentor teachers, and aides which became a primary source of confidence. This confidence, ignited by positive reinforcement and support, enabled them to cope with the dynamics of their inclusive classrooms, especially at times when they were experiencing difficulties. For Belle, this positive reinforcement came from her mentor and it made a dramatic change to how she saw herself in the classroom and reacted to her experiences.

“I’ve had some really positive feedback this week and stuff so I had a big smile on my face all week. It’s just so nice to get positive feedback for a change.”

Discussion

This study aimed to fill a void in the literature pertaining to pre-service teachers and their experiences regarding inclusive education. Specifically, the results of the study were used to answer three questions: How does an inclusive education internship affect the attitudes of interns towards inclusive education? What are the advantages and disadvantages of working in an inclusive setting as perceived by interns undertaking an inclusive education internship? What coping strategies do interns employ during their inclusive education internship? These three questions and their responses will now be considered in turn.

Generally speaking, the results of the data analysis showed that the intern’s attitudes towards inclusive education grew more positively as their internship progressed. It became apparent that with greater exposure to an inclusive classroom and students with special needs, the attitudes of the interns towards inclusive practice took on a more positive tone. Support for this finding can be found in numerous
studies (see, for example, Carroll et al., 2003; Konza & Harris, 1994; Rademacher et al., 1998; Reber et al., 1993). These studies indicate that pre-service teachers, who participate in both inclusive in-school experiences as part of general subjects and guided practicums, are provided with more direct contact with special needs students, and therefore develop more positive attitudes towards both inclusive education and included students.

Even though previous studies concerned with pre-service teachers have shown attitudinal change with respect to inclusion, there has not been any convincing evidence that these same beginning teachers have modified their behaviour towards included students. However, in the current study, the teaching practices of the three interns changed over the course of their practicum. For example, interns who worked closely with teacher aides and other school-based personnel during their internship practised more specific behaviour-management approaches. Additionally, these interns adopted a strong advocacy role for their included students by attending IEP meetings, parent conferences, and various school-based sessions as a teacher and advocate. The role of an advocate is normally played by the classroom teacher and not a pre-service teacher, but because of the intern’s higher status within the school he or she can elect to perform such a role.

It must be also noted, however, that whilst the internship did help to develop more positive attitudes towards inclusive education by the interns, this was also dependent upon the type of special need encountered in the classroom. Although, two of the interns formed positive attitudes towards the notion of inclusive education as a whole, they also developed a somewhat negative attitude to including students with behavioural and emotional disturbance. Their experiences with these included students and the negative impact on their attitudinal development towards their
inclusive education is shared by many pre-service and in-service teachers. Many studies have shown that students with emotional and behavioural difficulties cause more concern and stress than any other type of special need, ultimately leading to negative attitude developments towards inclusion of these students (see, for example, Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Bartak & Fry, 2004; Hastings & Oakford, 2003).

The answer to the second question can be seen by reviewing the first two themes, namely, *positive realities* and *negative realities*, and their related categories. The major advantages about participating in an extended inclusive practicum, as indicated by the interns: were the support they received from others; the formation of positive attitudes towards inclusion; being able to see the positive impact of inclusive education for both included and general students; the development of consistent and effective teaching and behaviour strategies; and, finally, professional growth through practical experience. Studies by Carroll et al., (2003), Konza and Harris (1994), Rademacher et al. (1998), and Reber et al., (1993) all lend some support to this finding. Taken together, these studies have shown that practicum experiences involving students with special needs have helped pre-service teachers to gain confidence and to be more capable when working with students with such needs.

