

# The effect of school-based practice on student teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education in Northern Ireland

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This study seeks to discover the attitudes to inclusion of those about to embark on initial teacher education in Northern Ireland and the extent to which an extended teaching practice in a non-selective placement school can influence attitude change. A cohort of 125 student teachers responded to a survey that explored their attitudes towards a range of issues relating to inclusive education in the context of Northern Ireland. The findings indicate that student teachers in Northern Ireland show positive attitudes towards the principles of inclusion, with teaching practice experience in a non-selective school appearing to confirm and increase these positive attitudes. However, despite displaying increasingly positive attitudes towards inclusion post-teaching practice, there are indications that student teachers continue to show strong attachment to current organisational practices strongly related to academic selection.

## Introduction

Since the publication of the Warnock Report (Department of Education and Science, 1978) the UK government has shown an increasing commitment towards the principles of educational inclusion which is now seen to be a 'keystone' of government education policy (Booth *et al.*, 2000, p. 15). This has reflected change within the broader remit of social policy and this study has been undertaken within this context of emerging policy and legislation. Such changes have had implications for the status, remit and delivery of special educational needs (SEN) provision in Northern Ireland which now operates within an increasingly inclusive educative environment.

Those responsible for initial teacher education (ITE) in Northern Ireland have been challenged to review training provision so as to ensure that new teachers are effectively prepared to support all learners within inclusive classrooms. The UK government strategy document *Removing barriers to achievement* (DfES, 2004) sets out a clear commitment to inclusive education offering a vision as to how this

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strategy will evolve over the next decade. Within it lies a clear expectation that every teacher will teach pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and that teachers should have the skills to do so effectively. Adopting inclusive practices in education has become one of the key factors in challenging existing thinking about the role of the teacher and the learner in the educative process. Research, however, has consistently shown that it is not the policy maker but the teacher who is ultimately responsible for the successful or otherwise implementation of inclusive practices in schools (Barton, 1992; Avramidis *et al.*, 2000).

Research has however been conflicting. Some studies have suggested that teachers with more experience show less positive attitudes toward inclusion (Harvey, 1985; Forlin *et al.*, 1996), while other studies found that as teachers' experience with pupils with SEN increased so did their confidence (Leyser *et al.*, 1994; LeRoy & Simpson, 1996). Studies of both pre-service and in-service teachers have also shown that attitudes can be influenced by the type of preparation they received (Wilczenski, 1993; Avramidis *et al.*, 2000). The importance of training in helping to form positive attitudes towards inclusion has been further supported by research suggesting that teachers who had specific training to teach students with learning difficulties expressed more positive attitudes towards inclusion as compared to those who had not (Shimman, 1990; Beh-Pajooah, 1992). Beare (1985), however, cautions that attitudes once set are in fact very difficult to change and that it might therefore be more effective to focus closely on the preparation of pre-service teachers. The suggestion is that if student teachers complete their pre-service education without having developed positive attitudes towards inclusion this will adversely affect the successful accommodation of learners with special educational needs into mainstream settings (Tait & Purdie, 2000). Blair (1983) concluded that improved provision at pre-service together with a more aggressive approach towards training for inclusion-based practices would be the best point to begin in teacher education. Lambe and Bones (2006) found that positive attitudes did exist in student teachers at the start of their pre-service training, concluding that this stage of teacher education was the most affective time to nurture these attitudes by the provision of high quality training.

If attitudes can be formed by the quality of pre-service provision then it seems reasonable to conclude that the school-based placement experience (which forms an integral part of ITE) may be a key time in the PGCE year when attitudes towards inclusion may be influenced. The main aim of this study is to explore the extent to which the attitudes of student teachers in Northern Ireland can be affected by an extended placement in a non-selective teaching environment.

Initial teacher education in Northern Ireland is a traditional model based on extended blocks of practical, school-based teaching experience blended with periods of face-to-face academic and vocational study. The combination of practical workplace experience and reflective academic study has been seen as the best method of producing a competent classroom practitioner, in that it offers the student teacher the opportunity to integrate theory and practice effectively within a short and intensive one-year Post-Graduate Diploma in Education programme.

