



COLLOQUIUM

Teachers' Perceptions of Collaboration and Partnership Regarding Children with Special Educational Needs in a Mexican Bilingual Elementary School

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ABSTRACT Mexico, like many other countries in the world, has subscribed to a UNESCO policy for the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream education. Thus, at least since 1994, public and private mainstream schools have included children with special educational needs. In this study, the authors intend to explore the issues in the Mexican context in order to identify teachers' attitudes, perceptions and concerns about their practice, their preparation and their skills to help children with special educational needs in their classrooms. Among the dimensions the authors are trying to investigate are those opinions and experiences expressed by classroom teachers in relation to the collaboration and support they receive from all the stakeholders in the process of educating children with special needs. The study uses the techniques and procedures of Q methodology since it is seen as a method that is particularly compatible with a social-constructionist research paradigm which allows the participants to express their own opinions and to produce an individual configuration of their own beliefs and attitudes.

Introduction to the Context of the Study

The inclusion of children with special educational needs (for example, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) in mainstream education has brought new challenges for teachers. In this study, we intend to document experiences in Mexico in order to identify teachers' attitudes, perceptions and concerns about their practice, their preparation and their skills to help children with special educational needs in their classrooms. Within the dimensions we are trying to investigate are the opinions and experiences expressed by classroom teachers about the collaboration and support they receive from all the stakeholders in the process of educating children. The questions we are trying to answer include:

- Do teachers feel that they are prepared to help children who have special educational needs?
- Are the educational policies on inclusion being applied in private bilingual schools?
- Are parents, administrators, special education teachers and psychologists collaborating with classroom-based teachers to improve opportunities for the success of children with special educational needs?

Collaboration for Inclusion

The inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms has been a concern since 1974-78 when Warnock (1979) published the first leading article on the report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People in the United Kingdom. Later, UNESCO (1994) established the Salamanca agreement, whereby all the countries signing the document agreed to integrate children into mainstream education in order to help them to become productive adults. There has been debate over whether the first attempt towards integration was based on an economic decision as opposed to a decision made to protect the human rights of children (Diez, 2004). Another debate has centred on the use of the appropriate words by which children are categorised, moving away from terms that might represent a social barrier, like 'handicap' or 'disability', by using terms that represent a more inclusive approach in a move towards greater equality for disabled people (Keil et al, 2006).

The stated purpose of inclusive education has been to improve the quality, usefulness and independence of children. This task is not as easy as it seems. In order to meet the children's needs, it is necessary to have the support of those persons interested in their well-being, such as policy makers, school administrators, teachers, specialists, doctors, psychologists and parents. Since 1979, teaching has been considered a profession that has a great deal to do in order to support the learning of all children. A need for appropriate teacher preparation was identified as one way to help teachers to identify students' needs, adapt the curriculum, have a record of what is working best with students in order to have the opportunity to improve strategies, and sustain good communication with parents (Warnock, 1979; Russell, 2008).

Cooperation among all the participants in inclusive education is regarded as being important for reaching the objective of providing an education that takes into consideration the needs of all children. Collaborative work will give teachers the opportunity to solve problems that might arise in their teaching practice in relation to the appropriate support given to students with special educational needs. Collaboration can provide more inclusive ways of working in mainstream classrooms. Schools that incorporate inclusive practices demand teachers who are aware that improving their teaching practice through continuous reflection is as important as a willingness to work as a member of a team, not as an isolated person (Ainscow, 2001). The key to collaborative work is to become a more efficient and effective team worker in order to achieve the success that inclusive education demands (Villa & Thousand, 2003). Collaboration among teachers will allow students to have the opportunity to find their strengths in their learning process, and collaboration and communication among teachers might give them a wider vision and a more comprehensive repertoire of strategies for dealing with students in their class. Collaboration can also help teachers find out ways in which they can fulfil this special need (Lawrence-Brown, 2004).

The parents of children with special educational needs are an important element in this collaborative group. Teachers need to work with and involve parents and carers in order to find strategies that improve their child's academic achievement in school. Some of the strategies that are proposed in order to increase parental involvement include asking parents to attend courses that give them a greater depth of understanding about their child's special educational needs or to create a notebook, which can be used as a journal, containing both the teacher's and parents' descriptions of the progress made by the child in a specific subject at school (UNESCO, 2001).

