

**Relationships with special needs students: Exploring primary teachers'  
descriptions.**

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Positive teacher-student relationships play an established role in the developmental outcomes of students. Ongoing research suggests that positive teacher-student relationships may be particularly beneficial for students with special educational needs (Baker, 2006; Hughes & Cavell, 2003). However, particular learning and behavioural characteristics are known to pose certain challenges when developing these relationships. For instance, teachers may have difficulty forming close relationships with students who behave in a hostile way. Likewise, they might feel stressed with students who take longer to learn material (Baker 2006; Yoon 2002). The present study conducted a focus group with six mainstream teachers from a primary school in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne to investigate the following questions: i) How do primary school teachers describe their relationships with special needs students? ii) Are these descriptions substantively different from the way in which relationships with non-special needs students are described? And iii) What, if any, are teachers' reported concerns with inclusive education practice? Thematic Analysis provided three primary themes and nine secondary themes indicating that in the context of inclusive practices, the quality of teacher student relationships is affected by a combination of psychosocial factors. In concurrence with previous literature, the use of qualitative methodology was considered optimal for exploring teachers' descriptions.

Key words: special needs, inclusive education, teacher student relationships

## **Introduction**

The Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood

Development identifies inclusive education practice as recognition of diversity within the classroom, and accommodating to the individual needs of students. Diversity in this context refers to various needs represented in the classroom. These needs include but are not limited to physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, social and emotional behavioural disturbances and other behavioural and learning challenges (DEECD, n.d.; Michail, 2011; National Council of Special Education, 2012). The Department states that an inclusive school is '...driven by the moral belief that all students can learn, uses a range of specialist personnel to assist students, encourages and supports education staff's personal and professional effectiveness, provides programs that target and incorporate students' needs and interests and forges strong alliances between colleagues and with the wider community" (p 4). Unlike previous education practices, such as segregation, where students with special needs are excluded from mainstream schools or integration, where students with special needs are expected to change so they could "fit in" with mainstream students, inclusive practices suggest the school must change to accommodate its students (Harman, 2009).

Despite calls to expand inclusive education practice, debate continues to surround its application. For instance, critics suggest inclusive practices can place an overwhelming strain on teachers (Low, 1997), subsequently disadvantaging special needs students' relationships with them (Soodak, Podell, & Lehman, 1998). This is alarming given the recognised benefit of positive teacher-student relationships (Pianta, 1999) and the increasing numbers of special needs students attending

mainstream schools (Forlin, 2001). Further, valued teacher- student relationships are seen to develop from a variety of processes, including high achievement and student engagement (Carreno & Avila, 2005). However, learning and behavioural disorders can manifest to impede attainment of the kinds of educational and relational dynamics associated with inclusive practices (Yoon, 2002).

As a Learning Support Officer (formally known in the DEECD as an Integration Aide) employed to assist children with special educational needs, the first author is familiar with the unique context of inclusive education. Unlike segregated classrooms, inclusive teaching practices engage with a range of students' needs and varying levels of severity within categories of need. Unlike integrated classrooms, teachers are expected to tailor their teaching programs to the needs of all students. Given the range and severity of needs represented in inclusive classrooms this context can be seen as particularly demanding (MacBeath, Galton, Steward, MacBeath & Page, 2006; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996).

Tacitly, from engaging in this work it seemed as though teachers support a range of views regarding inclusive teaching and learning practice. Teacher-student relationships are complex and intricate and as such it has been suggested these may be best understood qualitatively (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). So, in the study presented here, six mainstream primary teachers from a primary school in the Western suburbs of Melbourne participated in a focus group discussion. The group explored the following questions: i) How do teachers describe their relationships with special needs students? ii) Are their relationships described as being substantively different from relationships shared with non-special needs students? and iii) What, if any, are

teachers' concerns with inclusive education practices? The findings of the research are relevant to primary school teachers, special needs coordinators and school principals interested in understanding and improving learning conditions for students with special needs. Having outlined the study, a background of inclusive education practices will now be provided.

### ***Teacher- student Relationships & Inclusive Education***

In Australia, movement toward inclusion is supported by the *Disability Discrimination Act* (1992) and the *Disability Standards for Education* (2005). This Federal legislation and policy focuses on the rights of students with a disability to access and participate in education without discrimination. Students with disabilities also have a right to reasonable accommodations or adjustments being made for them within educational settings. Some of these adjustments include: modifications to curriculum; employment of Learning Support Officers (LSOs) providing individual assistance; and improved professional development for teachers specific to the needs of students with special needs. Past research has indicated that inservice training in special educational needs is vital for improving the attitudes and emotional reactions of teachers working with special needs students (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). However, despite provisions created by legislators and policy makers, practicing inclusive education continues to pose challenges for mainstream teachers (MacBeath, et al. 2006).

