

## **Pre-service Arts Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education Practice in Western Australia**

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### **Abstract**

*The creation and maintenance of inclusive learning environments is a key responsibility of all teachers working in Australian schools. Most Australian universities embed inclusion education training for pre-service teachers (PSTs) in coursework. There is an implicit assumption in these arrangements that the study of inclusion and of special needs education completed at university will translate into practice when PSTs are working in schools. This phenomenological mixed methods research design investigated how effectively inclusion education translated into practice. The results revealed that while PSTs were aware and supportive of inclusion, no clear links were made between theory and practice.*

**Keywords:** *Inclusive Practice; Arts Education; Inclusive Arts Education; Artists in Residence; Pre-Service Teachers; Special Needs Education, Additional Needs.*

### **Introduction**

Australian teachers are required under legislation, and also by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) professional teacher standards, to create and maintain inclusive learning environments for all children in their classes. With the passing of the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the presence of increasing numbers of children with special needs included in regular classrooms, many PST education programs at Australian universities began to provide formal studies to prepare graduates for this challenging role. This is an increasingly complex undertaking as the notion of special needs has expanded over recent decades to include children with a wide range of learning difficulties and disabilities/disorders, including autism

spectrum disorder and dyslexia, as well as children who are gifted. Despite sound theoretical preparation during PST education, there is still some concern that many Australian children with 'special needs' may not receive the support they require in regular classrooms. Many Australian schools increasingly seek to innovate and offer enrichment programs for students with special needs. This includes in-class support with an education assistant or via education support centres on school premises.

The Arts have long been acknowledged as instruments for social inclusion because they draw on alternate understandings of intelligence and they value difference and divergent or novel thinking. Programs in which classroom teachers collaborate with external colleagues through special arts based learning projects framed around creativity education have been shown to have good success (Paris, 2013). Sternberg (2006, 2017) considers creativity to be an invaluable life skill which is achievable for all under the right environmental and educational conditions, noting:

*Creativity comprises several different aspects: (a) abilities, (b) knowledge, (c) styles of thinking, (d) personality attributes, (e) motivation, and especially intrinsic motivation, and (f) environment. ... It is crucially important, especially in schools, to provide an environment that allows creativity to flourish – not just in word, but also in deed.* (2017, para. 4)

Sternberg's (2017) focus on the centrality of 'environment' (encompassing critical human resources and infrastructure supports) as a key driver of creativity in education intersects with emerging school inclusion agenda reform employing arts collaborations. In such collaborations, for example, school based Artist in Residence (AiR) programs, community artists often partner with generalist teachers for creativity education for the benefit of students. Bresler, DeStefano, Feldman and Garg, (2000) report that generalist teachers who do not usually have high levels of artistic skill and or expertise working in partnerships with artists, can achieve positive inclusive educational outcomes for students.

As legislation increasingly demands more of teachers in their efforts to accommodate children with special needs, the potential of the arts to foster inclusion, offers a pathway to improved educational experience for children with special needs. What is less well understood, however, is the readiness of graduate teachers to meet their responsibilities in inclusive education. Teaching and research academics involved in teacher education preparation, raised concerns about PSTs' abilities to create and maintain inclusive classrooms during their teaching practicums and beyond. The capacity to create an inclusive classroom is, in the current authors' view, contingent on PSTs being able to recognise students with special needs and to have the knowledge capacity to respond to those needs. This study hypothesised that failure by PSTs to identify/recognise students' needs would present a barrier to inclusive practice. In addition, our students' understandings of inclusive practice were of interest to us within our teacher education improvement framework.

### **The Arts are beneficial for individuals**

Numerous studies have demonstrated the positive impact which involvement in the Arts (dance, drama, media arts, visual arts and music) affords individuals through arts making and arts responding experiences. The Australian and Western Australian Curriculum, supported by the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (2017), note the centrality of the Arts as one of five compulsory learning areas for students from kindergarten to Year 12. It proposes that, "*The Arts have the capacity to engage, inspire and enrich all students, exciting the imagination and encouraging them to reach their creative and expressive potential*" (para. 1). Further that, "*The Arts entertain, inform, challenge, and encourage responses, and enrich our knowledge of self,*

*communities, world cultures and histories. The Arts contribute to the development of confident and creative individuals, nurturing and challenging active and informed citizens”* (para. 3).

