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Beginner teacher preparedness for inclusion

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Educational Psychology

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Abstract

The exclusion of students who experience disability is a social justice issue that persists in New Zealand despite efforts to establish a fully inclusive education system. Although there has been some research into the teaching of inclusive practice in initial teacher education (ITE) in New Zealand, little research examining beginner teachers' feelings of preparedness for inclusion has been undertaken. This mixed-methods study investigated the role of ITE in preparing beginner, secondary school teachers for including diverse groups of learners by capturing their experiences of ITE and early career. Phase one involved an online questionnaire to secondary school teachers in the first three years of their career. Phase two involved conducting four follow-up interviews exploring salient findings from the questionnaire. The findings of this study suggest that while ITE recognises the diversity of the classroom, it falls short when it comes to the pragmatic implications for teaching and learning. The vast majority of participants felt their ITE did little or nothing to help them develop their knowledge of legislation and policy as it relates to inclusion. Two-thirds of participants felt that their ITE did little or nothing to help them develop their knowledge of supports available for students who experience disability while the majority had little to no experience teaching such students on practicum. Teachers' sense of preparedness to include learners varied significantly according to their personal connection with a person with a disability. Several key themes which align with literature in the field of teacher education for inclusion emerged, namely: knowledge about, and understanding of inclusive pedagogy; lack of focus on legislation, policy and human rights; lack of focus on collaborative practice; and beginner teachers not identifying as lifelong learners. Research-driven practices that are beneficial in preparing teachers to make socially-just decisions are discussed in light of the themes. These include: (1) critical reflection about experiences gained during practicum and service-learning opportunities; (2) explicit teaching of human rights; (3) explicit teaching about effective collaboration with professionals, teacher aides and whānau.

Acknowledgements

> *It may be easier to grasp how mistaken such thinking is by asking whether it would be acceptable for education systems to continue to officially sanction racism in policies and practices. If we know that the response to certain students (whose bodies, minds, senses work differently to the socially ascribed 'norm') is wounding and unfair, we cannot 'unknow' this. We have a responsibility to acknowledge and address what is essentially institutionalized discrimination* (Rutherford, 2016, p. 132).

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