International research identifies teacher-student relationships as central to positive experiences at school, especially for students with special needs. Yet, limited attention has been given to exploring teachers' accounts of such relationships beyond

attitudinal questionnaires (Avramidis and Norwich 2002). Two recent exceptions are noteworthy.

Shevlin, Winter and Flynn (2012) conducted an exploratory study which investigated teacher perceptions of the inclusive education practices in the Republic of Ireland. A sample of 24 school staff members, including principals, teachers and support staff who taught in mainstream schools were involved. In Ireland, inclusive educational practices are conceptualised as upholding the rights of children to have access to appropriate education and the provision of equitable resources for children and young people who are disadvantaged or have special educational needs. Legislation, including the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (National Disability Authority, 2004) backs these views by recommending substantial allocation of educational resources and guidance regarding special educational needs testing.

Shevlin, et al. (2012) used semi-structured interviews and found that most of their participants generally supported the principle of inclusion and recognised the importance of acknowledging and accommodating varying learning needs. However, the discussion revealed that some teachers were resistant to the ethos of inclusivity and felt the responsibility of 'weaker' students belonged to the special needs team. It was typically older teachers who shared these views and it was attributed to resistance to changing perceptions regarding education practices.

Similar to other research, the type and severity of needs represented in the classroom caused concern for teachers (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Shevlin et al. (2012) found that teachers in mainstream classes had difficulty teaching students with Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD). Participants admitted that the

main reason for student segregation was unmanageable behaviour and disruption. Participants struggled with upholding their personal and school beliefs regarding inclusive practices and providing a safe and productive classroom environment for their other students. The study identified that teachers felt inadequately trained and had limited time for planning and peer consultation. The interviewees specifically described the teacher's role as central to the success of inclusive education, and emphasised the importance of teachers' responsiveness to students' learning styles. The interviewees of this study strongly endorsed professional learning and expressed a strong interest in further training and skill development regarding inclusive teaching.

In a second example, Goodman and Burton (2010) conducted a small-scale study with a sample of eight secondary school teachers and one primary school teacher from four regions of England. In England, inclusive education practices are conceptualised as providing education free of discrimination. This means education providers have a legal and moral obligation to ensure every student has the same access to education, including students from an ethnic minority or race, and those with special educational needs. Likewise, government bodies have an obligation to provide educators with specialist training to ensure they are equipped to handle the diverse needs represented in the classroom (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2013)

Goodman and Burton (2010) used semi-structured interviews to investigate participants' experiences and approaches to including students with BESD in mainstream education. The analysis suggested that although school communities endorsed inclusivity, teachers felt inadequately prepared to teach students with BESD.

In particular, the teachers reported that schools vary in their interpretations of inclusive policy and that these inconsistencies caused teachers' confusion. The study reported that some schools were fully inclusive, whereby BESD students were part of their mainstream classes full time. Other schools employed a more segregated approach, whereby BESD students spent the majority of their school day in Learning Support Units, which were located away from the main school building. The BESD students at these schools rarely interacted with teachers and students of the mainstream population. Accordingly, the teachers had to restructure their teaching methods as they moved between partially inclusive classes and fully segregated classrooms. The level of support and training available to teachers of special needs students also varied greatly across schools

Goodman and Burton (2010) also found that the teachers overall disagreed with the withdrawal of students. Teachers reported strong support for forming positive relationships with students with BESD and therefore considered the withdrawal of students to be counterproductive. Further to this, the interviewees spoke about the importance of supportive and collaborative relationships. The teachers claimed that they made efforts to find out about their students with special needs, and used student interests to motivate and engage them. By forming close relationships with their students, they were also able to use 'collaborative' approaches when dealing with challenging behaviour. The interviews revealed that the teachers assist each other when dealing with the challenges of inclusive practices, such as when responding to interpretations of policy and challenging student behaviour. For example, the *Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Disability Act* stated that students with special needs should have access to the same quality of education as students without special



learning needs, but have reasonable adjustments made (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2001). The teachers used each other to determine what this means in terms of lesson preparation and which adjustments were most appropriate. The teachers reportedly benefited most from peer collaboration, including peer observations and group discussions.