Eisner (2002, 2009) identified many positive contributions the arts make to holistic development in children. Over three decades, he advocated for the centrality of the arts in education and, whilst lamenting that education systems still generally prioritise the hard sciences over arts, observed deeply impactful positive outcomes accruing where education leaders reconceptualise schooling to place the arts at the centre of curriculum. Over time, involvement in the arts often leads to increased self-efficacy, enhanced self-esteem and sometimes the reframing of past poor self-identity schemas into more positive identity constructions (Djurichkovic, 2011).

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) (Tavris & Aronson, 2007) offers an explanation for this change in identity construction because it asserts that an individual cannot simultaneously hold two competing notions of self – in short, one cannot be both ‘bad’ and ‘good’ at something at the same time. In the case of the Arts, CDT is a powerful phenomenon because it counteracts notions of innate superior ability (albeit assuming the necessary infrastructure and educational personnel) as skills mastery, agility in ideas generation fluency and flexibility, original outcomes/creative capital over time replace earlier ideations/beliefs of being unskilled (Giles, Paris & Whale, 2016). Djurichkovic’s (2011) review of the literature pertaining to art education programs in Australian correctional facilities, provided striking examples of this kind of CDT disequilibrium noting that despite frequent incidences of poor self-worth, prisoners involved in arts education programs often experienced benefits that positively impacted and changed their levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy through, “practical and psychological benefits that strengthened cognitive abilities and helped students integrate knowledge, feelings and manual skill” (Djurichkovic, 2011, p. 11).

### **The Arts and the Community**

When undertaken with others as part of a shared creative endeavour, arts activities provide the individual with opportunities for social interaction, emotional connection and a sense of belonging. These benefits accrue from participants working together to learn new skills and through supporting one-another to achieve the desired arts outcomes. In the best collaborative settings the success of each individual is viewed and valued as a critical component of the success of the group, and participants interact and support one-another within a shared creative purpose framework. Djurichkovic (2011) provided a poignant illustration of the benefits afforded individuals involved in collaborative arts endeavours through her case study of inmates involved in one Australian prison art education program, noting that prisoners reported:

*... the group created a sense of belonging and it didn't matter where we were from and/or what we had done; ...working with an artist who saw our usually negative experiences as positive fodder for art; and working with someone from the 'outside' to create a link to the 'outside' world. (p. 21)*

Beyond prison settings and within disenfranchised community contexts (for example, in impoverished suburbs within or on the outskirts of many international cities) the arts are regularly used to bring people together to overcome social isolation and to foster inclusion. Whilst schools are obviously not prisons, nor even large communities, like both entities they have among their members, people who are isolated, excluded and disenfranchised – individually or institutionally cut off from the opportunities to achieve to a level commensurate with ability. Bynner (n. d) noted:

*In recent years the idea of “social exclusion” has taken this kind of conceptualisation further ... it also brought with it rights of access enshrined in equal opportunities legislation and a whole range of initiatives to match educational provision to the needs of the individual child. (p. 3)*

Within the context of this ‘evolution in understanding’, UNESCO (2017), in its focus on education, describes exclusion from meaningful education experiences as a human rights issue and presents examples such as:

*...teaching and learning process not meeting the learning needs of the learner; teaching and learning process not corresponding to the learning styles of the learner; the language of instruction and learning materials is not comprehensible; learner goes through negative and discouraging experiences at school or in the programme, e.g., discrimination, prejudice, bullying, violence. (para. 4)*

The arts in education offer a solution to persistent exclusion for many children because engagement with the arts, replaces isolation with collaboration and foster positive relationships within a community of creative practitioners. Kinder & Harland (2004) observed:

*In terms of social inclusion, arts outcomes appear to be strongly associated with the therapeutic outcomes of enjoyment, psychological wellbeing, and also interpersonal skills/relationship development along with increased awareness of cultural and moral issues... the arts have the potential to offer cultural, educational and even economic inclusion ... this may, in part, explain the impact made by contemporary artists working in education settings, both formal and informal. (p. 53)*

### **Understanding Inclusion**

Inclusion assumes the equal right to access to resources such as infrastructure resources, learning programs, teaching and learning strategies and even teacher expertise (Mitchell, 2014). Support for the child with special needs is individual and includes modifications, substitution, omission and or removal of any barriers that inhibit the child from achieving their learning outcomes in a regular classroom (Foreman & Arthur-Kelly, 2015; Mitchell, 2014). With the passing of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA), it was understood that children with a disability and or additional need, which significantly impacted on their learning outcomes would be given full access to an appropriate education, and could not be discriminated against in the education system, and that education providers would need to ensure that all children would be provided with opportunities allowing them to achieve to a level commensurate with ability. The DDA also provided the schools with support through the Australian Disability Standards for Education (2005) which assist all educational settings and educators with understanding the challenges with enrolment, participation, curriculum, student support services and elimination of harassment and victimization (Australian Disability Standards for Education, 2005).

