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Preparing Teachers to Support Inclusion:
the benefits of interaction between a group of preservice teachers and a teaching assistant who is disabled

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ABSTRACT
This qualitative study investigates the development of preservice teachers' attitudes toward people with disabilities during a semester-long unit. Ten students enrolled in a special education teaching elective were interviewed before and after they were engaged in a teaching program designed to expose them to direct, structured interactions with a teaching assistant who was physically disabled. The teaching assistant interacted with students in both small and large group tutorial discussions throughout the semester. Also, students kept a reflective journal on their experiences with people with disabilities throughout the teaching program. Data were collected through the use of semi-structured interviews and journals, and analysis indicated that: (i) students developed a more positive attitude and became more comfortable in interacting with the teaching assistant during the semester, and (ii) learning experience improved their knowledge about disability issues.

A focus placed on the rights of the child, regardless of disability, to receive an appropriate education with peers has been interpreted in many countries to mean the inclusion of all students in regular classrooms (Forlin, Hattie & Douglas, 1996b; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995). Thus, there is a need to ensure that preservice teacher education courses encourage student-teachers to reflect on their attitudes to disability and to identify ways to help them develop positive attitudes to people with disabilities and inclusive schooling (Forlin, 1997). Furthermore, Tait and Purdie (2000) argue that, if teachers emerge from preservice education programs without having developed positive attitudes to people with disabilities, those attitudes will be difficult to change and experiences in inclusive schooling will not be as successful.

We began this investigation with an overarching question: How would structured interactions between a group of preservice teachers and a teaching assistant who is disabled influence attitudes towards disability?

Background
Most states and territories in Australia provide educational opportunities for children with disabilities at local schools (Forlin, Hattie & Douglas, 1996b). Inclusion represents a revolutionary departure from existing organizational structures and systems of service delivery in education (Murphy, 1996), and the roles of both regular and special educators have changed as a direct outcome of the move towards inclusive practices. The expectation is that regular classroom teachers cater for a diverse range of student abilities and assume a greater responsibility for their education (Carrington, 1993).

Therefore, graduates of preservice education programs need to be prepared to teach to the individual differences of a diverse student population that may include students with a range of disabilities (Villa, Thousand & Chapple, 1996). Educators' beliefs and attitudes regarding inclusion have been found to be closely linked with the acceptance of children with a disability (Forlin, Hattie & Douglas, 1996a; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Ward, Center & Bochner, 1994) and the success of inclusion (Coates, 1989; Semmel, Abernathy, Butera & Lesar, 1991). Bender, Vail and Scott (1995) have indicated that teacher attitude toward students with disabilities can be critical to the quality of their inclusive instructional strategies. Idol, Nevin and Paolucci-Whitcomb (1994) argued that general

education teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward students with disabilities are among the most important issues influencing collaborative efforts between special and general educators. It has also been argued that negative attitudes to disability lead to low expectations of students, and may result in reduced learning opportunities and performance (Gold, 1980).

Preservice Education: preparation for inclusive schooling
Donaldson (1980) categorized techniques used to reduce negative or stereotypic attitudes toward people with disabilities as follows: (a) direct or indirect (media) contact with, or exposure to, people with disabilities; (b) information about disabilities; (c) the use of persuasive messages; (d) analysis of the dynamics of the prejudice; (e) disability simulation; and (f) group discussion. The area of techniques to reduce negative or stereotypic attitudes towards people with disabilities has received only limited research attention.

One strategy that is commonly utilized in preservice teacher education is known as the "information-based approach", which could be described as category (b). That is, teacher educators attempt to change the attitudes of students who are training to teach in regular education environments by giving them detailed information (e.g. lectures and tutorials/workshops) about disabilities and learning difficulties (Tait & Purdie, 2000). Unfortunately, Donaldson (1980) suggested that such attempts to improve attitudes toward people with disabilities had either no effect or, worse, led to a negative change as indicated in around 40% of published studies. Hastings, Hewes, Lock and Witting (1996) have identified two main reasons for this poor result. First, information-based attempts to teach about disability often lack interpersonal contact with individuals with special needs. Furthermore, if information-based approaches are combined with only small amounts of interpersonal contact (e.g. brief contact through practicum teaching placements or case study assignments, etc.), then this may provide student teachers with just enough information to establish that children with disabilities are a social "outgroup" with stereotypical negative attributes. So it seems that information-based approaches (category (b)) are unlikely to be effective.