## **Inclusion in the context of education in Northern Ireland**

Inclusion (as opposed to integration) is a more recent term possessing more radical connotations that are associated within a wider human rights context. It implies a restructuring of mainstream schooling so that every child irrespective of disability can be accommodated, underpinned by the belief that all individuals should belong to the whole community of learners (Ainscow *et al.*, 2000). While policy and practice has been relatively comfortable in moving closer towards integration, inclusion poses a much greater challenge than conventional mainstreaming because, for example, it may appear to threaten the perceived safety net of traditional special education services within the education system. Full inclusion is then much more than integrating those with special educational needs into mainstream by using less traditional teaching methods. It goes further than just integration because it places special needs and disabled learners in the mainstream of education (Pugach, 1995) with the expectation that accommodation is the aim rather than assimilation. To put the principle of universal access to education into operation, policy makers are faced with the fundamental dilemma of how to make educational provision for all pupils, which takes full account of 'sameness', and at the same time pays due regard to 'difference' and 'diversity' amongst individuals.

The adoption of inclusive education has been somewhat problematic in Northern Ireland which has had a complex constitutional history, and is presently emerging from a long period of internal unrest. Though part of the UK, the education system has evolved along different lines. Until the end of the 1960s, Northern Ireland has been in many respects self-governing. The very conservative Unionist government were able to exercise the choice to retain academic selection as a model for post-primary education when most of the rest of the UK and Europe embraced a system of comprehensive schooling. The structure itself was shaped largely by the 1947 Education Act in Northern Ireland that adopted academic testing by examination for placing pupils in post-primary schools that became known as the '11-plus'.

At the end of the primary phase of education (KS2) pupils may sit two written papers testing their abilities in English, mathematics and science. The results of these are used exclusively to determine the type of post-primary schooling a learner will receive. Those whose score in the test are in the top 30% will generally attend an academically selective (grammar) school while the rest will be placed in what is known as a non-selective or secondary/high school. Such a system, while appearing to be academically meritocratic, has appeared to serve some of the population extremely well, with 'A' level results the highest in the UK (CCEA, 2003a,b). However, educators within Northern Ireland have been aware, for example, that the average performance of pupils is lower than in England. In the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Schleicher & Tamassia, 2000), which assessed the ability of 15-year-olds from 32 countries, the gap between the highest and lowest scores in Northern Ireland was amongst the widest of those participating. This system, where pupils aged 11 are segregated from their peers based on perceptions of academic ability, has made the adoption of inclusive education somewhat difficult.

Ainscow (2000), considering ways in which schools can be developed in response to pupil diversity, cites, 'traditional and inflexible organisational structures that rigidly compartmentalise subjects and isolate teachers for preventing the exploration of a "more collegiate culture" that would best facilitate the inclusive classroom' (p. 15). The system of segregation by academic selection at age 11 which has existed for the past 50 years has restricted until recently any serious adoption of inclusive education in Northern Ireland.

Changes, however, are ahead. The Department of Education in Northern Ireland commissioned a report (*The effects of the selective system of secondary education in Northern Ireland*) which concluded that the majority of pupils achieving a grammar school place were 'more likely to come from socially advantaged backgrounds, as compared with pupils entering secondary schools' (Gallagher & Smith, 2000, p. 20, 2.3.3). In the last few years a major review of the curriculum (CCEA, 2003a,b), together with a number of reports dealing with issues of post-primary provision (Department of Education in Northern Ireland, 2001, 2004), have indicated that very radical changes were necessary to ensure that all pupils receive a more equitable educational experience. By 2008 when the process of academic selection is finally to be set aside it would seem reasonable to believe that much more inclusive practices will then be adopted by all schools. The recent adoption into law (September 2005) of the Special Education and Disabilities Act (2002) (SENDA) in Northern Ireland has now brought the province legislatively in line with the rest of the UK. Issues relating to inclusion are seen now as the most pressing educational issues facing the education system in Northern Ireland. In a recent report of a survey on the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream classrooms, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) stated that there was a need for 'a fundamental review of in-service and initial teacher education (ITE), focusing on the extent to which the courses deal with special needs issues' (2004, p. 5).