### **Pre-service teachers’ views about inclusion in regular classrooms**

The challenges faced by teachers in creating and maintaining an inclusive educational setting stem from developing individual educational plans, modifying, omitting, substituting and differentiating the learning outcomes to meet the needs of the children with a range of disabilities and special learning needs (Foreman & Arthur-Kelly, 2015; Mitchell, 2014; Yasar & Cronin, 2014). Such challenges include the lack of professional development as it relates to the wide range of specialized training, understanding the social, emotional and behavioral needs of children, class size, making changes to existing curricula, competing expectations of various stakeholders, and the availability of resources to support the children in their educational settings (Chakraborti-Ghosh, Orellana & Jones, 2014; Chong, Moore, Nonis, Tan & Wee, 2012; Hunter-Johnson, Newton & Cambridge-Johnson, 2014; Nonis, 2006; Nonis & Tan, 2011; Nonis, Chong, Moore, Tan & Koh, 2016; Odongo & Davidson, 2016).

Chong et al., (2012) and Nonis et al., (2016) reported that teachers in early childhood settings (Peoples Community Foundation, PCF) in Singapore felt that children with developmental needs

should receive the same service as other children. However, the authors highlighted the teachers' concerns about the lack of training and or expertise where classroom strategies would be required when working with children with different developmental needs (Nonis et al., 2016). A study by Odongo and Davidson (2016), which included information from preschool principals, teachers and learning support educators, reported that both special and general education teachers were positive towards idea of inclusion. However, the study noted that teachers were most concerned about not having enough time to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. The authors were also concerned about the quality of training required to meet the needs of children with disabilities in inclusive settings (Odongo & Davidson, 2016).

Chakraborti-Ghosh et al., (2014) reported that while Brazilian teachers' perceptions of inclusive education was positive, when asked if students should be included in regular classrooms, regardless of severity, the authors reported a slight difference of opinion from private and public school teachers. Specifically, teachers in the public school expressed slight disagreement to the statement compared with private school teachers who expressed slight agreement. The authors reported that the Brazilian teachers in their study believed that inclusion benefits students' academic skills. Importantly the study reported that both American and Brazilian teachers agreed that students with mild and moderate disabilities could benefit from being educated in regular classrooms. However, only Brazilian teachers in the private schools agreed that students with severe and profound disabilities could benefit from inclusive educational settings (Chakraborti-Ghosh et al., 2014).

The aim of the current study was to investigate PST perceptions about inclusive practices. In addition, the study looked at the interplay between perception and practice for PSTs during school experience and whether the university's on-campus teaching was adequate in preparing the PSTs to work with students with special needs in regular schools. The focus group in this study were secondary arts PSTs and post graduate students who had already completed an arts degree and who were considering a career as arts specialist (secondary) teachers. The study also investigated whether positive impacts associated with an existing AiR program (discussed later in this paper) might be utilised as a platform by which to investigate PST preparedness to meet inclusion obligations. The study's research questions were:

1. Can PST engagement with mentors beyond the usual practicum settings complement on-campus studies and enhance sensitivity to special needs and inclusive education agenda – i.e., capacity to *see* student needs?
2. Can involvement in an arts based residency (AiR Program) enhance PST preparedness to meet inclusive education obligations – i.e., improve the capacity to *act* to meet student needs?

### **Methodological Framework**

The research was contextualised within an existing university facilitated AiR program, which had operated in Western Australia since 2007. In this program visual arts and arts education university students worked on a voluntary basis in schools on a special arts project. The work undertaken in the program is a collaboration between the AiR, teacher-host, and children, and the program is annually advertised to schools as 'an opportunity to have an experienced artist facilitate a special collaborative arts project that would not normally be possible within the school setting'. Since 2007 over 200 arts residencies have been completed in both non-government and government school sectors.

Several examples of typical residency projects follow to provide the reader with an understanding of the AiR program and a context for the research (see images one to four below).