The studies cited above are relevant as they represent a divergent approach to researching the topic of teacher-students relationships and inclusive education (cf. Lawson, Parker and Sikes [2006] as another exception). In a review of the literature, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) critique the narrow application of surveys and questionnaires in the area suggesting that such methods leave implicit a range of meanings available to teachers' interpretations (e.g. around the use of labels to categorise students) and that the impersonal nature of pencil and paper questionnaires might allow respondents to return socially desirable responses, especially as these pertain to issues of inclusion and diversity. Whilst it can be acknowledged that focus groups have been part of mixed methods studies exploring inclusive practices, the current research joins the previously cited literature dedicated to qualitative explorations of teachers' descriptions.

## **Methodology**

As noted in the previous section, the quality of teacher-student relationships can be related to a range of connected factors, such as existing preconceptions of good relationships, the work ethic and behavioural presentations of students and level of training and support offered in the classroom. The present study purposively employed a qualitative methodology using a semi-structured focus group discussion

to maintain focus on meanings created by/in the teacher's descriptions. Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to examine the three primary questions: i) How do primary school teachers describe their relationships with special needs students? ii) Are their relationships described differently from relationships shared with non-special needs students? and iii) What, if any, are teachers' concerns with inclusive education practice? Of particular concern was for the research to create dialogic space in which teachers could elaborate from these questions to generously describe their experience of teacher-student relationships.

### ***Participants & Recruitment***

Six mainstream teachers were recruited from one primary school in the western suburbs of Melbourne. The study used convenience sampling selecting this school site because of its availability to the project in meeting the necessary topic requirements (Willig, 2008). The sample represented approximately 47% of the classroom teaching staff at the school. The school caters to an enrolment of approximately 275 students. There are approximately 26 children who receive funding under the Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs (LNSLN) program, a program assisting non-government schools to improve the learning outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students (Catholic Education Office Melbourne, 2012).

There is an average of four funded or special needs students in each class. The funded students most commonly present with: Severe Language Delay, which is when a child's language is developing in the right sequence, but at a slower rate (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2013); Autism, which is a pervasive

developmental disorder that affects social communication, social interaction and is characterised by restricted or repetitive behaviours and interests (Autism Spectrum Australia, 2013) and mild Intellectual Disability, which is an impaired cognitive ability characterised by an IQ score falling between 55 and 70 (Westwood, 2009).

Information sheets were delivered to the pigeonholes of staff at the school outlining the scope of the study. Criteria for participation included a current or past teaching responsibility for a student with special needs. Staff members who were interested in participating were asked to email the second author who then referred potential participants onto the first author. Opportunity was made for participants to raise questions regarding the research aims and design of the research activity (e.g. that it was going to be a semi-structured focus group interview; that the focus group would be digitally recorded; etc.).

The most experienced teacher in the group had been teaching for six years. At least one teacher from each year level was represented in the group. The following pseudonyms were used: Grade prep/1 teacher, Jackie, 29; Grade prep/1 teacher, Kelly, 30; Grade 1/2 teacher, Michelle, 34; Grade 1/2 teacher; Deena, 27; Grade 3/4 teacher, Tania, 23; Grade 5/6 teacher, Gloria, 28. A small sample size was appropriate for the present study as the study was able to maintain a close association with the respondents, enabling more in depth and personal understanding of the participants' experiences (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

The necessary ethical guidelines were followed; these included voluntary participation and obtained informed consent. Prior to convening the focus group, all

participants gave written consent to be recorded and for publication of the results given confidentiality and anonymity standards were assured throughout the research project. Following the focus group, participants were given the opportunity to comment on the transcript, to clarify or correct any personally attributed statements. The research proposal was overseen and approved by the Victoria University Human Research and Ethics Committee and regional education offices.

Relational power was a factor considered in the research design (Barbour, 2007). It was determined that relational power would not be an issue as the first author was a colleague of the participants and not in a position of authority. The study may be considered insider research given the first author's relationship with the participants and employment at the primary school. Hockey (1993) maintains that insiders are able to blend into situations, making them less likely to deleteriously affect the research setting. Insiders also can have a better initial understanding of the social setting because of their intimate knowledge of the research context. Additionally, since relationships with the participants were already in place, much of the rapport building work had already been done.