In comparison, people who have had high levels of contact with individuals with disabilities have been found to hold more positive attitudes toward children with disabilities (Hastings, Hewes, Lock & Witting, 1996; Jones, Wint & Ellis, 1990). It seems that previous experience with people with disabilities has a powerful effect on the way teachers view children with disabilities. Specific factors that produce positive attitude change were identified mainly in the first category as described by Donaldson (1980): (a) direct or indirect (media) contact with, or exposure to, people with disabilities. In fact, structured experiences with individuals with disabilities consistently resulted in positive attitude change, whereas unstructured social or professional contact had equivocal results (Donaldson, 1980). Structured experiences could include presentations by people with disabilities (Donaldson & Martinson, 1977, cited in Donaldson, 1980) or even videotapes of individuals who have been successfully physically rehabilitated.

It is possible that non-structured experiences may have the disadvantage of exposing individuals to people with disabilities who represent stereotypic images, and therefore reinforce stereotypical beliefs (Donaldson, 1980). Analysis of successful studies involving structured contact also suggested that the formation of more positive attitudes and the reduction of discomfort and avoidance behaviour may be closely associated with careful exposure to people with disabilities who do not act in a stereotypic manner. For example, in the successful studies discussed by Donaldson (1980), the researchers specifically attempted to present people with disabilities who belied stereotypes of helplessness, hopelessness or desire for separateness. Therefore, it is important for the success of direct contact interventions that the person with the disability is perceived to have the same status as those people without disabilities. For example, the person with a disability could be of similar age and enjoy the same social, educational or vocational status. Conversely, when the person with a disability is significantly younger than the people without disabilities or is in a position to receive help as in a professional-client relationship, they may be perceived to be of non-equal status (Donaldson, 1980).

We may conclude, then, that structured student contact with a person of equal status who has disabilities and does not act in a "stereotypic manner" may well break down the negative stereotypes related to people with disabilities. As part of this type of intervention, individuals may experience situations where incompatible beliefs are recognized, deconstructed and reconstructed (Pajares, 1992). Such changes will take place only if the individual is challenged to see the inadequacy of his/her beliefs. This should occur more easily when students are encouraged to interact with a teaching assistant of equal status with a disability. Structured reflection using journals and interviews may allow preservice teachers to challenge their beliefs by providing opportunities to evaluate their

beliefs, attitudes and behaviour in relation to alternative views and to grow personally and professionally.

Description of this Study

This study explored the development of preservice teacher attitudes to disability by exposing the students to sustained interactions with a teaching assistant who had a severe physical disability (cerebral palsy). Structured learning experiences were designed so that preservice teacher education students could: (1) experience direct, structured interactions with a teaching assistant who was physically disabled; and (2) reflect on, and possibly reconstruct, their beliefs about people with disabilities. Interview data were collected from the participants before and after they engaged in the learning experiences. The teaching assistant interacted with students in both small and large group tutorial discussions throughout the semester. Also, students kept a reflective journal on their experiences with people with disabilities throughout the teaching program. Pseudonyms have been used in this paper. The participants, setting, and data collection and analysis techniques will now be described in more detail.

Participants

The students in this study were completing the fourth and final year of a Bachelor of Education at a large university in Australia. They were enrolled in an elective unit in special education. Of the total number of students enrolled in the unit (*n* = 26), 10 students (eight females and two males) were randomly selected for interviews and analysis of journal entries. All 10 students agreed to participate in the data collection process after receiving a letter of information and a consent form.

The teaching assistant was also completing a Bachelor of Education (Adult and Workplace Education) at the same university. She was in the 20-25 age bracket, was severely disabled by cerebral palsy and used an electric wheelchair. Although she had difficulty with expressive language, with patience and focused attention, she could be understood. Her particular strength was a good sense of humour. She had considerable experience as a disability awareness consultant, and had been educated in both segregated and inclusive settings.