### **Initial teacher education in Northern Ireland**

Because of the system of academic selection that has existed the majority of student teachers in Northern Ireland will have been drawn from the selective (grammar) school sector. For example, 72.4% of the 2005–2006 cohort of student teacher at the University of Ulster (the group used in this study) had attended a selective school while 27% had experienced non-selective schooling. This should be seen in the context of the current Northern Ireland school system where these figures are almost reversed with approximately 70% of pupils attending non-selective schools. Many of these student teachers will have had little contact during their own educational experience of peers with special educational needs and may begin their training with little conception of the complexities of managing classrooms where the pupils are not all drawn from the academically selected 30%.

Attitudes of student teachers in Northern Ireland towards inclusion and perceived training needs will have important implications for the future development of ITE programmes. Importantly, monitoring the factors that appear to influence attitude

change during the PGCE year can help to inform any rationalisation that may be required in preparation for the more inclusive system that education in Northern Ireland may embrace. The model for training student teachers in Northern Ireland has had a common format recognisable in most of the programmes offered throughout the UK and Ireland. These are generally a four-year Bachelor of Education programme or a one-year full-time Post-Graduate Certificate (PGCE), combining two block periods of practical, school-based teaching experience with periods of face-to-face academic and vocational study in university.

During the PGCE year, the placements serve to offer the student teacher real-life experience as a practicing teacher within a school. Student teachers complete two teaching practice placements during their training year. Because of the selective school system this affects the arrangements for school placements. The first placement will be spent in a non-selective school while the second will be spent in a selective (grammar) school environment. It is in the first placement in the non-selective school where a student teacher will have most opportunities to have contact with pupils who a range of abilities but also including those who may have diverse special educational needs or challenging behaviours. It is here that inclusive practices are more likely to be seen and experienced. The expectation is that where possible the school will offer students the opportunity to work with pupils who have special educational needs in a mainstream setting.

## **Research questions**

The research project forms part of a longitudinal study following a cohort of student teachers enrolled on a one-year post-primary Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) at the University of Ulster. The first stage of the research (Phase 1) was initiated at the point of entry to the PGCE and involved the use of a survey. The aim had been to discover student attitudes to inclusion prior to the potential influences of theoretical discussion, knowledge or experience that might be gained during the PGCE programme or while on a practical school-based placement. The broader research aim is to identify the key factors that can influence attitude change during pre-service training.

This study (Phase 2) sets out to discover what the attitudes of student teachers are in Northern Ireland towards inclusion on completion of an eight-week placement in a non-selective school. In particular it sought to discover if teaching practice had influenced or modified initial attitudes identified at the start of their pre-service programme.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The population consisted of the same 125 student teachers enrolled at the University of Ulster for the award of PGCE (post-primary) who completed Phase 1 of the longitudinal study. These student teachers were studying eight subject areas,

including art and design, English, geography, history, home economics, music, technology and design and physical education. The group represent almost 50% of all students studying for a post-primary PGCE in Northern Ireland and the research focussed upon those training for the post-primary sector because it is here that developing inclusive practices are seen as most problematic.

### *Instrument*

The approach to this part of the research was quantitative and involved the re-administration of the survey designed by Lambe and Bones (2006) and used in Phase 1 of the research. Of the 125 surveys administered 108 were completed and returned, representing a return rate of 86.4%. From this number 28% were male and 72% female, reflecting accurately the gender breakdown for the whole PGCE population in Northern Ireland. Table 1 sets out the characteristics of the students who participated.

During the first week of the PGCE course class discussions between the students and subject tutors that explored beliefs about the purpose of schooling (part of the introductory programme) had yielded the following themes:

1. beliefs about the purpose of schools and attitudes towards organisational issues within teaching;
2. concerns or anxieties about teaching within an inclusive educational classroom; and
3. personal beliefs and attitudes towards the ideology of inclusive education.