In summary, schools that are inclusive require a systematic effort that enables teachers' skills acquisition, planning and organisation, all of which, it is hoped, will make a positive impact in improving the lives of children with special educational needs (Villa & Thousand, 2003).

Methodology

The study reported on here was carried out using Q methodology. The participants who were interviewed using Q methodology were 16 teachers in a bilingual primary school in Monterrey, Mexico.

Q methodology is a method that is used to study subjectivity in a systematic and objective way (McKeown & Thomas, 1988), and it is considered to be a qualitative research method. As a study of subjectivity, it is seen as a method that is particularly compatible with a social-constructionist research paradigm that allows the participants to express their own opinions,

producing an individual configuration of their own beliefs and attitudes (Watts & Stenner, 2005). In many ways, what Q methodology does is use quantitative techniques (factor analysis and correlations) and present them with a qualitative view (interpretation of factors).

In Q methodology, the subjects participating in an interview are asked to agree or disagree with a collection of Q statements about the topic being researched. These opinions are normally written on cards, which are placed on a table under a scale. The collection of the Q statements, which comes from among all the members in the community and from the literature available on the topic, helps to display many viewpoints. Q methodology interviews help the participants to express their own opinions based on the opinions written on the cards. The Q set in this study consisted of a total of 60 Q statements. The teachers were asked to rank the Q statements so that their unique personal configuration reflected their own opinions. When ranking these opinions under the scale, the participants expressed their agreement or disagreement with all the viewpoints expressed in the Q set. The scores given to each Q statement were recorded for further analysis. Each participant produced a different Q sort because each gave different ranks to the Q statements. All the personal configurations were then statistically analysed. The results are shown in the following section.

Results

The scores in this study were factor-analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Through this statistical process the results show how participants form groups (also known as ‘factors’ or ‘components’) based on how similar or different their opinions are. Those with similar opinions cluster together within a factor. These clusters are evident in strong correlation coefficients, shown in italics in Table 1. A correlation coefficient is statistically significant if greater than 0.333. Those in one factor or component think differently to participants in other factors. Table I shows the results in this study producing four factors.

Participants	Components			
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
P7	<i>0.706</i>	0.452		
P5	<i>0.670</i>	0.346		
P1	<i>0.660</i>		0.254	0.209
P14	<i>0.652</i>	0.192	0.122	0.366
P11	<i>0.637</i>	0.389		0.186
P9	<i>0.598</i>	0.213	0.156	0.321
P8	<i>0.588</i>		0.432	-0.153
P15	<i>0.555</i>	0.355	0.178	0.490
P6	0.249	<i>0.724</i>		0.218
P2	0.246	<i>0.720</i>		
P3	0.153	<i>0.567</i>	0.248	
P10		0.252	<i>0.730</i>	-0.103
P4			<i>0.668</i>	0.437
P16	0.298		<i>0.653</i>	0.207
P13	0.280			<i>0.745</i>
P12	-0.120	0.433	0.419	<i>0.552</i>

Extraction method: principal component analysis

Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalisation

Table I. Rotated component matrix (rotation converged in nine iterations).

Once it has been identified how teachers cluster together in groups of similar beliefs, it is possible to know how they are thinking if we take a closer look at the Q statements with which they were interacting and that are of interest in this article.

The correlations scored by the teachers in Components 1-4 show their different approaches and beliefs. A negative sign means the teachers demonstrated disagreement with the Q statement. In general terms, 0.8 or -0.8 is considered a strong correlation. Those Q statements which are

scored with less than 0.8 or -0.8 mean that teachers were either showing a more neutral stance on the issue or were not sure (as in 'I don't know').

In this study, the collection of Q statements included 60 Q statements with reference to eight dimensions: the policies on inclusion; learning problems versus permanent disability; teacher preparation; teacher awareness; teacher stress; support for teachers; the syllabus; and bilingual classroom teaching strategies. In this article, the focus is on the dimension that is related to *support for teachers*, which includes views on collaborations and partnerships, and trying to understand the ways in which practitioners engage with children, as well as seeking information about the type of support practitioners receive from other stakeholders. Analysing this helps to explain how support, or lack of it, might affect the lives of children with special educational needs in a bilingual primary school context.

The responses of the teachers to the Q statements presented in the dimension of support for teachers (Q38 to Q41) and two other Q statements (Q6 and Q11) provide some details about such support, and are also related to collaborations and partnerships. The Q statements discussed here are:

Q6. Bilingual schools in the private education sector work within an interdisciplinary network of medical doctors, psychologists, parents, teachers and school staff to support the development of children with special educational needs.