### ***Design***

A focus group discussion was employed so that a range of responses would arise through participant interaction. A particular strength of the focus group is that it encourages participants to respond and comment on each other's contributions. In this way, statements can be challenged, extended and further developed (Willig, 2008). The focus group discussion was digitally recorded and transcribed using an adapted version of the Jeffersonian model (cf. Potter & Hepburn, 2005).

Thematic Analysis was used to analyse participant responses. Meaningful themes, which represented recurring descriptions, were identified across the transcripts. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that Thematic Analysis is like other qualitative data analysis methods and can be applied both inductively in a ‘bottom up’, data driven way and/or theoretically, in a ‘top down’ approach, where the researcher is looking to explore specific theoretical interests. In this study, participant responses were analysed bi-directionally involving several coding phases to provide primary topics and secondary themes.

### **Teachers’ responses**

An analysis of the focus group discussion revealed three primary topics: ‘Building and Maintaining Relationships’, ‘Balancing Act’ and ‘Professional Identity’ and nine secondary themes. These will be addressed in turn.

#### ***Building and Maintaining Relationships***

This topic refers to the efforts and behaviours teachers engaged in when building and maintaining relationships with students. This topic has two secondary themes: (i) the responsibility teachers feel they have for building relationships with special needs students, and (ii) providing students with relationship building tools so that they can develop positive relationships with other people.

### *Teachers' relationships with special needs students*

The term 'loco parentis' is used to describe the kind of temporary guardianship teachers have whilst a child is at school (Power-deFur & Orelove, 1997). Prep teacher, Kelly described an aspect of this understanding as she stated: 'I think they become quite attached to you. They put a lot of trust in you to look after them' (line 446). Furthermore, when forming relationships with students, the participants emphasised the importance of mutual trust. This referred to teachers not only maintaining their students' trust but also placing trust in their students to behave and follow through on what is expected of them in the classroom. When the participants were asked to describe a positive relationship with their students, Kelly said "...very trusting... I'd ask (them) to do a special job because I know they'll do it properly" (Line 43). Deena said, "I think trust's a big thing...I've noticed they've (two particular special needs students) come to trust me a lot more and have become a lot more open with me" (Line 85). One particular way they form these trusting relationships with students with special needs is by forming unique personal bonds, as Jackie explained:

I think you know just having your own personal relationship. You have that with every student but you sort of like to not make it generic across all students...Daniel had a particular sense of humour. You have to try and work that with you, using that to build your relationship, so that he feels comfortable with you and he feels safe to be himself. (Lines 54-60)

Similarly to Goodman and Burton (2010), the teachers of this study stated that the best way to form a close relationship with a student was to get to know them individually. Some familiarisation strategies included finding out about their background (culture, family, friends) and their interests, and by simply spending individual time with them. Deena highlighted this:

... It makes them feel like... you know you're not just my teacher. You're not here just so that I can learn, you're here to help me learn but you're actually here because you like me. You actually care about me. (Line 41)

These kinds of relationships have significant advantages, particularly for students who have special needs. Forming close relationships allows teachers to become more attuned with the nuances of particular needs that then help to build capacity in the successful prevention and intervention of challenging behaviours. The following statement by Tania stressed this. The student in question has a number of difficulties with learning, and he also exhibits extreme behavioural outbursts, which exacerbate his learning difficulties.

I think that having a positive relationship with him calmed him because he can come to me and tell me his problems...I know when he's going to have outbursts... and how to calm him down. I think having that relationship, I don't spur him on or make him angrier. (Lines 31-36)

### *Students' relationships with others*

The teachers emphasised the importance of creating an atmosphere that accommodates diverse educational needs. One of the ways they achieve this is by shifting classroom focus, which Gloria called 'valuing'. She stated,

‘...Jenny, for example, she is excellent with her art, so valuing what people are really good at, as opposed to focussing on what they can't do. But also, recognising that you can't be good at everything’ (Lines 283 and 285).

This in turn helps promote favourable peer relationships. For instance, Michelle said, ‘...there are some (children) that are really caring and helpful and others that get a bit impatient’. Gloria responded to Michelle saying: ‘We just have to talk about accepting each other, just bringing it back to look, how would you feel if someone said that to you about your weakness?’ (Lines 262-268).

