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**Abstract:** This paper reports on a study examining pre-service teachers' views about working with children in inclusive settings. The study has two foci: one, the development of views about inclusive education whilst partaking in an extended practicum; and two, the strategies employed by these teachers in and outside their classrooms during the extended practicum. Data gathered from these pre-service teachers were analysed using qualitative procedures, guided by the principles of grounded theory. The results show that the data can be grouped within 15 categories of response and that these can be subsumed within three major themes, namely, positive realities, negative realities, and coping strategies. The implications of this study for tertiary course designers, practicum personnel, supervising teachers, and future pre-service teachers are considered.

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## **Introduction**

Inclusive education has been a long-standing area of interest for educators. Studies of teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education have identified a number of areas of concern for teachers: (1) increase in demand for teacher attention by individual students; (2) lack of training - both pre- and in-service (Bennett, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Westwood & Graham, 2003); (3) lack of funding (Westwood & Graham, 2003); (4) negative effects on the general students (Wright & Sigafos, 1998); (5) the threat of violent attacks, outbursts or behaviours by included students (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart, & Eloff, 2003); (6) increased administrative issues (Forlin, 1997); (7) lack of support (Westwood & Graham, 2003); (8) lack of continuation of inclusive programs within the students home life by family and carers (Bennett et al., 1997); and, (9) lack of confidence (Wright & Sigafos, 1998). In order to manage these concerns, teachers have tended to develop two types of strategical approach. The first approach is a classroom managerial one (see e.g., Harrower, 1999; O'Donoghue & Chalmers, 2000) and the second approach relies more on help from others (see e.g., Forlin, 1997).

It needs stressing, however, that discussions about the positive perceptions of inclusive education by general education teachers are also prevalent in the literature. It is evident that teachers are becoming more aware of the benefits which can be accrued by all students through the practice of inclusion of mild to severely disabled students. 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 literature suggests that the inclusion of mild to severe special needs students is allowing such students to have greater levels of sustained contact with their non-disabled same-aged peers, develop richer friendship networks, build a higher independence towards adult functioning in regards to social skills required in the outside world, foster interpersonal skills, be provided with appropriate language stimulation, be present in the same school as siblings, and, improve their communicative and emotional development (Brown & Shearer, 1999; Salisbury, Gallucci, Palombaro, & Peck, 1995; Sontag, 1997).

As many experienced teachers express 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. Even more surprising is the limited range of studies conducted into the effect which extended practicums during the university years have in the development of these views.

A study conducted in the United Kingdom, by Hastings and Oakford (2003), found that attitudes towards inclusion were affected by the nature of the special needs of children, with emotional and behavioral problems seen in the most negative light by pre-service teachers. Shade and Stewart (2001) conducted a study in the United States of America (USA) in order to ascertain whether a single special education subject at university can significantly change pre-service teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. The study indicated that a single subject was beneficial to both pre-service general education and special education students. Improved significantly were the attitudes towards included students' behaviour, the effect on inclusion on the other students, and the self-concepts of the pre-service teachers.

Research within Australia has also provided support to the findings of the studies conducted in the USA. Australian research findings suggest that by the end of their course, pre-service teachers are less frustrated about not knowing how to help, less fearful about being disabled, develop confidence and competencies in providing inclusive education, feel less pity towards people with disabilities, and are more likely to notice the person rather than the disability (Carroll, Forlin, & Jobling, 2003; Konza & Harris, 1994). However, it must be noted that the partially guided practicums undertaken by the pre-service teachers in the studies were no more than two-hourly periods 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.

From a review of the relevant literature, there is an obvious need for a study to be conducted in an Australian setting identifying the effect that a self-directed inclusive education extended practicum has on the development of attitudes by pre-service teachers toward inclusive education. In addition, the coping strategies these pre-service teachers use in and outside their classrooms would be a worthwhile area of study to fill this void in the literature.

## Method

In order to meet this need, a study was planned so as to draw on the experiences of pre-service teachers involved in the Charles Sturt University (CSU) 2004 Internship program. The internship is undertaken in term two of the New South Wales school year, with the interns taking full responsibility for their class during the ten weeks of term two.

