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Designing Fieldwork Experiences That Make a Difference

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## Preparing Pre-service Teachers for Inclusive Classrooms: Designing Fieldwork Experiences That Make a Difference

Initial teacher education programs need to prepare new teachers to effectively teach in inclusive classrooms but how this is best achieved requires further investigation. Many pre-service teachers (PSTs) hold positive attitudes towards inclusion but lack confidence with being able to meet the needs of children with more complex special educational needs (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000). According to PSTs, more emphasis is needed on developing knowledge and strategies for teaching students with special educational needs during their preparation (Jobling & Moni, 2004), including more experience working with these students (Avramidis, et al., 2000). In this paper we investigate the benefits to PSTs of an innovative fieldwork experience involving tutoring young adults with an intellectual disability (ID).

### Background

In Australia as elsewhere, the move towards inclusive education has been facilitated by legislation. Since the Federal Disability Discrimination Act (Australian Government, 1992) was passed there has been significant movement of students with disabilities from special schools to mainstream schools (Forlin, 2006). Data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2013) suggested that in 2009, fewer than 10% of students with disabilities attended special schools. Most Australian students with disabilities attended either regular classes in mainstream schools (65.9%), or special classes within mainstream schools (24.3%).

To prepare PSTs for inclusive classrooms, it is important they have opportunities to work alongside students with disabilities during professional placements in mainstream schools; however, this can be difficult to organise. Instead, planned *fieldwork* experiences may be developed to complement coursework components in initial teacher education programs. The term fieldwork is used here to denote learning through firsthand experience of interacting with a person with a disability.

Fieldwork experiences need to be carefully planned and supported if they are to be helpful. When combined with coursework, fieldwork experiences can promote productive attitudes towards inclusion (e.g., Carroll, Forlin, & Jobling, 2003), but they can also increase concerns about inclusion (e.g., Forlin & Chambers, 2011). Furthermore, fieldwork experiences do not

always bring about expected improvements in PSTs personal beliefs about their ability (self-efficacy) to teach students with a disability in an inclusive setting above what can be achieved with well-designed coursework (Lancaster & Bain 2007, 2010).

Planned fieldwork experiences described in the literature vary greatly. They include, supporting a teacher in an inclusive classroom and delivering a co-planned and co-taught lesson (Van Laarhoven, Munk, Lynch, Bosma, & Rouse, 2007), buddying up with a person with a disability at a local school (Carroll, et al., 2003) and participating in sporting and recreational activities with people with disabilities (Sharma, Forlin & Loreman, 2008; Forlin & Chambers, 2011). Few experiences have provided PSTs with opportunities to teach an individual with an ID over a substantial period of time. A tutoring program called the Keep on Learning (KoL) Program was developed to provide such an experience and the benefits to PSTs were investigated.

## Method

### *Participants*

The study participants included 38 PSTs (31 female and 7 male students) enrolled in an undergraduate education degree at a university in Melbourne, Australia. All PSTs were enrolled in their first year of a Bachelor of Education degree, where graduates receive a dual qualification to teach in primary (elementary) and secondary schools. As part of this degree, all first-year students are required to complete a fieldwork placement of their choice, encompassing volunteer work in an educational setting outside of schools. Participants chose to be involved in the KoL program to fulfil these requirements.

The study participants also included 18 young adults with a moderate-intellectual disability (7 female and 11 male clients). Clients were supported by Wallara, an established provider of community-based programs for individuals with different abilities. In an interview about their learning goals, clients had indicated that they would like to improve their literacy and/or numeracy skills. Nine clients received tutoring in literacy and nine clients in numeracy. Reading was the focus of literacy tutorials and working with money was the focus of numeracy tutorials.

Literacy and numeracy pre-tests indicated clients to have a range of skills. Most clients tested for numeracy were able to count up to 20 to find the number of objects in a set but few were able to count backwards or skip count by fives and tens. One client had particular trouble

counting teen numbers and another was not able to enumerate small sets. No client was able to arrange three-digit numbers in order of magnitude. Clients were all able to identify Australian coins and notes, but only two clients were able to calculate the value of more than one coin or note. For example, when shown three, five-dollar notes and asked how much money this was altogether, most clients responded with the answer three. Similarly, clients tested for literacy showed a range of skills. Using sections of the Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests (Woodcock, 2011), most clients were able to identify letters of the alphabet. One client was unsure about some letters and another identified few letters correctly. Skills with rhyme production, blending and deleting sounds, and word identification all varied greatly but no client was reading past a grade-one level.