Teachers also monitor students' relationships with their families. Kelly shared an instance where she felt a student's parent had difficulty understanding the specifics of his child's learning abilities and therefore the limitations of how his child could learn. She said:

I had a child who we started to flag for having learning delays... and (his) Dad just decided that he was going to do two hours of homework a night with that child. I think that any child who has to spend 6 hours in class and then goes home and does 2 hours of work at night is going to be exhausted (lines 334-342)



One result of the father setting unrealistic homework expectations for the child was that the child's whole demeanour at school was affected. Kelly discussed the implications of this for the child:

... His whole demeanour [was affected]... You know not doing anything one on one. He didn't like working in small groups. He didn't like being put in small groups with the Teacher's Aide. He just wanted to blend into the furniture. (Lines 344-349)

Having personally worked with this particular student, the first author suggests that the student may have felt stressed by the amount of homework he was completing and perhaps disempowered by the complexity of the work. This could have had a 'carry-on effect', which may have affected his demeanour when at school. However, given that the first author didn't question Kelly further, the exact meaning of why the student felt this way cannot be determined.

### ***Balancing Act***

The teachers faced several challenges in attempting to maintain an ethos of equality and attend to the realities of inclusivity. Although the teachers spoke about valuing diversity and students' rights to education, they expressed several concerns about how these principles play out in practice. This topic has three secondary themes: (i) importance of equality, (ii) distribution of time and attention and (iii) logistics of inclusion.

### *Equality*

The teachers reportedly strived to create classrooms that met the needs of all their students. The term “equality” seemed to correspond with teachers’ notions of relational consistency. Michelle highlighted this: ‘just being consistent in everything that you do, so across all students, being fair and equal. Also, being consistent so, that they know what to expect, and you also know what to expect from them’ (lines 47 and 48). Tania spoke about consistency in another way. She stated:

...Yeah, we do that across the school though, which is good because I think it’s really important that we have that discussion... you know we’ve talked about that there are different needs in the classroom and yeah, just accepting that. (Lines 271-273)

This collective discussion was said to involve all members of the school community, particularly the students. The other teachers agreed that their classes were generally accepting of their students with special needs. Such understanding corresponds with Robertson et al. (2003) who found that students’ attitudes toward classmates with special needs often reflect the views of their teacher and other educational professionals. However, it differs from Willis (2009) who suggested that children who have special educational needs experience relational challenges with their peers. It is likely that this attitudinal difference could be the result of an increased effort by particular schools and communities to promote more positive representations and inclusive environments for people living with special needs (Munyi, 2012).

## *Time*

Previous research has identified concern over mainstream teachers' abilities to distribute their time and attention evenly across their class. For example, students' varying needs and associated levels of severity have posed considerable worry for both teachers and parents (Low, 1997). Although the teachers in this study strived to uphold the school ethos and their personal beliefs regarding equality, they too were concerned over how they used their time.

The discussion regarding teachers' use of time highlights three concerns. Firstly, teachers approach their students who have special needs differently. Gloria highlighted this saying: 'I feel like I'm more intuitive to the needs of the special needs kids' (lines 125-126). Kelly also shared: '...they (special needs students) definitely need you (your assistance) more than the other children (non- special needs students), so I know personally, I have to spend more time with those (special needs) students than with the other students (so) it's hard... to say that you spend equal time with all your students, when you have students who need you more' (lines 146-147).

Secondly, given the extent of needs represented in the classrooms, distinction between students seems to be an unavoidable aspect of inclusion. Tania elaborated: '...it's because you *have* to pay more attention. You don't really have the same issues with the other kids' (lines 141-142). Lastly, despite this seemingly unavoidable and realistic component of inclusion, some teachers worry that their use of time may negatively impact their students. Jackie said: 'You don't want to devote all your time to the lower kids as well, because then you feel like you're going to neglect the other kids' (lines 190-191). We will return to this statement below.

### *Logistics*

For many schools, accommodating the logistics of inclusive classrooms is the biggest obstacle to success (UNESCO, 1994). Similar to previous studies, these teachers struggled with the tension between accommodating the special needs of some students and disadvantaging other students. As previous studies have indicated some educators and parents may feel that it is unfair to other students to devote extra time and attention to students with special needs (Konza, 2008; Lavoie 1989). Like other studies, these teachers felt this issue went hand in hand with the number of special needs students represented in classrooms (Konza, 2008).

However, it was apparent that teachers who had more assistance in the classroom felt less strongly about the number of special needs students represented.

This point led to discussion regarding the distribution of Learning Support Officers amongst the classes. As mentioned above, LSOs are employed by the school to provide individual assistance to students who receive government funding for their learning needs. There are currently eight LSOs employed at the primary school.

However, some teachers felt that the LSOs' time was distributed impractically, with multiple LSOs working in one classroom on varying days and at varying times.