### ***Images One and Two***

#### ***AiR project exemplars - ceramic sculpture mosaic (nature play garden) and mural***



**NB: images one and two reproduced with the permission of the AiR school-teacher host**

*Teacher Host Feedback: "The (AiR) mosaic was extremely inclusive. The technique was kept simple but effective which meant even the students who struggled in Art were able to feel successful and were proud to visit the mosaic and show off their work. I have often seen students searching for their work and showing it off to their friends while playing at break times. Hearing some of the extremely engaged questions asked by the students, to the mural artist, made me realise that this exposure opened many students' eyes to the possibility of a career in the arts."*

### ***Images Three and Four***

#### ***AiR Project Exemplars - Large Scale Dreamtime mural***



**NB: images three and four reproduced with the permission of the AiR school-teacher host**

*Teacher Host Feedback: "We loved being able to participate in the AiR program and our students benefited greatly by having a dedicated artist at the school. Everyone is extremely proud of the mural that was completed. Being a 100% Indigenous population District High School our students can be very difficult to engage and this program was a huge success as they do like to have visitors in the school. ... the students loved this and were totally engaged. The experience was very inclusive. The students very quickly took ownership of the project and were very proud of their achievement. They learnt that having a go was more important than having to get things right and perfect every time. All students that started the*

*project worked through to the end and helped with every aspect including cleaning up materials and area".*

### **Residencies 2016**

Early in 2016, expressions of interest were sought from schools in Western Australia wishing to host an AiR program and by March, 2016, 25 placements (24 primary schools and one secondary school) were confirmed. The host teachers were advised that inclusion and diversity would be the underpinning theme for the residencies and they were asked to offer the PST-AiRs guidance in implementing inclusive practice.

As in previous years, the 2016 residencies ran across the 10 weeks of the third school term (i.e., July – August) with the majority having a duration of around five weeks (a total of approximately 15 – 20 hours duration). The AiRs and host teachers shared the progress of their placements in a closed-access online learning community (FB-OLC). This approach had previously been used with great success by the researchers to support PSTs during periods they were working in schools and away from the university (Paris, Boston & Morris 2015).

Without exception the projects were considered successful in producing quality substantive arts works and the feedback/testimonials collected from AiRs and host teachers suggested that the residencies made an important contribution to the school and also to pre-service teachers' professional development. One AiR commented:

*"The AiR program was similar to a condensed practicum placement, as I was able to develop my teaching skills through working so closely with students. I was also able to build relationships with other art teachers and the wider school community... I have come away from the AiR program a better teacher, with an expanded network and some wonderful resources plus samples to take with me to my future classrooms." (2016, PST-AiR)*

### **The interviews**

While this research is primarily a phenomenological study, it employs both quantitative and qualitative research methods. It makes effective use of both interviews and questionnaires to elicit an enhanced breadth and depth of response. Forsey (2012, p. 364) suggests that, "interviews work best when used as part of a suite of approaches applied to knowledge generation." In this research, a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis was employed in order to strengthen the findings and improve the richness of the final product. Creswell (1998) suggests the ideal interview cohort to be between five and 25 subjects, while Morse (1994) suggests at least six interviewees makes a suitable sample size. In this study, ten of the 25 AiR Program participants agreed to be interviewed and data was obtained from nine host teachers supporting the PSTs.

In this research project, the interviewer used a combination of semi structured and open ended techniques to gather data, and importantly, to identify and then focus on ideas which were not initially expected, but which were considered to be potentially significant. Recording by video and sound (using iPad2) allowed the researcher to effectively and accurately assess and interpret the data. The researchers were able to cross reference comments made in different stages of the interview and this allowed them to identify conflicts and to corroborate ideas and perspectives in ways which might not be possible in surveys, questionnaires and when simply observing interactions. Data from this research project were analysed both deductively and inductively. Thomas (2006) describes inductive qualitative analysis as an approach whereby the researcher uses detailed analysis of raw data to identify and develop emerging themes (or concepts or models). Interviews were reviewed and the data thematically coded by the



researchers. This deductive element of the analysis resulted in several subsets of data being available for further inductive analysis, which, in turn, allowed the researchers to develop descriptions of patterns and themes in the data, based on type, frequency and emphasis of PST responses.

