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The Quality Teaching Model: How does it apply to children with special needs?

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Abstract

In May 2003, the NSW Department of Education and Training introduced the Quality Teaching framework to NSW public schools for discussion and possible implementation. Principals and teachers were encouraged to use the framework for the twofold purpose of improving both teaching practice and student learning. While versions of the framework have been successfully used in USA and Australia, there is a paucity of research which reports on its merit, worth, or value for teachers of children with moderate intellectual disabilities.

The aim of this study is to explore the degree of congruence and/or "fit" between the Quality Teaching framework and the ebb and flow of the day to day realities which a teacher of a class of children with moderate intellectual disabilities has to deal with. The study was located within the naturalistic paradigm of inquiry, and employed a case-study methodology. Data was collected through qualitative methods including ongoing, semi-structured interviews with the teacher, classroom observations recorded as field notes and document analysis.

While small in scope, the study provides insights into the value (or otherwise) of the NSW DET's Quality Teaching framework for teachers of children with moderate intellectual disabilities especially from the perspective of the classroom teacher dealing with the day to day realities of teaching these children.

Introduction

This paper reports on a study which focused on exploring the degree of congruence between the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting and the NSW DET's Quality Teaching framework. The study explored one special education teacher's experiences and perceptions of the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting and the NSW DET's Quality Teaching framework. The findings of the study indicated that there are various aspects which contribute to the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities and that there is little congruence between these realities and the NSW DET's Quality Teaching framework.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study was explore the day to day realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting and to subsequently investigate the degree of congruence between these realities and the NSW DET's Quality Teaching framework.

The research project was informed by the inquiry question:

What are the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting: Is the Quality Teaching framework congruent?

Background to the Study

Throughout education there are some children who, for one reason or another, are unable to take full advantage of the experiences as it is normally offered. For these children, special arrangements must be made to ensure that they receive the opportunities and experiences which will enable them to learn and develop to the extent of their abilities. In general terms, these arrangements usually lie within the area of education known as special education.

As such, special education involves various distinguishable factors, including the provision of individualised learning that is based on the unique needs of each child, the provision of a range of educational settings in which education can be received and specific policies that outline the processes and procedures to be implemented when teaching special education. These factors are essential for special education teachers particularly as they hold great influence on the day to day operations of teaching. These essential factors include planning, assessing, programming as well as the teaching strategies used and the overall classroom environment, however, do not specifically outline best practice when teaching of children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting resulting in many of the decisions being made by special education teachers, particularly when teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities, are made in a vacuum. One of the underlying reasons behind these vacuum decisions is the paucity of research that relates to children with moderate disabilities. Whilst there is some research associated with teaching children with intellectual disabilities, there is a definite dearth of research that specifically outlines best practices in the various facets that contribute to the reality of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting. Hence, there is a need for research to be conducted so to explore the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting.

In addition, the research that is available on teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities is generally empirical in nature and as a result, does not provide the teacher with a holistic view of best practice when teaching these children. Furthermore, there is a difficulty in conducting empirical research of the teaching of children with moderate intellectual disabilities, which includes instrumentation tools, control variables and sample size. This then validates the need for studies that are qualitative in nature to investigate the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in segregated setting.

Subsequently, in education throughout the 21st century, there has been an ongoing pursuit for best practice or 'quality' and 'effective' teaching to be implemented within regular classrooms. In response to this pursuit, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET) has developed the Quality Teaching framework (NSW DET, 2003a), which presents a model of pedagogy that implements various dimensions and elements that have been researched as having particular importance when being implemented to enable 'quality teaching'.

The paucity of research is continually evident when examining the Quality Teaching framework. Although the research and literature base associated with the Quality Teaching framework (NSW DET, 2003b) infers that the framework can be used when teaching children with special needs within the regular classroom, it does not appear to have specific research conducted of children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting. Furthermore, this research base does not appear to identify the congruence and/or 'fit' of the model when being used for teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting. Thus, there is a need for this framework to be investigated in congruence to the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting.

Therefore, the study aimed to fill the 'gap' in the research, which comes from an over reliance on empirical research and the application of the Quality Teaching framework based on one study, by outlining the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting through the naturalistic paradigm and subsequently, investigate the degree of congruence between these realities and the Quality Teaching framework.

Methodology

This research study, qualitative in nature, was located in the paradigm of naturalistic inquiry. A naturalistic paradigm of inquiry allowed valuable insights and interpretations to be gained, enabling a closer, more adequate and intimate view (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998) of the participant's perception of the realities of teaching students with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting to be formed.

This study involved the development of one in depth case study of one teacher currently teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting. Appropriate to the naturalistic paradigm, the case study framework was chosen to enable readers to obtain a "vicarious experience of the inquiry setting" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 214). The case study described the participant's perceptions and experiences that combine to formulate the ebb and flow of day to day realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting. The case study also focused on how these perceptions and experiences relate to the dimensions and elements of the Quality Teaching model and if the two are congruent.

The participant in the study was a special education teacher. The inquiry was carried out in a small primary school located on the South Coast of NSW. This primary school included a support unit which contained a class for children with moderate intellectual disabilities (IO classroom). The IO classroom was the primary research setting where data was collected.

The understandings gained from the study were collected through three methods of data collection. These included semi-structured interviews with the teacher, unobtrusive observations of life in the classroom and document analysis of the teacher's program and policies, as well as the documents of the Quality Teaching framework. Data was

collected over a period of 4 months, which allowed me, as the researcher to move backwards and forwards to both clarify issues and explore new ones with the participant.