The composition of the pre-service teacher's classroom was vital to the selection of eligible participants in the study. Each classroom was required to include at least one special needs student who was fully included. Several of these classrooms had more than one student who met this condition. The 2004 Internship cohort was approached during the first week of term one 2004 during an initial lecture about the internship. They were informed about what the study was concerning, what their participation would entail, that their participation would be entirely voluntary with the right to withdraw, and finally the geographic region and class composition which would be essential to their participation in the study. From the voluntary group, three students were selected using stratified random sampling. As a way of preserving anonymity, these students were given the following pseudonyms - Belle, Elise, and Seamus.

The researchers chose to conduct a purely qualitative study as it would be more sensitive to individual lived realities, to the professional development of the participants within the study and for specifically identifying the meanings that the pre-service teachers place on the events, processes and structures that occur throughout their inclusive education internship (Gay & Airasian, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Several techniques were adopted to assist in the data gathering phase: interviews; a reflective journal; and, telephone conversations. The interviews conducted with the participants were either semi-structured or unstructured in their format. The interviews allowed the researchers to understand what each pre-service teacher was thinking, feeling, and to explore their attitudes and concerns in regards to their particular inclusive classroom. The interviews with the pre-service teachers were based upon information obtained from each of their reflective journals. This allowed the researchers to obtain data which could later be compared and contrasted to another source (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). The pre-service teachers participated in three interviews; one at the start of the practicum (Weeks 1-2), one midway through the practicum (Weeks 5-6), and one at the end of the practicum (Week 10). The interviews were approximately an hour in length and conducted by one of the researchers (subsequently referred to as the investigator).

According to Creswell (1998), journaling is a popular form of data collection in the qualitative paradigm. As a consequence, the pre-service teachers were provided with a reflective journal and asked to record their experiences, concerns, feelings, strategies and important events which were occurring or were a result of their participation in an inclusive practicum. The participants were also instructed that their reflection could be anything from previous experiences with people with disabilities, their thoughts on how they are coping in an inclusive classroom, what they think of inclusive education, to specific incidents which have occurred and their thoughts, feelings and potential strategies to employ as a result of the incident. The use of reflective journals in studies such as this one is supported by Bentley-Williams (2000).

Telephone conversations were also undertaken throughout the ten-week internship in order to maintain contact between the investigator and the participants. The telephone conversations acted as a means of establishing times and places to conduct interviews with all the participants, allowed the investigator and each participant to maintain contact throughout the ten-week period, helped the investigator establish a rapport with each of the participants and gain a small insight into how each pre-service teacher's internship was progressing, providing a guiding direction for interviews. These conversations were not a source of data (Hockley, 2001).

The data collected in this study were then analysed using principles of grounded theory. The first stage of grounded theory data analysis involves identifying categories and their properties. This process of identifying categories is known as coding (Dey, 1999). Secondly, 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, cited in Dey, 1999).

The data were coded in the first instance by using open coding. In this process the data are "broken down into incidents to be closely examined and compared for similarities and differences, while constantly asking of the data the neutral question "What category or property of a category does this

*incident indicate?*” (Glaser, 1992, p. 39). The second coding step is known as axial coding. In this process the data are put back together in new ways by making connections between categories (Glaser, 1992). The final coding step is called 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 is undertaken until theoretical saturation is reached; where no additional data are being found or achieved (Glaser, 1992).

## Summary of findings

As a result of these analytic processes, 15 categories of response were revealed. These categories and the three themes that they fall within are highlighted in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Themes and final categories**

Theme	Categories
Positive realities	Important support Positive impact Consistent classroom practice Internal compass Professional growth
Negative realities	Divergent experiences Classroom dynamics Negative classroom behaviour Unsupportive school culture Practicum stress
Coping strategies	Organisation Relaxation Essential communications Reflection Self-help

For the sake of brevity, parts of the participants’ stories will be presented below. Each of the themes will be highlighted; however, only a few of categories will be identified in this section.

### Theme 1: Positive realities

#### *Important support*

Belle found the demands of her Kindergarten class to be substantial, and having two included students who needed regular assistance to complete basic tasks took a great deal of time away from the other students. Belle had an aide in her classroom daily until lunch time and considered herself lucky in this regard. Her aide was a constant source of support. She not only helped out with the included students, but assisted with other members of the classroom. Belle saw the presence of her aide in the classroom as an *advantage of this practicum* and ultimately to her development as a teacher. Initially, she was *worried about it and didn’t want someone in the class all the time*, but by week six of her internship, she began to look more positively on the aide support provided in her classroom and at times wished that her aide was present for the afternoon sessions.