### *Program Description*

In semester 1 of the academic year, PSTs attended six hours of workshops to prepare them for their role as tutor. The structure of the tutoring sessions and the activities used were developed by experienced teacher educators (the authors) but the activities could be modified to differentiate the content (what is learned), the process (how it is learned) and/or the product (what is produced as a result of learning). Tutors were encouraged to differentiate the learning activities to suit their client's abilities and interests, but not alter the specified learning intention of each activity.

In semester 2, the tutoring sessions commenced. Clients travelled to the university campus by bus and were tutored for one hour each week for 10 weeks. The tutoring sessions were held concurrently in separate rooms, where two PSTs worked together with the same client each week. Pre-service teachers had planning time before each session and time after each session to debrief with each other and the teacher educators.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

At the end of semester, PSTs were interviewed about what they had learned from being involved in the Program. Participation in the interview was voluntary and all but one PST agreed to be involved in a recorded interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in four focus groups, with around nine PSTs in each group. Each focus group interview lasted for 60 minutes. Responses were audio recorded and were later transcribed. Data were analysed using constant comparison analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) with open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

## Results

Using open coding, data were coded into nine categories and subsequently organized into four topics. Two themes emerged, differentiating a stage appropriate curriculum and transitioning from student to teacher (see Figures 1a and 1b). Each of the nine categories are briefly described below.

### *Differentiating a Stage-Appropriate Curriculum*

*Increasing motivation.* Pre-service teachers (PSTs) learned the need to be flexible with the pacing of their teaching and spoke about the need to provide breaks and vary tasks, and the importance of positive feedback. They recognised the importance of knowing their clients so they could incorporate the client's interests into their teaching to make learning personally relevant.

*Building rapport.* PSTs found that building rapport could be developed through talking about the client's weekend and genuinely listening to him/her. They recognised that while it was important to develop rapport with their client, boundaries also needed to be established.

*Finding the right level.* PSTs learned that determining the skill entry level for their client was difficult, yet it was vital to discover what s/he could and could not do, to ensure learning took place.

*Promoting understanding.* PSTs discovered the importance of monitoring their client's understanding and being able to make quick decisions regarding accommodations that were needed. They found tasks needed to be explained in a variety of ways.

### *Transitioning from Student to Teacher*

*Having pre-conceived ideas challenged.* PSTs realised that interactions with clients were no different to interactions with other young people. They were surprised at the effort required to sustain the attention of the client and the amount of scaffolding and support that was needed. PSTs had also underestimated the determination of their clients to learn.

*Seeing progress.* PSTs found that although the teaching and learning process was a struggle for both client and tutor at times, over time the client made definite progress. Breakthroughs occurred when clients were able to retain the skills and knowledge from one session to the next. PSTs reported how rewarding teaching was and how this experience had boosted their own confidence.

*Raising awareness of mixed abilities.* PSTs gained an awareness that they will have students in their classes with very diverse needs.

*Insights into teaching children with an ID.* PSTs realised their client had both strengths and weaknesses. They gleaned the importance of not limiting their client's progress by underestimating them, while at the same time they realised that they should not be overly demanding. PSTs learned to be better prepared for emotional outbursts and recognised 'small achievements are good achievements'.

*General insights into teaching.* PSTs determined that teaching involves discovering how students learn and how teaching needs to be adjusted accordingly to meet an individual's needs. They realized the need for organization, planning and flexibility, and remarked on the many on-the-spot decisions needed to be made.

## DISCUSSION

Teachers with experience of including children with an ID often perceive their pre-service training to be insufficient for preparing them to meet the needs of children with an ID within an inclusive classroom (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart, & Eloff, 2003; Forlin, Keen & Barrett, 2008; Sermier Dessemontet, Morin, & Crocker, 2014). This study involved a fieldwork experience for PSTs to help prepare them for teaching children with an ID and an investigation into the benefits of this experience for PSTs. Two key findings were apparent.

First, PSTs developed effective strategies for differentiating a program of work to promote participation and engagement of individuals with an ID. These strategies addressed some of the barriers to learning experienced by individuals with an ID (such as a short attention span) and helped to maintain an active learning environment. Importantly, these strategies were not learned from books but were developed through trial and error, reflection and collaboration. Forlin, et al. (2008) found that collaboration with colleagues was an important coping strategy for inclusive teachers but less than a third of teacher-participants in their study reported doing this. The KoL program allowed PSTs to experience the benefits of collaboration prior to entering the profession.