Setting

All students *(n* = 26) were informed of the nature of the study in the first tutorial session. All students agreed to be involved in the teaching program. The content of the unit covered the following topics: (a) developing and enhancing a positive attitude towards exceptional learners; (b) selected theories of exceptionality in learning and development; (c) identification and assessment of special educational needs; (d) teaching students with special needs; and (e) the professional team concept. The 12-week unit included a weekly lecture and 2-hour tutorial.

In approximately 75% of all the tutorial sessions, the teaching assistant participated, or in some cases led the class, in discussion of various topics related to the teaching, learning and developmental needs of children with disabilities. Throughout the teaching program, the student teachers involved in this project were not only interacting with a peer with a disability, but could identify with her personal experience of inclusion and exclusion. The teaching assistant shared her personal perspective of what was required to adequately manage the individual needs of children and adolescents with disabilities.

The students' regular journal reflections were an important feature of the learning experience, essentially by helping them to reflect explicitly on their beliefs about people with disability. In terms of affective outcomes, journal writing also enabled students to wrestle with emotional issues related to learning experiences (Ballantyne & Packer, 1995).

Data Collection

Both semi-structured interviews and journal entries were used to collect data regarding students' beliefs and attitudes toward people with disabilities. The words of the students themselves provided valuable insight into their feelings related to interactions with people with disabilities.

Interviews. The technique of in-depth interviewing was used to gather data in this study (Minichiello, Atom, Timewell & Alexander, 1995). In-depth interviewing is described by Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander as a conversation with a specific purpose "focusing on the informant's perception of self, life and experience, and expressed in his or her own words" (1995, p. 61). Ten students from the group agreed to be interviewed regarding their beliefs and attitudes toward people with disabilities. Students were interviewed prior to meeting the teaching assistant (Interview 1) and then again during the final week of the semester (Interview 2). The interviews followed a semi-structured format, were

approximately 20-40 minutes in duration, and were audiotaped for later transcription. Students were asked to respond to the following questions in Interview 1:

- Can you tell me about your experiences with people with disabilities?
- Can you describe an experience you have had with someone with a disability? What happened? Tell me about what you actually did in that situation. How did you feel?
- What do you expect to learn from this unit?

The following questions were posed in Interview 2:

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

Journals. All students *(n = 26)* were asked to keep a reflective journal of their experiences with people with disabilities. They were asked to describe how they felt, how they behaved, and any changes in their understanding and attitudes toward people with disabilities. However, only the journals of those students *(n = 10)* involved in the interview process were analysed. Specifically, students were asked to reflect on the following issues: (a) the first meeting with the teaching assistant in relation to what they were thinking and their behaviour; (b) the teaching assistant's experiences as a student in special education schools and mainstream schools; (c) the nature of communication with the teaching assistant; and (d) the nature of learning that took place over the semester in relation to understanding of students with disabilities.

Data Analysis
This research is "interpretive-descriptive" (Belenky, 1992, cited in Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). This means that the data were analysed using an approach that is both inductive and deductive in nature: while categories emerged from the data, the categories and coding of data were influenced by the literature that informed the research (Belenky, 1992, cited in Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The method of constant comparison advocated in seminal work by Glaser and Strauss (1967) influenced the analysis of the interviews and the journals. *As* phenomena were coded and classified, comparison also occurred across and between other categories and phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). In this way, relationships were discovered, and initial observations and conceptualizations were refined through further data collection, and classification and analysis. Interviews were transcribed and imported into *Q.S.R. NUD*IST* (Non-numerical, Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorising) (Richards & Richards, 1994) for coding.

Findings and Discussion
Students described their experiences with people with disabilities throughout the interviews and journal entries in relation to two broad categories. These categories related to students' perceptions of: (a) changes in their feelings/attitudes towards people with disabilities; and (b) changes in their knowledge base related to people with disabilities. The frequencies (*n*) refer to the number of individuals who made comments regarding a particular category. When quotes from students are used, a pseudonym, the phase of analysis (Interview 1, Journal and Interview 2) are indicated. Interview statements and journal entries have been edited to improve readability.