Data obtained in different interviews were compared and contrasted (via cross-case analysis), and within each interview, a form of constant comparison was used to interpret observations. This process allowed the researchers to identify patterns and themes as well as anomalous evidence. This inherently flexible approach to reviewing the data allowed the researchers to identify new threads in conversations which at times led the research in new and important directions. As the process continued, the relatively unstructured and disorganised data took on an organised and meaningful structure – and so, allowed the researchers to identify shared and emergent themes and unique or unexpected responses. This occurred with a view to developing an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of teacher training programs – as they relate to informing inclusive educational practices for those children with a wide range of minor, and more significant, special educational needs.

The initial data reduction, analysis and review of AiR surveys/interviews informed the decision to seek further corroborating data. It was deemed important to confirm the actual numbers and profiles of identified special needs students in the AiR projects since the AiRs reported in their interviews their belief that there were few if any special needs students involved the residencies. Host teachers were contacted and asked to identify the types and numbers of students with special learning needs, who were present in the host classes. A “Special Needs Profiling Checklist” was created and sent to the host teachers at the participating schools (see Table 1). In order to get a general sense of the range and numbers of various special needs which might typically be present in mainstream Australian classrooms, host teachers were only required to tick a checklist identifying specific special needs and to indicate how many children with the special need there might be in the classroom/s.

## Method

The combination of perceptual surveys, reflective interviews, and special needs (SN) demographic data collected from the school hosts (confirming the number and type of SN students in the AiR project groups) provided the authors some insight into the adequacy of pre-service training as a precursor to the PSTs working with students within an inclusive and collaborative arts context. It is relevant to note here that the Graduate Diploma Education (GDE) PST-AiRs had all completed formal studies in inclusion philosophy, education practice and their AITSL obligations in the first semester of their teacher education degree, whereas the BA-AiRs had not.

## Participants

Purposeful sampling was selected for the research. The participants were comprised of the following:

1. Cohort 1 (PST-AiR) – Six (6) PSTs enrolled in a Graduate Diploma Education (GDE) at two Perth Universities with a major in an arts subject (i.e., visual arts, media, or drama studies) – all of whom had been invited to participate in an AiR placement.
2. Cohort 2 (BA-AiR) – Four (4) 3rd year visual arts students enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts (Fine Arts) who had expressed interest in teaching and were in the process of entering the Graduate Diploma Education in 2017.
3. Cohort 3 (host teachers) – Ten (10) Primary generalist teachers who mentored the



AiRs in working with the students and hosted the AiR projects at their school.

### **Questionnaire and Interview Instruments**

The instruments were administered over the 12 month period of March, 2016 to April, 2017. The research instruments comprised:

1. An online Qualtrics quantitative pre-test questionnaire completed by prospective AiRs, comprising both demographic data questions and perceptual questions aligned to attitudes towards special needs education and inclusion. Participants were asked to rate 18 special needs inclusion perception statements on a five point Likert scale. Ten of the respondents indicated that they had some past experience (one to two years) working or volunteering with people with special needs. Ten of the survey respondents went on to complete an AiR placement and were interviewed about their experience (see Table 1).
2. An interview schedule comprising 10 questions about the completed AiR placements and inclusive education experience in the residencies (see Appendix 1).
3. A post AiR Program survey completed by the host teachers (see Table 2).

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Online pre-test survey – prospective AiRs**

Seventeen surveys comprise the data. Eighty-three percent of respondents identified themselves as Western Australian with 17% indicating they were international students. Respondents were aged from 20 to 60 years with the majority in them in their 20s and 30s. Four males and 13 females completed the questionnaire. Thirteen were enrolled in a Graduate Diploma of Education (arts education) and four were completing a Bachelor Fine Arts. All respondents indicated that they had completed a range of undergraduate and post graduate studies in arts and all had some industry experience working professionally in the arts industry. Ten of the respondents indicated that they had some experience (one to two years) working with people with special needs. All respondents expressed interest in participating in the 2016 Artist in Residence Program. Ten of the survey respondents went on to complete an AiR placement and were interviewed about their experience.

Overall, the results of the first survey indicate that PSTs had positive attitudes about the concept of inclusion as a whole and about including children with special needs into regular classrooms. For example, PSTs felt that children with special needs have the right and should be included in regular classrooms alongside their peers (100% and 94% respectively, see Table 1). In addition, all PSTs were of the opinion that Inclusion was a good idea. This is a promising affirmative statement that PSTs were supportive of the DDA (1992). While PSTs were supportive of Inclusion in regular schools, some 76% felt that they were not entirely responsible for teaching children with special needs. The cohort responded to the statement “Special education teachers have the primary responsibility for the education of students with special needs” (see Table 1).