Because these were themes of major importance to the future of education in Northern Ireland it was decided to construct a survey in order to obtain more detailed information about student attitudes towards them. The survey contained 27 statements relating closely to the issues elicited from the discussions and allowed three types of response: 'agree', 'disagree', and 'don't know'. Once the initial survey was developed, it was piloted by a panel of professionals and academics working in the area of inclusion. These included a psychologist, two university lecturers and a school Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO). Some refinement of the survey was completed using their feedback before being administered and validated by use during Phase 1 of the study where it was found to be reliable. Surveying the whole group at key points in the PGCE year offers opportunities for the researchers to compare and contrast changing attitudes during the programme. It will also provide an overview of the extent to which attitudes might be influenced by specific periods that were theory-based (time spent in the university setting), or gaining practical experience (time spent on teaching practice).

The survey consisted of 27 closed statements (as opposed to questions) that were thematically based and required the participant to select one response (agree, disagree, don't know) to each statement. There were important reasons for using the same survey as in Phase 1. One of the research aims was to observe the changes that occurred in student attitudes to inclusion as the PGCE year progressed and the

Table 1. Student responses to theme 1 pre- and post-teaching practice experience: beliefs and attitudes about the purpose of schools and organisational issues within teaching

Statements	Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Don't know (%)	Don't know (%)	Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2
1. I think all teachers should experience teaching pupils with special educational needs	82.2	91.5	12.1	4.7	5.6	3.8
2. I think that streaming is the best practice for dealing effectively with pupils of different abilities	48.1	59.6	37.5	24	14.4	16.3
3. It is more important for schools to promote academic achievement than social inclusion	13.1	9.4	18.7	22.6	68.2	67.9
4. I think that changing the education system in Northern Ireland from selective to a non-selective one is the best way to cater for all pupils	15.9	20.8	39.3	39.6	44.9	39.6
5. The most important role of a school is to ensure academic excellence	15.8	16	15.9	14.2	68.2	69.8
6. Mainstream schools should not be allowed to exercise policies and structures that cater only for the needs of certain pupils thereby excluding others with special educational needs	57.5	53.8	24.5	34	17.9	12.3
7. Mainstream schools should have the final say in which pupils they can enrol	27.4	29.8	38.7	30.8	34	39.4

times selected to administer the survey needed to be key moments in the year. Phase 1 was conducted at the start of the programme at a point when student opinions were as yet uninfluenced by either theory or classroom experience. For this part of the research (Phase 2) the survey was re-administered immediately after the students had returned from the first teaching placement in a non-selective school. Changing the survey each time would have affected the validity of the findings and since they were administered at least three months apart this ensured a sufficient gap between each so that the respondents were unlikely to be able to recall (and possibly be influenced by) their previous responses.

### **Data analysis**

Formic Data Capture software was used in the analysis of the survey and allowed other factors such as gender, age and whether the respondent had personally experienced selective or non-selective schooling to be considered. It also provided the means to measure and compare any changes to the survey responses before and after teaching experience. The survey was anonymous and the students were informed as to the purpose of the research in advance of it. This information was also repeated in writing at the start of the survey. Because Northern Ireland has yet to specify how it will interpret inclusion post-2008 and as a prerequisite to completing the researcher-administered survey the students were given a working definition of inclusion which stated that inclusion should be taken to mean 'mainstream schools accommodating a full diversity of pupils'. They were also given a definition for special educational needs taken from the Education Act (1996, Part iv, p.312), stating that 'A child has special educational needs ... if he (*sic*) has a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made for him (*sic*)'.

The results are presented in tabular form and show in percentages the students' responses to the survey pre-teaching practice (Time 1) and post-teaching practice (Time 2).

### **Results**

Table 1 provides details of the responses to statements relating to Theme 1: *student beliefs and attitudes about the purpose of schools and organisational issues within teaching*. Three statements (1, 2 and 4) show a significant change of response from first survey. The most marked change was in Statement 2, *streaming is the best practice for dealing effectively with pupils of different abilities*. Responses post-teaching practice show a positive increase of 11.5% (from 48.1% to 59.%) as to student teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of streaming.