Deena suggested that:

...I think we need the time talk through what we can be doing in the classroom... That's what happened at my old school, we had some time where we could sit with our Aides (LSOs) and the Special Needs Coordinator... It just ran more smoothly I think. (Lines 560-564)

Deena reflects the challenge highlighted by Goodman and Burton (2010) that schools vary in their interpretation of inclusion. The discussion also touched on the debate concerning how much assistance should be provided to students with special needs (Low, 1997). In terms of ‘pulling’ these students out of class, the following comments were made: ‘I had one Learning Support Officer... she would take the [special needs] kids out for support. It was probably too much taking out of the classroom. So you probably need a good balance’ (Deena, lines 484-485). Gloria also noted: ‘We try to encourage the Learning Support Officer to work with kids inside the classroom as well because we don’t want the kids taken out all the time’ (lines 496).

### ***Professional Identity***

This topic considered the professional identity of teachers. Kerr, Von Glinow and Schriesheim (1977) suggest that becoming a teacher occurs on two levels, socially and psychologically. The first point refers to formal training and qualifications, while the second refers to a ‘sense of calling’ (Brott & Kajs, 2001) or teaching being an ontological enterprise (Corcoran & Finney, in press). This second, psychological component concerns how teachers view themselves in regards to their work and is known as one’s ‘professional identity’ (Brott & Kajs, 2001). This topic encompassed two secondary themes: (i) teaching and pedagogy and (ii) continuous development of professional identity.

### ***Teaching & Pedagogy***

The traditional role of the teacher was to control the learning environment (Novak, 1998). This style is strongly opposed by contemporary student-centred models for learning. Current pedagogy creates a hands-on learning environment, where students

actively work together to achieve common goals and take responsibility for their own learning (Brew, 2003). For example, Inquiry Based Learning (IBL) is a contemporary approach to learning where the teacher sets up various activities connected to the curriculum (Crick, 2009). The students then choose what activities or topics they would like to ‘investigate’. Kelly discussed the use of an inquiry approach in her classroom:

I think having investigation time is really important. It’s really helped to find out where different students are... When I get to work one on one with students... I get to see so many aspects of their learning. (Line 108)

Similarly, Tania spoke about working on pedagogy with maths school advisors from the Regional Education Office. Tania spoke about how the teachers at the school try to ensure all activities are inclusive. She said, ‘...rather than ok, you’re really low, you can sit down here and you’re a bit smarter, you go there. Everyone does the same thing’ (Line 171). By having the same activity for all children, teachers are able to provide additional support to students positioned across developmental benchmarks. From this discussion, it appears that inclusive pedagogy at this particular school centres on a collaboration between special needs and non-special needs students. The teachers may then look for teaching opportunities to target specific needs. For example, Deena shared an instance, where her twin students were believed to have selective mutism. After a term of group work with these twin students and other students with varying needs, the twins were more vocal and social. Deena stated, ‘I think (it’s) a good example of where it worked; you know the...mixing of abilities. Toward the end they (twin students) actually became the teachers’ (Lines 501-503).

### *Continuous Development of Professional Identity*

A teacher's professional identity continues to develop over their career (Brott & Kajs, 2001). Two particularly important determinants mentioned in the discussion were "workplace alliance" and "ongoing training".

Like the interviewees in Goodman and Burton (2010), the focus group suggested that collegial support was a strength of the primary school. The teachers relied on each other for help with lesson planning, delivering curriculum and also for building relationships with students. In particular, helping each other to deal with the nuances of learning needs and for overcoming particular challenges with students.

Tania: Like, I always go into Sue's class and she always gives me help.

Gloria: Yeah and I go into Matt's class and ask about his past students.

Tania: It's not very formal but there's always help if you ask. (Lines 511-514)

The participants also expressed an agreed need to further develop their skills as inclusive educators. This is unsurprising given the most experienced teacher of the group had only been teaching six years and a positive professional identity can take a substantial amount of time to develop (Brott & Kajs, 2001). Amongst these professional development needs, teachers seemed particularly interested in knowing how to better work with students with particular learning challenges. Currently, it seems that the teachers manage the nuances of special educational needs through close interaction with their special needs students and by accommodating to a range of learning styles.