In addition, the PSTs overall responded with positive responses supporting inclusive practices in schools as they felt that it not only benefitted the child with special needs but their peers (82% and 88% respectively; see Table 1). It appears from the responses PSTs in this cohort did not deny that there were challenges (82%). The benefits of implementing inclusion in classrooms outweigh the challenges but still supported inclusion in schools. The responses about inclusion correspond with other research supporting inclusion in regular classrooms (Chakraborti-Ghosh et al., 2014; Nonis et al., 2016). In addition, only 18% responded that they would not prefer to teach in a class with children with special needs. The results showed that PSTs were of the opinion that most children with special needs were well behaved in classrooms (68%) although some 41% responded that the challenges could potentially escalate if a teacher had a

class of children with “mixed” special needs (see Table 1). In terms of training and knowledge about special needs, 71% of the participants responded that they were aware that there was a lack in their knowledge in understanding special needs, a similar concern relating to training in Odongo & Davidson’s study (2016). Furthermore, 29% responded that teachers were not equipped to meet the individual special needs of children in regular classrooms. While the cohort for this study is relatively small, this result suggests training in inclusive education must continue to be a core unit at any undergraduate course for PSTs. It is recommended that a further study is warranted to verify the PST training requirements in the area of special needs education.

While the PSTs in this study were supportive of the idea of inclusion they also expressed some interesting responses about integration for children with special needs in their classrooms. For example, 24% of PSTs responded that students with special needs should not stay in the regular classroom for the entire school day. In addition, the 24% of participants responded that believed that they would need to spend more time with children with special needs and therefore may have less time for the other children in the class (24% and 35% respectively, see Table 1). Furthermore, some 18% of respondents agreed that inclusion “is not a desirable practice in a regular classroom” (see Table 1).

In summary, there was a general sense that PSTs were supportive of the idea of inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms. The results also revealed that PSTs felt that teachers were not equipped with the necessary knowledge to work with children with special needs and that the challenges would potentially be increased if a teacher had a classroom of children with different special needs.

**Table 1. Pre-service Arts Teachers’ Perceptions of Inclusive Practice (N= 17).**

Percentage Agreement	Perception Statements
94%	Students with special needs have the right to receive their education in the same classroom as typically developing students
100%	Students with special needs should be given every opportunity to learn in an inclusive classroom.
65%	Most students with special needs are well behaved in inclusive classrooms.
88%	It is a valuable experience for all students to be educated in inclusive classrooms.
94%	Inclusion provides learning opportunities for students both with and without special needs.
82%	The benefits of implementing inclusion in classrooms outweigh the challenges.
100%	Inclusion is a good idea.
71%	Most teachers lack an appropriate knowledge base to educate students with special needs.
18%	Inclusion is not a desirable practice in a regular classroom.
24%	Students with special needs should not stay in the regular classroom for the entire school day.
29%	Students with special needs will have their education needs more effectively met in special education settings than in regular classrooms.
29%	Teachers who teach in regular classrooms are not equipped to meet the individual needs of children with special needs.
76%	Special Education Teachers have the primary responsibility for the education of students with special needs.
41%	It is difficult to maintain order in a classroom that has a mix of students with special needs and their typically developing peers.

24%	Students with special needs lose the specialised services they need as a result of inclusion.
24%	Teachers pay more attention to students with special needs than their typically developing peers in inclusive classrooms.
18%	I would prefer not to teach students with special needs in a regular classroom.
35%	I have less time for typically developing students when students with special needs are included in my classroom.

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### Emergent Themes from the Interviews

The emergent themes from the interview data were concerning. The PSTs and their host teachers knew that this project was about ‘inclusivity’ i.e., about identifying and supporting children with special needs in a mainstream context. The general findings indicated that the PSTs (as a group) believed that there were no (or very few) students with special educational needs in their project groups. Several of the PSTs in the cohort indicated that though they knew there were children with special needs in their group, they did not appear to have much specific information about numbers or needs. The reasons for this appeared to be a consequence of both lack of personal insight (the PSTs did not look for children who may have had special needs), and the fact that (according to the PSTs) few mentor teachers made any mention of special needs students or discussed the need for the PSTs to adopt an inclusive approach to teaching.