The second significant attitude change is found in the responses to Statement 1: *all teachers should experience teaching pupils with special needs*. This statement had already been well supported during the first survey and now showed a further positive increase of 9.39% (from 82.2% to 91.5%) post-teaching practice.



A small increase in agreement (almost 5%) was shown in response to Statement 4: *changing the education system in Northern Ireland from a selective to non-selective one is the best way to cater for pupils*. However, initially 44% of student teachers had disagreed with this and in the second survey this number had reduced by only 5%.

There were only small variations (under 5%) in responses to Statements 3, 5, and 7, but there was a marked increase of almost 10% within the 'don't know' category in response to Statement 6, *mainstream schools should not be allowed to exercise policies and structures that cater only for the needs of certain pupils and thus excluding others with special needs*.

Table 2 displays student responses to statements relating to Theme 2: *concerns or anxieties about teaching within an inclusive educational classroom*. The most significant change occurred in response to Statement 12: *a teacher should be concerned with educational issues and not expected to deal with a pupil's emotional and behavioural problems*. This saw a decrease in the 'don't know' category (23.4% to 5.7%) with a rise of more than 20% (68.2–88.7%) of students who disagreed with this statement. In the first survey 47.2% of respondents agreed with Statement 1: *I have no experience in working with special needs education*. Post-teaching practice this decreased to 15.1% with a large majority (83%) of respondents now claiming to have gained experience in this area. Concerns about personal effectiveness seemed to be reduced in response to Statement 2, *I am concerned I will not have the skills required to teach special educational needs in an inclusive setting*, from 57.4% in the initial survey to 42.5% post-teaching practice.

One of the marked outcomes of the results from this theme was some increase in uncertainty about issues relating to roles. While there was a marked reduction of 10.6% in agreement with Statement 7, *parents are often to blame for their child's poor behaviour*, post-teaching practice there appear less surety than in the initial survey about apportioning blame with the 'don't know' responses increasing in the second survey by almost 13%. This also occurred in response to Statement 9, *education has a duty to look after the interests of pupils who are trying to learn*, with 'don't know' responses increasing by 12.7%.

While acknowledging teacher responsibility in dealing with behavioural problems there was increased agreement of almost 8% to Statement 5: *pupils with emotional and behavioural problems should be excluded from mainstream classes because they disrupt other pupils' progress*. There was also increased agreement to Statement 11, *I think you need a special interest in SEN to be an effective teacher in SEN*, rising by almost 10% (51.9% to 61.3%) in the follow-up survey. There were smaller variations (under 5%) in responses to Statements 3, 4, 6, 8 and 10.

Table 3 shows the responses made by the students to Theme 3: *personal beliefs and attitudes towards the ideology of inclusive education*. The most marked change is seen in Statement 1: *I would prefer to teach in a selective educational system if I had a choice*. Initially 44.9% agreed this would be their preference but in the follow-up survey this had decreased to 28.3%, a swing of 16.6%.

Statement 8, *parents should have the final say in what school their child attends*, also indicated a change of attitude and saw support fall for this almost 9% (34.6% to

Table 2. Student responses to theme 2 pre- and post-teaching practice experience: concerns or anxieties about teaching within an inclusive educational classroom

Statements	Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Don't know (%)	Don't know (%)	Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2
1. I have no experience in working with special education needs	47.2	15.1	3.7	1.9	49.1	83
2. I am concerned I will not have the skills required to teach special educational needs in an inclusive setting	57.4	42.5	21.1	23.6	21.5	23.6
3. I think some people claim to have special educational needs to get extra attention and special treatment	38.1	36.8	21.9	24.5	40	38.7
4. Emotional and behavioural problems are often just an excuse for lack of self-discipline	29.6	30.8	24.1	19.2	46.3	38.7
5. Pupils with emotional and behavioural problems should be excluded from mainstream classes as they disrupt other pupils' progress	17.8	27.4	35.5	31.1	46.7	41.5
6. It is a parent's role to ensure their child behaves properly	60	55.2	24.8	24.8	15.2	20
7. I think that parents are often to blame for their child's poor behaviour	65.4	54.8	14	26.9	20.6	18.3
8. I think it is impossible to try and accommodate too many differences in one classroom	52.3	57.8	24.3	26.5	23.4	15.7
9. Education has a first duty to look after the interests of pupils who are trying to learn	59.3	52.4	13	25.7	27.8	21.9
10. I think you need to be a special kind of teacher to teach pupils with special educational needs	50.9	53.8	23.2	23.6	25.9	23.6
11. I think you need a special interest in special educational needs to be an effective teacher of SEN	51.9	61.3	14.2	14.2	34	24.5
12. A teacher should be concerned with educational issues and not be expected to deal with a pupil's emotional and behavioural problems	8.4	5.7	23.4	5.7	68.2	88.7