Changes in Feelings/Attitudes Towards People with Disabilities
Overall, many students (*n* = 9) related some negative feelings about people with disabilities in the first interview and in their journal entries. Students spoke of their own fear of interacting with the teaching assistant and discomfort in not knowing how to react to her. Some students expressed feelings such as pity and sympathy. These types of responses to disability are not uncommon in individuals because of the influence of society's thoughts about intelligence, confidence, beauty and success.

One student was clearly struggling with what she was really feeling about her interactions with the teaching assistant and what she thought she should be feeling:

> I can't help but stare at her and feel ashamed to do this. I feel pity, I feel sorry for her and I am also ashamed of this attitude I maintain. I should look up to her with admiration, and in a way, I do, but I still consider her to be different from me ... disadvantaged and different. (Journal entry)

When the focus is on difference, there seems to be a presumption of physiological inferiority of people with disabilities that emphasizes individual loss or inability. Labels such as "cripple", "spastic", "handicapped" and "retarded" all imply loss of worth and function in society, and have legitimated stereotypes of people with disabilities (Barton, 1996).

Seven students commented on the teaching assistant's sense of humour as a positive attribute in helping them feel comfortable with her. It is possible that such a personal characteristic had the effect of minimizing students' stereotypical views of people with disabilities.

> Basically I wasn't very comfortable at first. For the first couple of weeks, it took a while to get used to her speech. But it was odd. She does have a sense of humour and she's not letting her disability stop her. (Interview 2)

Students initially found the teaching assistant's speech difficult to understand and had to concentrate on listening and understanding her language. Communication difficulties seemed to frequently place the students in an uncomfortable position. For example, they were not sure how to react if they could not understand the teaching assistant. Many students *(n = 8)* indicated their ability to understand and interact with the teaching assistant improved during the semester. The following section from Libby's journal entry indicates the learning that occurred for her over the time period of the lectures.

> When I first met [the teaching assistant] I found her speech to be very difficult to understand. Because of this I wondered if she understood what I was saying. I was also a bit hesitant in talking to her because of my inability. Throughout the time [the teaching assistant] has been with us, I have realised that even though her speech may be hard to understand at first, if you listen carefully you can hear exactly what she says. One thing I've learned is that when she is saying something to you and if you don't understand her, it is important to tell her to repeat. All too often people who don't understand what others are saying just ignore rather than try to understand. This causes a lack of communication and can hurt the feelings of the person trying to be understood. This can also lead to the person's unwillingness to communicate in the future.

It is of interest to note that most of the negative feelings related to disability were recorded in the first interview *(n = 7),* compared with five students' descriptions of negative feelings in the journals. Only one student described negative feelings in the final interview. This student still felt uncomfortable at the end of the semester when speaking with the teaching assistant.

Although students experienced some discomfort while interacting with the teaching assistant, all students described the structured interactions as a useful experience and made at least some comments that indicated a positive change in attitude and levels of comfort. The following quote from the second interview with Kelly demonstrates a positive change in attitude and comfort in interacting with the teaching assistant. Kelly suggests that the learning experiences in the unit provided her with the confidence to approach and interact with the teaching assistant in a more relaxed way. She also expressed her satisfaction with this change in her beliefs and attitudes towards people with disabilities.

Kelly: A week ago, [the teaching assistant] was waiting for somebody to pick her up. I was walking past her and she [the teaching assistant] stopped to ask me a question about somebody's name. Without any hesitation, I could understand exactly what she was saying. I didn't feel threatened, I didn't feel hindered by her asking and approaching me. I had never made an effort to form any sort of a friendship with anyone with a disability, probably because I hadn't had any experience with people with cerebral palsy before. I had never met anybody like her. I'd seen people, but that's as far as it went.

Interviewer: *So* why do you think it stands out in your mind as being so special?