#### *Positive impact*

By approximately week 5, Belle no longer looked at her autistic student as a child who was different or more demanding, and began to see her as just a ‘normal’ child.

*You just wouldn’t know that she had it. Some days or parts of the day, you just think that she is a normal little girl, but then at other times she gets a look on her face and you can tell she’s confused or like conflicted in a way.*

The development of this optimistic attitude towards her included students meant that Belle was able to develop a more positive attitude towards the notion of inclusive education. She no longer saw it was an additional task.

#### *Professional growth*

Through their experiences on their internship, both Belle and Seamus 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. For Seamus, it was his experience in an inclusive classroom which helped him grow in a professional manner. Dealing with students who had behavioural and emotional difficulties was something which Seamus had never had to encounter on his previous practicum placements. For him, learning how to manage the behaviour of these children was the area in which he grew most as a teacher. As Seamus matured 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 behavioural strategies and a mutual respect developed. The difficult behaviours in the class began to lessen and he became more confident within himself with helping the students to learn more appropriate behaviours and curb their less appropriate ones.

### **Theme 2: Negative realities**

#### *Divergent experiences*

The pre-service teachers felt that they did not receive the support at university that they should in order to be able to deal with the dynamics of an inclusive classroom on a full-time basis. For Belle, the only learning regarding working with an autistic child took place in her special needs subject, and occurred only because it was the seminar topic she was assigned.

This was a feeling which was also shared by Elise. She believed that the University did not provide enough explicit information and direction for working with students with special needs in general classrooms, and as a result, left graduates inadequately prepared to effectively teach in an inclusive classroom.

#### *Negative classroom behaviour*

For all the participants, the behaviour of the students in their classes created the greatest negative impact on their internship experience. This was not only specific to their special needs students. In fact, the greatest negativity resulted from the inappropriate behaviours of their general students. All these negative behaviours placed a great deal of stress and pressure upon the participants and they often found feelings hard to deal with and let go of even outside the confines of the school.

#### *Practicum stress*

All the participants commented that ten weeks was a long time for a practicum. Seamus believed that the ten-week period was too long to be away from his university support network, and even though he could call peers/lecturers at anytime, felt he was too far away for the support to be really helpful. Belle made similar comments and argued that the practicum should have been about seven weeks to reduce stress and potential burnout.

### **Theme 3: Coping strategies**

#### *Relaxation*

For all the participants, relaxation was a primary 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 participant, there were a number 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. As stated by Seamus,

*I'm usually right once I sleep on it but sometimes when I go home I am really frustrated.*

#### *Essential communications*

For the interns, the main people with whom they communicated about their experiences in their inclusive classroom were other pre-service teachers. For Seamus and Belle, they were at an advantage, as opposed to Elise, as they shared a house with others who were completing their extended practicum in the same geographical location as themselves. This meant that upon arrival at home, they immediately had someone they could talk to, someone who relates to them. For Belle, this was an

extremely beneficial situation for dealing with her classroom dynamics and keeping perspective on what things really counted and what could be cast aside.

### *Reflection*

An analysis of the data showed that reflection as a coping strategy was conducted in three different ways: by using day books; through talking; and, by maintaining a journal. For Elise, her day book and journal were key tools that encouraged daily reflection. Both these tools helped her to cope with the demands of her classroom and her respective teacher roles. In her journal and using ideas jotted down in the day book, Elise would recount what had occurred and from there devise ways as to better deal with the day to come. This helped her to identify possible reasons for negative events within her classroom.

As stated earlier, communicating with other interns, teachers, family and friends was an important coping strategy. These communications were also a main source of reflection. Through talking, the pre-service teachers were able to put things into perspective and sometimes allow them to gain further insight into what was happening with regards to their practice. Depending on whom the communications were with, other strategies could be identified for possible employment.

### **Discussion**

This study aimed to bridge gaps in the current literature regarding pre-service teachers' attitudes and realities regarding inclusive education classrooms by drawing on the experiences of three persons involved in the CSU 2004 Internship program. The interviews conducted with each of the participants provided invaluable information about how their attitudes towards inclusive education grew more positively as the extended practicum progressed. That is, as their internships advanced, each pre-service teacher began to generate more positive ideas about the notion of inclusion and how inclusive education could be implemented. It became evident that with greater exposure to an inclusive classroom and special needs students, the attitudes of the interns began to take on a more positive tone.