Learning style can be considered to an individual's way of processing new information referring to the different approaches individuals take to learning (Carter, Bishop, & Kravits, 2006). Although there are many models that attempt to describe the different styles of learning, the teachers in this study did not explicitly refer to one particular model. Rather, it appears that they attempt to engage students through a variety of means providing a range of materials to target different interests. As Kelly explained earlier, when students engage in 'investigation time', teachers are able to observe how students learn and what style of learning is most appropriate to them. They can then use this information to manage particular student's behaviour during difficult and lengthy lessons.

As mentioned previously, Tania's close relationship with a particular student helped her deal with his behavioural outburst. However, there are students with special needs who the teachers suggest are particularly difficult to form close relationships with. In these instances, a formal training process would reportedly be more beneficial. For example, professional development seminars on inclusive practices, student engagement and the use of LSOs (Tania, line 547). The teachers also saw merit in providing Learning Support Officers with training about how they teach the programs being used.

### **Summary**

The analysis suggests that in the context of inclusive education, the quality of teacher student relationships is affected by a combination of psychosocial factors. These factors will now be tracked to the study's three primary questions.



The first question asked: How do teachers describe their relationships with students with special needs? The teachers described these relationships as both rewarding and challenging. Topic two, which referred to the challenges teachers face when trying to maintain an ethos of equality whilst attending to the realities of inclusivity, revealed that overcoming the challenges in forming positive relationships with these students appears to offer teachers a greater sense of gratification. Given reports that the teachers in this study work hard to overcome relationship challenges associated with learning needs (e.g. social withdrawal and fear of answering questions), the success they eventually experience appears to be highly rewarding (e.g. when students interact with teachers and peers positively). As Kelly, put it, "...It's hard work but enjoyable... because you can see their progress... students with a difficulty... it's like even small achievements are really big..." (Line 126).

Attachment Theory may offer further insight about this finding. Attachment Theory sees human biological and psychological requirements around emotional security being gained through affectionate bonds shared between individuals and attachment figures, for example, those experienced in altruistic caregiver and child relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Research has determined that teachers can fulfil the role of an attachment figure, particularly during the early years of schooling (Howes, 1999). Working in line with this understanding, Nias (1996) suggested that both students and teachers emotionally invest in each other and when teachers' "investments" pay off, i.e. the student succeeds, teachers can experience a heightened sense of personal reward (Howes, 1999).

This finding is further elaborated by topic one, which referred to the efforts and behaviours teachers engage in when building and maintaining relationships with students. The topic supports existing claims that these students may experience challenges in their relationships with family and peers (Willis, 2000) and highlights the teachers' awareness of potential relationship difficulties associated with learning needs. As was stated, they actively build relationships with these students, and assist them to build relationships with other people. In this way, they try to provide alternative relationships that may supplement less beneficial dynamics. As Waddington (1957) suggested, influential adults (other than children's parents e.g. teachers) can help children to create positive experiences by providing 'positive developmental pathways'. Likewise, they can also help students to reconsider prior negative experiences with adults.

The second question - Are these relationships described differently from relationships shared with non-special needs students? - may also be answered using topics one and two. Yoon (2002) indicated that relationships are built on various preconceptions and expectations of the parties involved. In this instance, teachers in this study spoke about the importance of mutual trust and relational consistency. As the analysis established, the manifestation of particular learning and behavioural challenges may impede fulfilment of these expectations. For example, consistent behaviour and academic performance may be impacted upon by the way the student presents in class. Given that teachers significantly invest themselves into these relationships, they can experience personal failure when preconceptions aren't met and consequentially the relationships are poor (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009). For this reason, forming

relationships with these students can potentially be more stressful than forming relationships with non-special needs students.

The analysis also established that teachers in this study are caught between providing students with special needs with the extra attention they require and attending to other students in their class. It is worth noting that this tension may negatively impact on a teacher's relationship with their students. The teachers in this study appeared more sympathetic regarding this circumstance. However, it's difficult to determine the actual effect of this tension, as it is possible that group dynamics or the use of an inside researcher skewed the teachers' responses. It might also be possible that the school's strong ethos regarding inclusivity caused added stress and guilt, making teachers feel that they could not share their feelings about this.