Kelly: Because it made me feel good ... Because it was 22 years of being scared of these people to now being completely relaxed and up front. Having a conversation with her was rewarding for me, but it also got rid of all the hesitation I'd had in the past about approaching and discussing things with people with disabilities, especially when they can't talk properly. (Interview 2)

Changes in Knowledge about People with Disabilities

The way teachers relate to people with disabilities is influenced by their past experiences and knowledge (Carrington, 2000), so it is not surprising that five students in the study considered a lack of knowledge and experience to be the cause of negative attitudes and feelings of discomfort. For example, one student described the effect of not having an understanding of a particular disability on her attitude to a child while on teaching practice in a mainstream school:

I do feel uncomfortable when I do not understand the disability. This occurred on one of my "pracs" when I had to deal with a child that had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. I had not researched the symptoms and I was not familiar with suitable teaching strategies, hence I did not enjoy the challenge of working with this child. I am embarrassed to admit that I viewed him as a hassle, rather than treating him as an individual. (Journal entry)

Most students (n = 9) believed that they needed to learn about people with disabilities and/or have more experiences with people with disabilities in general. This is evident in Libby's journal entry:

I find that I learn more about a particular disability through experience than through research and that is why I believe that inclusion in schools of children with disabilities is a much more positive experience for the children in the class than telling a story about them.

As would be expected, many students (n = 9) described an increase in knowledge as a result of being involved in the learning experiences in the unit. Student knowledge gained from the unit content and the experience of interacting with the teaching assistant helped some students to develop a new awareness and understanding of issues related to disability. This awareness is evident in Mary's second interview where she talks about what she has learnt from those experiences:

I think I have become more aware of everything. I go to shopping centres and look at the toilets and think, I wonder if you had a wheelchair, could you get in there? I think it has heightened my awareness of everything. I think when I went to my prac school I said, "would you have any policies about integrating people here and they said not really". I said, "why not?" I've become an advocate and become so much more aware.

Conclusion

Traditionally, the popular media portrays stereotypes of people with disabilities that patronize, criminalize and dehumanize (Barnes, 1992). It is highly likely that these individual and community experiences affect teachers' attitudes towards people with disabilities. If teachers have negative views of disability, this will influence interactions with children who have disabilities who may be in their classrooms.

Indeed, the accounts in this study suggest that the structured experiences with the teaching assistant had a positive impact on the participant's knowledge and views of disability. For example, when students discussed what they had learnt from this teaching program, eight students commented that there had been a positive change in personal comfort levels. They also believed their ability to communicate with the teaching assistant had improved over the semester (n = 8). All students described the experience of working with the teaching assistant as positive. Most students (n = 9) noted that working with the teaching assistant had facilitated their knowledge about disability issues.

Teachers' attitudes are reportedly a significant influence on the quality of inclusive teaching practices (Bender, Vail & Scott, 1995), and this study has highlighted that the preservice teachers' knowledge and experience related to disability may be an important influence on positive attitudes. Therefore, it may not be enough to provide opportunities for students to reflect on beliefs and attitudes toward disability (Forlin, 1997) or to present information about teaching students with special needs

(the information-based approach) (Donaldson, 1980). It seems that a combination of approaches may prove to be the most fruitful. Indeed, structured face-to-face contact with a person of equal status who has a disability and who does not act in a "stereotypic manner" has had a positive impact on the preservice teachers in this study. This type of approach could be combined with the more traditional information-based approach that can provide the conceptual framework, language and set of teaching skills needed to teach in inclusive schools.

The findings of this study are preliminary, and certainly more work needs to be carried out on a larger scale to investigate the impact of such programs on preservice teachers' beliefs about inclusion and disability. Further qualitative research is needed to discover whether such notable changes in knowledge and attitudes might be experienced by students who have *not* chosen to participate in a special needs elective. In reality, part of the success of this study may have been attributable to the positive predisposition of these preservice teachers. A future challenge may be to develop a teaching program similar to that in this study for preservice teachers engaged in a general education unit. This would contrast with the current study, where the teaching program was implemented with preservice teachers who had elected to study a unit in special education. These issues of program development are especially important if we consider that preservice teachers are to be future change agents in our education system, with the potential to become advocates for marginalized people in our society.

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