The interns indicated that the main disadvantages of an internship were: a lack of experience in both general and inclusive classrooms; large class size making it difficult to meet the number of varying needs; fear that the general students will be disadvantaged by the special needs students’ demand of their attention; the inappropriate behaviour of both the special needs and general students; isolation in the schools; and, lack of support and stress (regarding lack of money and distance from family and partners). Again, these results are consistent with other studies (Bennett et
In terms of the third question, it was clear that there were five distinct coping strategies employed by the interns in order to deal with their inclusive classrooms. These coping strategies employed by the interns were labelled as *Organisation*, *Relaxation*, *Essential communications*, *Reflection*, and *Self-help*, and link, to a certain degree, to similar strategies identified in previous studies. To exemplify, the pre-service teachers described in the Hemmings and Hockley (2002) study were inclined to employ self-help, relaxation, and communicative strategies. Interestingly, these pre-service teachers, compared to the interns in the present study, did not draw on different forms of reflection to help them counter the stressors faced in their classrooms. It could be argued that interns working with included students expend considerable more effort on meeting the needs of particular individuals and thus are more likely to think deeply about the consequences of those efforts and rely more on reflection as a coping strategy.

Based on the results of this study, six recommendations that have implications for a number of stakeholders, including tertiary course designers and practicum staff, are suggested. Firstly, teacher education course designers should integrate special needs and inclusive education strategies and information, as well as short inclusive education experiences, within core university subjects. This should initially include short stints of practical work in inclusive classrooms (not just observations) with the number of stand-alone days eventually increasing to more lengthy inclusive education experiences for pre-service teachers. Secondly, these same course designers should include more specific inclusive education subjects within pre-service teacher education courses. Thirdly, subject coordinators need to plan subjects with a greater
emphasis on teaching students with behavioural and emotional disorders. This would assist in producing teachers who are less negative about including students with these specific needs in their general education classrooms. Fourthly, practicum and internship personnel should plan and run stress management workshops prior to the undertaking of inclusive education practicums, which would assist interns, in particular, to develop more effective coping strategies for the demands of teaching in an inclusive classroom. Fifthly, practicum and internship personnel should evaluate schools and individual classrooms for their appropriateness in an internship program. Proper caution needs to be exercised if classrooms with high numbers of special needs students, limited support, or behaviourally and emotionally disturbed students are nominated by schools for use. Alternatively, classrooms with behaviourally and emotionally disturbed students could be used to demonstrate effective practices in early practicums. Sixthly, practicum and internship personnel should establish an allocation system that ensures all pre-service teachers experience at least one inclusive practicum during their university studies. Moreover, fostering partnerships with particular schools by education faculties would enable all pre-service teachers to be given first-hand experiences in an inclusive classroom before their first in-service teaching placement.

From a future research perspective, the findings of this study suggest that researchers could conduct a comparison study of the realities of an inclusive practicum for interns dependent upon length of practicum to determine if there is a critical time-frame for developing suitable appreciation about inclusion. For example, researchers could compare the reality experienced by a pre-service teacher conducting a three-week practicum in an inclusive classroom to that of an intern in order to determine whether the length of time in an inclusive classroom is an additional factor
in developing teachers with more positive attitudes towards people with disabilities and inclusive education. In addition, researchers might undertake a study using interns who have completed additional special needs subjects (perhaps as part of an elective choice) in order to compare their attitudinal development and their teaching behaviour to those interns who have only completed the one compulsory subject.

This study had several limitations. To begin with, the number of participants was small due to data collection constraints and, as a consequence, caution needs to be exercised about the generalisability of the results. Further, the design of the study did not permit a pre- and post-test analysis of attitudinal change. In fact, as no systematic observation of the three interns and their interactions with certain students occurred, some care is required when considering the extent and the type of attitudinal and behavioural change reported.

The results of the study that dealt with both students’ lived experiences during an extended practicum and their growth and mastering of challenges in an inclusive classroom have not only extended previous research findings but have also offered valuable insights. In particular, the resilience showed by the interns and the kinds of mechanism they used to cope with daily challenges is worthy of closer examination. One very important message that has been signalled from this investigation is that effective and strategic preparation of pre-service teachers is paramount if they are to gain from and contribute appropriately to an internship. Furthermore, it could be then argued that if the internship is both positive and satisfying, it is likely that as new teachers they will show a full range of professional competencies and coping strategies required for teaching in contemporary times.
References


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