As a consequence of their initial understanding, it appeared that few of the PSTs made any adjustments to their teaching, and some made no adjustments at all. By ‘adjustments’, the researchers are referring broadly to the provision of curriculum differentiation designed to create an inclusive classroom. The broader category of special needs as understood in this context was taken to encompass as much as one third of each classroom. The classes in which the PSTs worked as AiRs, although limited in number, did represent a cross section of schools in terms of SES, Sector (Government, Catholic and Independent), size, and age of students (early childhood to secondary), so, were deemed ‘typical’ (see Appendix 1).

The following remarks by four of the ten AiR participants exemplify the interview data we collected. Each AiR was first asked to explain their understanding of the terms ‘special needs’ and ‘inclusion’ before describing the role of these concepts in their placements:

***AiR #1 interview extract: BA-AiR at School #1 on Table 2 (at least 11 students with special needs)***

*“Special needs students are those who have difficulty learning. I had three classes (years 1, 2 and 6) working on this project and the students were allowed to decide if they wanted to be directly involved in the mural or not ... the whole class was there every time I was there and the ones who wanted to be involved on the day could be, or they could watch ... no, there were no special needs students in the project.”*

***AiR #2 interview extract: PST-AiR at School #4 on Table 2 (at least 11 students with special needs)***

*“Special needs ... for me personally, I would say that’s anyone who is experiencing learning difficulties - so that could be a diagnosed disorder or it could be a person with issues or distractions from anything happening in their life. Yes, there was one student that the host told me about. She said “he’s great - you’re not going to encounter any problems with him”. She said “he is on the ASD spectrum”. I would not have known he was on the ASD spectrum had I not been told. The mentor said he was “high functioning and highly intelligent”. No, she*

*provided no advice on how to work with him. No, I didn't need to do anything special with him."*

***AiR #3 interview extract: PST-AiR at School #8 on Table 2 (at least 26 students with special needs)***

*"Special needs ... it doesn't necessarily mean someone with a disability - to me it means someone who just requires a little help with their education, whether that's for physical reasons, cognitive reasons or just difficulties understanding. And also the ways they learn – not everybody is a visual, or tactile learner. Yes we had two or three (students) with hearing impairment. On my first day they hooked a microphone up to me, and I had no idea why, they forgot to tell me. I thought they were recording me for university. And then I looked around realised that a couple of kids had these little devices in their ear. After I asked (the host) she said "oh I forgot to tell you – it's so they can hear you, otherwise it's just muffled noise". No - no special instructions ... the mentor just said "whenever you're talking to the whole class make sure you have it (the lapel microphone) on, but when talking to them privately they won't need it". No, no others really ... um ... actually, there was one other student who was a bit isolated – he wasn't diagnosed with anything but I had the feeling there was something going on with him. I did ask the teacher but she said he was just a bit day-dreamy. No, I didn't do anything about it."*

***AiR #4 interview extract: PST-AiR at School #5 on Table 2 (at least 17 students with special needs)***

*"Special needs ... I suppose special needs are not necessarily one thing or another. I guess it's a range of students who could have learning difficulties or disabilities and require some form of differentiation in the teaching. I guess I had some students who were a bit disengaged with low self-efficacy. I think some may have had self-comparison issues – a low view of what thought they could achieve. This was a high ability group so maybe they (the SNs students) were screened out. The host did say that the whole class needed praise – but it wasn't specific to any particular child. I think the project itself fostered inclusion ... they had choice ... we used natural objects they (the students) brought in, and scanned in the photographs they took for the stop motion samples which were then combined into one long film ... it was an 8/10 for quality ... and collaboration was a really important aspect. I'd say it was an 8/10 for collaboration and an 8/10 for inclusion."*

### **Host Teachers' Survey Responses**

All host teachers reported that there were at least seven students (see Table 2) having special needs in each project cohort (of one or more classes) being supported by the PST-AiR. Conversely, most PST-AiRs indicated that there were few, or no, students with special needs in their classes. Six of the 10 AiRs were in the final semester of their teacher education training and had explicit exposure to inclusion pedagogy within both general education and also arts education contexts. It is perplexing therefore that none of the simple accommodations to which they had been introduced during coursework training were implemented in the AiR Projects. Our analysis of results suggests as previously stated that rather than not knowing *what to do*, our PST-AiRs were simply unaware that there were students in their project groups who needed this intervention support. The failure to 'see/investigate' translated to 'failure to act' and therefore a 'failure to accommodate' students' needs. Accordingly, inclusion cannot be claimed as the by-product of host teacher/AiR action in this study.