Second, PSTs transitioned from student to teacher: they were able to build confidence based on positive experiences and gleaned insights into the role of a teacher. Further research is needed to establish if the teacher efficacy developed was sufficiently grounded in practice and is not eroded in the first years of teaching (Hoy & Spero, 2005).

While the KoL program is not unique in terms of providing an opportunity for PSTs to tutor a person with an ID (e.g., Lancaster & Bain, 2010), it is innovative in terms of its design. Three design features of the KoL Program stand out as being essential for producing the learning documented: (i) the tutoring sessions were the same and based on a literacy and numeracy curriculum that was developed by experienced educators, (ii) the activities were designed so they could be differentiated without changing the learning intentions, and (iii) PSTs had the opportunity to collaborate with peers before, during and after the tutoring sessions.

In closing, it is worth noting that the KoL program was designed to benefit clients as much as prepare new teachers. Adults with an ID perceive poor literacy and numeracy to be a barrier to social inclusion (Abbott & Roy, 2006). Practical programs like the KoL program are needed to support the ongoing development of literacy and numeracy skills for individuals with an ID who are beyond formal schooling.

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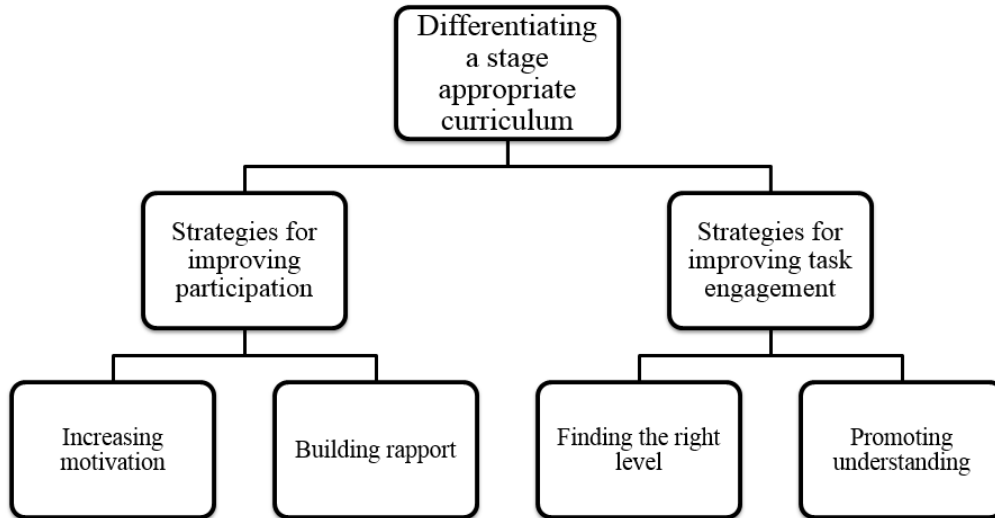


Figure 1a. Data categories associated with differentiating a stage-appropriate curriculum.

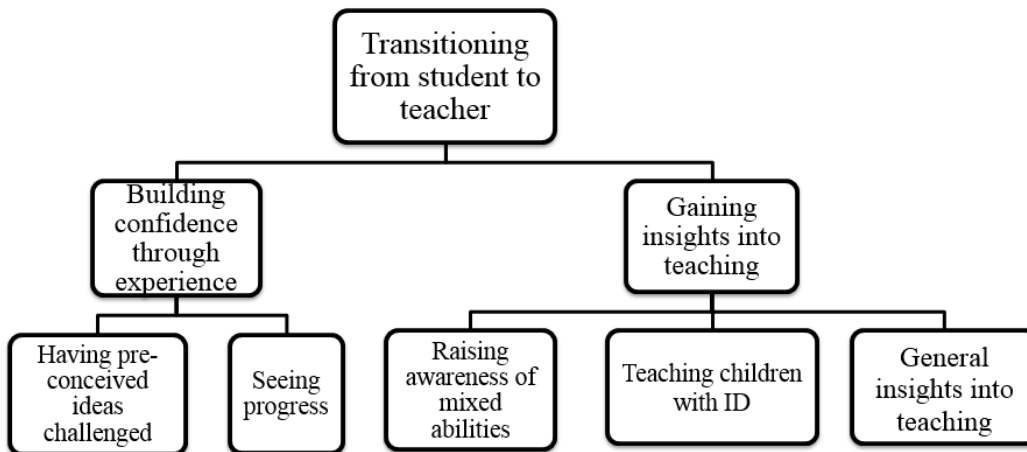


Figure 1b. Data categories associated with transitioning from student to teacher.