For the pre-service teachers participating in this study, the main bases for the initial selection of teaching strategies were intuition and their pre-existing schemas regarding appropriate teaching techniques. These decisions, it became apparent, were ultimately based on meeting the individual needs present in their classrooms. Studies by both Harrower (1999) and Vaidya and Zaslavsky (2000) support these findings, indicating that many in-service teachers make modifications to their teaching strategies based upon meeting the individual needs within their inclusive classrooms. A study by O'Donoghue and Chalmers (1999) into the teaching practices in inclusive classrooms adds further support to these findings as they contend that in-service teachers partake in a number of steps to meet the dynamics of their inclusive classrooms. Many of these steps are based in the usage of their own intuition to make judgments about the classroom, what practices need to be changed in order to provide the best learning environment for all, changing these practices and determining how well these adjustments have worked in their classrooms.

Through the interviews of this study, it became clear that there were five very prominent coping strategies employed by the participants in order to deal with their practicum. The coping strategies employed by the interns were categorised as: *Organisation*, *Relaxation*, *Essential communications*, *Reflection*, and *Self-help*, and can be compared to those identified in previous studies by Hemmings and Hockley (2002), Lewis and Frydenberg (2002), and Forlin (1997). Notions of being organized, drawing on the advice of others, and feeling optimistic are common in all of these studies.

This study has implications for practice, in both the area of pre-service teacher education and in-service teacher training, support and professional development. More specifically, there are implications from this study for universities (including course designers, practicum personnel and liaison lecturers), schools which undertake internships, education departments and enrolled students.

The findings of this study suggest a need for a change in the structure of Education degrees if pre-service teachers are to become more positive, confident and prepared to teach in inclusive classrooms. In order to give pre-service teachers more exposure to special needs students, course designers need to include more stand-alone practicum days in inclusive classrooms as part of both the compulsory special needs subject and other core subjects. More discussion about working in inclusive classrooms needs to be integrated into core subjects to provide pre-service teachers with more strategies for teaching and learning within an inclusive classroom setting.

Based on the findings of this research, it appears that the length of the internship at CSU is an additional cause of stress. While the findings indicate that an extended practicum is extremely beneficial for the pre-service teachers, course designers need to re-evaluate the length of this extended practicum as high levels of stress can be counterproductive for the pre-service teachers. Possibly, the practicum and face-to-face teaching during this practicum could be reduced to allow the interns greater freedom to explore other matters and reflect further on their experiences.

As alluded to earlier, the varying dynamics of an inclusive classroom can cause a great deal of stress for interns whilst conducting their extended practicum. Placing persons in classrooms with a large number of special needs or behaviourally and emotionally disturbed students can cause additional stress. By making more in-depth preliminary inquiries regarding the classrooms that pre-service teachers are to be placed in, practicum personnel at universities could become more aware of the additional support that may be needed to assist the pre-service teacher through the extended practicum; or alternatively, find a more appropriate school placement.

Practicum personnel are the link between the university and the school, and as such, are therefore required to clearly explain the expectations and roles of the school and staff members involved. The more each individual understands the roles he/she has, the more supportive the environment will be for the pre-service teacher. Furthermore, the more explanations pre-service teachers are given about inclusive classrooms, the more positive their attitudinal development.

It is inevitable that throughout their teaching careers, enrolled students will be part of an inclusive classroom. Before undertaking any kind practicum or classroom placement, these students need to be made aware of the stressors which they may face within the classroom environment. They also need to develop positive stress management strategies to assist them in coping with the dynamics of an inclusive classroom. Furthermore, it is essential that they become aware of the individual needs of students prior to entering the assigned classroom and find out as much as possible about included students (i.e., specific needs, helpful teaching and learning strategies, and possible contacts for follow-up). If students are effectively prepared for their practicum, then they are more likely to reap the benefits that an experience of this form can provide. This then places them in an appropriate position to become productive and influential teachers.

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Inclusive education happens when children with and without disabilities participate and learn together in the same classes. Research shows that when a child with disabilities attends classes alongside peers who do not have disabilities, good things happen. For a long time, children with disabilities were educated in separate classes or in separate schools. People got used to the idea that special education meant separate education. But we now know that when children are educated together, positive academic and social outcomes occur for all the children involved. We also know that simply placin