Topic three looked at the professional identity of teachers. It reflected the notion of a 'hidden curriculum' or the implicit lessons taught by teachers such as morals and values (Apple, 1971). The reinforcement of certain stereotypes was of concern given one teacher's description of special needs students, on several occasions, as being 'lower'. From the present study, it is difficult to determine whether all the participants were comfortable with the use of the term 'lower' as there was no follow-up discussion regarding this one teacher's comment. Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) postulate that education labelling can have both positive and negative effects on teachers and students. They claim labelling students can provide better access to funding and resources, while also raising awareness regarding learning needs. However, labelling can also create stigmatisation, bullying and reduce opportunities in life. Here, the negative effects seem to outweigh the positive and may implicitly

affect a teacher's pedagogy and the way they relate to their students with special needs. Conversely, Lauchlan and Boyle suggest that education labelling does not always lead to negative relationships between teachers and special needs students. As Deena stated, "... (As a teacher) you're more tuned in (to the needs of SEN students)" (Line 139). This finding is further supported by Soodak, Podell, and Lehman (1998), who suggest that a teacher's knowledge base and sense of efficacy (e.g. awareness and ability to engage particular learning needs) can positively influence attitudes toward special needs students.

The final question asked: What, if any, are teachers' concerns with inclusive education? As highlighted by topic two, the most difficult aspect of inclusion appears to be the negotiation between maintaining classroom equality and providing students with special needs with appropriate levels of engagement. The analysis revealed that the level and quality of support offered to teachers by the school system could ease this strain but this issue is not simply a question regarding time allocation. As Michelle reported, such concern must also involve a teacher's ability to behave consistently when relating with students' and their own expectations.

Topics two and three revealed two types of support that were available to the teachers of this study. Firstly, personnel support, such as support from fellow teachers and Learning Support Officers and secondly, resourcing support, such as the teaching resources and training. The discussion revealed that collegial support from fellow teachers was consistent and routinely available, both formally and informally. However, the analysis found that in some classrooms the current management of Learning Support Officers lacked efficiency. This was concerning given that past

research has found that LSOs' play an essential role in inclusive classrooms, as they can ease teachers' angst about how they distribute their time (Smith & Smith, 2002). This viewpoint was supported by the discussion, particularly by Gloria, who stated that "...the LSOs' know the kids really well... so they know exactly who needs to be worked with" (Line 483).

Lastly, the teachers expressed interest in having formal training regarding how to better include all students. This may be particularly beneficial as the analysis revealed that like other studies (e.g. Goodman & Burton, 2010; Male, 2011; Shevlin et al., 2012), the teachers of this study expressed interest in improving their teaching methods to ensure their special needs students are engaged. For example, Kelly stated, "I'd like to have access to more knowledge about how to better include my special needs students... (to) make sure they're engaged and participating".. In saying this however, it appears that the school is proactive to better support inclusive education. Two current examples of this are the IBL program (mentioned above) and assistance from school advisors through the Regional Education Office. Both of these supports are aimed at improving inclusive pedagogy and personalised learning for students.

## **Conclusion**

The current study qualitatively explored primary school teachers' descriptions of their relationships with students with special needs. The study suggests that the teachers understand their relationships with these students as both rewarding and challenging. By working through the challenges associated with learning needs, teachers feel a strong sense of gratification; particularly, when their positive relationships with these students 'pay off', e.g. the student succeeds academically or socially. Next, teachers

strive for equal relationships with all their students. However, it was acknowledged that the presence of specific learning needs in the classroom can require extra assistance from teachers. The most pressing concern shared by the teachers occurs as they grapple with the difficulty of providing students with special needs with additional attention whilst also attending to the needs of the other students in their class.

It appears that the Learning Support Officers' time could be used more efficiently i.e. distribution of one or two Learning Support Officers in a classroom for the whole year, as opposed to varying Officers throughout terms. More so, there needs to be better communication between teachers, LSOs and the Special Needs Coordinator, with designated times allocated to discuss how best to teach the students with special needs in the class. In addition to this, professional development seminars targeting how to better include students and how to more efficiently use the assistance of the LSOs' would also be useful.

The present study was useful for highlighting the multifaceted nature of inclusive education and calling attention to several psychosocial factors affecting the quality of teacher-student relationships. These factors include the duty teachers feel to build relationships with their students, while also equipping them with the skills to form relationships with their peers; the stress teachers' endure whilst maintaining an ethos of equality when attending to the challenges of inclusiveness; and the teachers' ongoing desire to improve their teaching ability and sense of professional identity. To more robustly engage the quality of these relationships we concur with the recommendation of Avramidis and Norwich (2002) made over a decade ago – that

research regarding teachers' experiences of inclusive education pursue a range of methodological approaches. To this end, the focus group approach used here, supported by the opportunity to conduct insider research, provided a unique window into a group of teachers' commitment to inclusive education.

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