Data analysis occurred throughout the study as a two phase process, which emerged in accordance with the research questions framing the inquiry. The first phase involved 'emergent design' (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995) whereby the stages of knowing, coding and categorising the data were undertaken so to result in the development of the in-depth case study. The second phase then involved 'pattern matching' (Yin, 1994) data from phase one with the three dimensions and 18 elements of the Quality Teaching framework, so to determine the degree of congruence.

Findings

As a result of the data analysis process, the findings were presented as two areas – the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting and the degree of congruence between these realities and the Quality Teaching framework.

The findings of the study that address the area of the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated classroom was organised into four sections including teaching philosophies, the instructional environment, instructional choices and teaching strategies. Each of the four sections included subsequent descriptive categories. These four areas and their subsequent categories are interrelated and together assist and hold particular value in the creation of the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting.

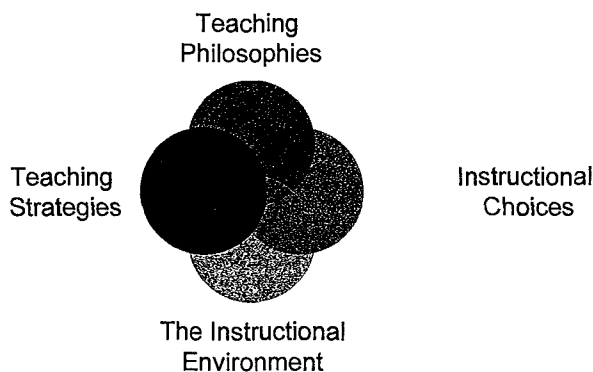


Figure 1 – The Four Interrelated Areas of Teaching Children with Moderate Intellectual Disabilities in a Segregated Setting.

The areas and their subsequent categories are outlined below:

- Teaching Philosophies
 - Background
 - Personal Philosophies
 - Roles and Responsibilities as a Special Education Teacher
 - Policies
- Instructional Environment
 - Description of IO Classroom
 - Classroom Management
 - Routine and Timetabling
 - The Classroom Environment
 - The Classroom Atmosphere
 - Classroom Expectations
- Instructional Choices
 - Learning in the IO Classroom
 - Curriculum
 - Planning in the IO Classroom
 - Programming in the IO Classroom
 - Assessment
 - Integration
 - Teacher's Aide (Special)
 - A Reflective Practitioner
- Teaching Strategies
 - Modelled, Guided and Independent Strategies
 - Questioning
 - Concrete Materials
 - Activity Booklets
 - Constant Monitoring and Immediate Feedback

Each of these subsequent categories plays a particular and vital role in creating a successful teaching and learning environment for children with moderate intellectual disabilities.

Upon investigating the degree of congruence between these realities and the three dimensions and the 18 elements of the Quality Teaching framework, the study found that there was little congruence between the two areas, as further outlined below.

The dimension of Intellectual Quality and its six elements proved to have very little congruence to the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in this segregated setting. The study found that the main causes for the disparity are the children's disability and its consequential effect on the children's cognitive and learning characteristics as well as, the knowledge and skills that are being taught in the IO classroom being specific to and catering for the children's disability.

The dimension of Quality Learning Environment and its subsequent elements appeared to have a significant degree of congruence with the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting. The reason for this degree of congruence lies in the IO classroom environment being one that is "focused on

learning”, which is evident through Monique’s personal philosophy, the physical setup and the day to day operations that occur within the IO classroom. This along with the setting and implementation of high and explicit expectations with regards to the classroom, behaviour and work also contribute to the significant degree of congruence. Although not all of the elements demonstrated a significant degree of congruence, the most congruent elements included explicit quality criteria, engagement, high expectations and social support.

Upon closely investigating the six elements of the dimension of significance, it became apparent that the underlying concept of significance displays congruence when teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in this segregated setting, as the focus of learning is based on the child and their individual needs. However, the six specific elements of the dimension display little congruence. Generally, there are aspects of each element that can be proven to show congruence when teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities, nevertheless the overall degree of congruence to this dimension is limited.

Consequently, the study found that when investigating the degree of congruence between the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting and the Quality Teaching framework, whilst the dimension of Quality Learning Environment and its subsequent elements proved to be most congruent to realities of this IO classroom, the majority of elements within the dimensions of Intellectual Quality and Significance displayed a limited degree of congruence.

Conclusions

The key conclusions that can be drawn from the study include the identification of the various areas, namely teaching philosophies, the instructional environment, instructional choices and teaching strategies and their subsequent categories. Each of these areas play an interrelated role in contributing to the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in the IO classroom, and consequently, hold particular value in ensuring successful teaching and learning.

The consequent conclusion that can be drawn from the inquiry is that the Quality Teaching framework, as devised by the NSW DET appears to have limited congruence with the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in this particular segregated setting. Although there is a degree of congruence within the dimensions of quality learning environment and significance, not all the elements within each of these dimensions are congruent.

In conclusion, the study highlighted that for successful teaching and learning to occur, there is a necessity for the four facets being teaching philosophies, the instructional environment, instructional choices and teaching strategies need to be coherently planned and executed when teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting. In addition to this, the study also highlighted the limited congruence between the realities of teaching children with moderate intellectual disabilities in a segregated setting and the Quality Teaching framework.

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