Q11. Parents of children with special educational needs are included in the planning of the best educational strategies for the development of their children in the mainstream classroom (Mexican Ministry of Education, 2007).

Q38. Collaborative work among teachers is crucial to understanding the needs of children with special educational needs (Villa & Thousand, 2003).

Q39. Collaborative work among teachers and specialists does not work due to personality conflict (Williamson, 2006).

Q40. Teachers have the support of teaching assistants who attend to the physical and academic needs of children with special educational needs (Logan, 2006).

Q41. The traditional school cultures have serious problems when faced with unexpected circumstances such as the presence of children with special educational needs (Ainscow, 2001).

Table II shows the correlations resulting from the scoring.

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Q6	-0.85229	-0.64293	-0.30270	1.00921
Q11	-1.04136	-1.67912	1.69985	2.47245
Q38	1.76596	-0.40115	0.23451	1.02915
Q39	0.16626	0.24070	-1.28335	-2.48884
Q40	-1.57187	-0.39689	0.26271	-0.35498
Q41	0.30172	0.61138	-0.31299	-0.39860

Table II. Factor correlations to Q statements Q6, Q11, Q38, Q39, Q40 and Q41.

In relation to Q6, teachers' responses in Factors 1, 2 and 3 seem to show that teachers have not seen a coordinated effort among professionals to support the development of children who have special educational needs. Factors 2 and 3 do not feel too strongly about it, while Factor 1 is definitely convinced that collaboration does not happen. On the other hand, Factor 4, with a correlation of 1.00, does express that there is support and collaboration. With regard to Q11, Factors 1 and 2 admit that there is no collaboration with parents to agree on the best teaching strategies for their children, while Factors 3 and 4 seem to have had such interaction with parents.

The correlations to Q38 seem to show that Factors 1 and 4 consider collaboration among teachers as crucial for the support of children with special educational needs, while Factors 2 and 3 do not seem to believe that collaborating with other teachers would help. In relation to Q39, Factor 1 seems to believe that collaboration does not run smoothly due to disagreements between teachers and specialists in relation to the types of strategies and techniques that work best for the child, while Factors 3 and 4 do not believe that collaboration is failing. Factor 2 seems to be more neutral on this issue. With regard to Q40, three of the components (1, 2, and 4) seem to agree that teachers

do not have the support of Special Education Assistants in the school context. Factor 2 has a neutral opinion. The correlations to Q41 seem to show that teachers in every component have a very neutral stance on this matter. It seems that teachers are unfazed by the presence of children with special educational needs in their classrooms.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study seems to show that teachers in the Mexican context are yet to discover the full benefits of collaboration that promotes and benefits inclusive education. The responses of the teachers do not always align because they have had different personal and professional experiences. Some schools would have had a more supportive approach towards inclusion, while other schools in their experiences would not have offered the possibility for collaboration or inclusive practices.

Many of the responses seem to show that bilingual primary schools within the private sector in the Mexican context lack a systematic collaborative effort to support teachers in their work with children with special needs. This study seems to show that teachers welcome students with special educational needs in their classroom, despite receiving little or no help from specialists, psychologists, parents, assistants or administrators. There seems to be a positive attitude from the teachers towards including the children, with teachers being supportive of the idea of having them in their classes. On the other hand, more training and preparation is needed in order to do a better and more informed job of improving the lives of special needs children. Teachers need to change their assumptions in order to understand that asking for help or advice from colleagues is not a sign of weakness or failure.

Every school year, teachers do their best to help students achieve their academic goals, but without the collaboration of specialists, administrators and parents, inclusive education in this context seems to be at risk. Policy makers, district superintendents, school directors and administrators should understand that inclusive education implies far more than just welcoming students who have special needs into the mainstream classroom. For inclusion to be successful, a more consistent array of services should be available for students, as well as for teachers and parents. A platform should be established to include all participants – for example, medical doctors, specialists, psychologists, administrators, parents, teachers and special needs assistants. Failing to provide this platform will put children at risk, since a classroom teacher may not solve the problem on an individual basis.

This research project was carried out by an educator in a public university and a practitioner in a bilingual primary school in Monterrey, Mexico. At least here we are seeing the beginnings of collaboration in order to try to understand the problem.

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