Table 3. Student responses to theme 3 pre- and post-teaching practice experience: personal beliefs and attitudes towards the ideology of inclusive education

Statements	Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Don't know (%)	Don't know (%)	Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2
1. I would prefer to teach in a selective educational system if I had the choice	44.9	28.3	23.4	26.4	30.8	45.3
2. I don't think I would have done as well academically if I had been in an inclusive classroom when at school	19.4	31.7	54.4	35.6	26.2	32.7
3. I think I would have benefited from being part of an inclusive classroom	29.2	34	52.8	42.5	17.7	23.6
4. I enjoyed school and never had any real problem with learning	71.3	78.3	7.4	2.8	21.3	18.9
5. It is more important for schools to promote social inclusion than academic achievement	22.9	27.6	30.5	26.7	46.7	45.7
6. The best way to ensure equality of provision is for all pupils to be educated in an inclusive classroom	20.8	18.3	50.9	49	28.3	32.7
7. Having pupils with diverse special educational needs in the classroom is unfair to other pupils who may be held back	39.3	44.8	24.3	22.9	36.4	32.4
8. Parents should have the final say in which school their child attends	34.6	25.7	23.4	36.2	42.1	38.1

25.7%). There was however also a considerable increase in the 'don't know' responses from 23.4% to 36.2% indicating some increased uncertainty post-teaching practice.

The responses to Statement 2, *I do not think I would have done as well academically if I had been in an inclusive classroom when at school*, showed a marked rise in agreement from 19.4% to 31.7% after teaching practice in a non-selective school. There were only small variations (under 5%) in responses to Statements 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7.

## **Discussion**

The already positive attitudes towards inclusion expressed by the student teachers at the beginning of the PGCE programme had increased on completion of an eight-week teaching practice experience in a non-selective school. The most significant changes in attitude related to student concerns or anxieties about teaching within an inclusive educational classroom and personal beliefs and attitudes towards the ideology of inclusive education.

At the start of the PGCE programme almost half of respondents claimed to have no experience working with SEN but by the end of teaching practice this number had decreased dramatically so that more than 83% of the student group now claimed practical experience in teaching pupils with SEN. Prior to teaching practice almost 60% of respondents had expressed concern about their lack of skills required to teach special educational needs in an inclusive setting. The results of the second survey indicated a marked increase in confidence regarding acquisition of the necessary skills. Though more than one quarter of the student group displayed some uncertainty as to how schools can effectively support pupils with diverse SEN, the majority of respondents did feel it was possible. There was also a marked increase in those who recognised that a teacher's role was not just to look after curricular issues and that dealing with pupils' emotional and behavioural difficulties should be an integral part of this role. While there was very little change in the perception that a 'special kind' of teacher was needed to teach SEN, there was however a significant increase (10%) in the number who believed that having a special interest in SEN made a teacher more effective.

The earlier responses to the statement that *all teachers should experience teaching pupils with special educational needs* had already been very positive (82.2% agreeing with the statement). Post-teaching practice this number increased further to 92.5%, suggesting that practical experience may have helped to confirm already positive attitudes. While a large majority of respondents had initially claimed to favour all teachers teaching pupils with SEN, a substantial minority (44.9%) had still expressed a personal preference to teach in an academically selective school if given the choice. Significantly this figure had reduced quite dramatically to 28.3% post-teaching practice. This increased confidence towards teaching in a non-selective school was taken almost entirely from those who had stated earlier they would prefer to teach in a selective school setting.

The analysis of results from the first survey had also revealed considerable numbers of 'don't know' responses to many of the statements. This had not been unexpected at such an early stage of training when many students had yet to develop informed opinions. Post-teaching practice, this uncertainty had been reduced in some important areas with more students willing to make a commitment to either agree or disagree with the statements. This may indicate that many were beginning to question and broaden their initial understanding of a teacher's role. In the context of the changes to take place in post-primary education by 2008 this was encouraging, and indicated that the first teaching practice experience may have positively influenced and possibly modified some initial uncertain or negative perceptions towards teaching in a non-selective school. While there was evidence of increased confidence in personal teaching efficacy, this did not impact strongly on the responses to the statements relating to future educational arrangements for learners in Northern Ireland.

The results of the second survey revealed that student teachers still felt comfortable with the traditional organisational system familiar to them. There is evidence to suggest that many held the belief that this system had served them well, with 31.7% of respondents believing they personally would not have achieved so much academically if they had been educated in an inclusive classroom (an increase of 12.3% from the first survey). In response to the statement *the best way to ensure quality of provision is for all pupils to be educated in an inclusive classroom*, the first survey showed that only 20.8% had agreed with this and this number fell by only 2.5% in the follow-up survey, revealing that more than half the respondents are still unsure and falling into the 'don't know' category. Considering the students' indication of growing confidence and competence in teaching in an inclusive setting the contradiction here is further compounded by the fact that less than one fifth of student teachers actually favoured the removal of academic selection at age 11, as a means of ensuring a more inclusive system. It would appear that amongst those about to enter the teaching profession in Northern Ireland considerable numbers are not yet convinced that the removal of academic selection should be the favoured option for post-primary arrangements in Northern Ireland.

There was also a positive increase of 11.5% to 59.6% of those in favour of 'streaming as the best practice for dealing effectively with pupils of different abilities'. Despite supporting the philosophy of inclusion, student teachers did not see it as a contradiction for schools to 'band' pupils internally based on academic ability. It may be possible to conclude that despite growing confidence in their personal skill and ability to teach in an inclusive setting and while claiming to support the philosophy of inclusion, many student teachers continued to show strong attachments to the traditional systems with which they are most familiar. Conclusions at this stage of the research may point to the tension within educators that can be seen as the balance between development and maintenance (Ainscow, 2000). While perhaps wishing to be seen as progressive and moving forward, there is still regard for current and familiar practice and an uncertainty about implementing what might be considerable risk-taking change.

## Conclusions

What then are the implications of these findings for initial teacher education in Northern Ireland? There is evidence that positive attitudes towards inclusion or at least inclusive practices had been reinforced during teaching practice in a non-selective environment.

The first placement ensured that the majority (83%) of student teachers did gain experience in teaching pupils with diverse special educational needs in a mainstream setting. While this confirms that most non-selective schools are offering student teachers opportunities to experience inclusive teaching, those responsible for ITE programmes must now be challenged to find the means to ensure that all students have equitable experiences. The responses to the second survey also indicate that the first teaching placement could provide a key opportunity to influence attitudes about inclusion and inclusive practices.

If the implementation of new educational structures in Northern Ireland is to be successful it is important that teachers have positive attitudes towards it. In any rationalisation of pre-service training provision those responsible for ITE programmes may have to address this issue. It may well require the provision of what Slee (2001, p. 120) describes as 'interdisciplinary studies of exclusion and inclusion' with the aim of 'weaving the preparation for inclusive teachers right across the fabric of their teacher-training curriculum'. Ensuring that all student teachers are offered a supportive teaching practice placement in a school with a pro-active approach to inclusion will be one way to provide the environment to nurture increasingly positive attitudes.

The research is still in progress. It is intended that a more qualitative approach will now be used, and interviews conducted with a sample of the student population to further explore and expand on the findings of the second survey. A follow-up survey will also be conducted when the student group have completed their second extended teaching practice experience which will be in an academically selective school and may reveal to what extent (if any) experience in this setting will influence currently held attitudes.

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