**Table 2. Numbers and Types of Special Needs Students in AiR Project Classrooms**

Identified special needs School Sites:	AiR classrooms (#1 – #10): numbers of students with special needs									
	#1	#2	--	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10
ADHD	2	2		1				2	2	
Autism Spectrum Disorder	2	2		1				1		
Cultural differences	1			2		14		6	many	1
Depression / anxiety	1	yes			1			4		
EALD		2				14	5	2	many	3
Gifted	1			6	16		5	4		
Hearing impairment								2		
Learning disability	1	2								
Physical disability – other									1	
Very low ability	1	3				1	3	5		3
Vision impairment	2								1	

### Transferability

There are obvious impediments to claims of transferability of our findings (i.e., that PST inclusion training did not transfer to PST teaching practice in the host schools) as a consequence of the small scale and single learning area (arts) focus of our study, however, the potential scale of the problem, if the experiences we observed are replicated more broadly, deserves consideration. Each of our AiR participants was working in a school with one or more classes of between 20 and 30 students under the supervision of an experienced classroom teacher and the impacts of their inaction extend far beyond their own experience. Their failure to see-acknowledge and act-respond to the needs of students who fell outside the ‘typically developing’ profile is serious cause for concern (200- 300 primary aged students were impacted in this small study alone).

Our AiR participants’ pre-service training encompassed four years of coursework and practicum experience and there are elements of inclusion training in each year of study as well as two course units which explicitly address inclusion in general and arts education contexts. It is quite clear that our participants’ training did not transfer into their practice. What remains unclear in this study is the *impact* of that ‘failure to see - failure to act’ on the achieved inclusion outcomes. According to the PSTs and the host teachers, the AiR projects were collaborative and inclusive; every child in each group participated in the project; and the placements resulted in a high quality art product which met the expectations of the school. One hundred percent (all) of our participants suggested that the placements were inclusive settings notwithstanding that our research has revealed they did little or nothing to achieve that end. The matter of whether the placements were really inclusive requires further investigation in light of the failure of the AiRs to ‘see’ student needs. Reasonably then we must question their perception and ability to adequately evaluate and appraise the placements as inclusive.

A secondary source (whilst not formally evaluated) is provided by our host teachers who, in their email correspondence and also in comment on their confirmation surveys, indicated that the placements had been very inclusive. One host observed on her survey: “*residencies were very inclusive, with students involved in decision making and working collaboratively with the artists*”. Perhaps as Kinder & Harland (2004) suggested, there is something in the Arts experience itself which fosters inclusion, underscoring the value of arts in education – and especially, inclusive education. Alternatively perhaps the AiR program *structure*, which mandated a specific configuration in which the children worked collaboratively under the guidance of the artist and their regular classroom teacher on an arts idea they *jointly* developed, *jointly* executed, and *jointly* celebrated leading to *joint* ownership, was the trigger for inclusion outcomes. In this sense programs that formalise collaboration over a sustained period may in and of themselves foster conditions needed for inclusion. A combination of factors such as arts experiences (the project), arts and general education expertise (the teacher/artist) and formalised collaboration arrangements (the children working together) may explain the positive inclusion ratings our participants afforded the projects after completion.

These unresolved questions limit the transferability of our findings beyond the scope of this first inquiry, however there is good evidence that PST preparation is not meaningfully transferring from theory into practice and this is a worrying manifestation of the lived reality of some classrooms in Western Australia. Further research and ongoing inquiry are warranted.

## Conclusions

The study revealed the following key conclusions:

1. There was little evidence of articulation of inclusion theory into practice in our participants’ work with students in the AiR projects despite the provision of formal training through PST course work and a request to focus on creating an inclusive environment in the project.
2. The schools sampled in the study reflected the anticipated broader composition of integrated classrooms evidenced in the literature and embodied in the legislation (i.e., the presence of special needs students in ‘typical’ classrooms). All of our school sites had students with special needs profiles integrated into mainstream settings.
3. That the provision of formal inclusion education as a routine part of course completion (i.e., for the Graduate Diploma Education AiRs) did not, in and of itself, appear to enhance the capacity of PST-AiRs to create or maintain an inclusive learning environment. The majority of the AiRs reported that there were few, if any, students with special needs in their project groups which when reconciled against the host surveys underscored a disconnect between perception and reality.
4. Despite *all* participants (hosts and AiRs) being asked to focus formally on inclusion as an underpinning theme for the placements, few accommodations were made for students with special needs, and (according to the PSTs) they were provided with little or no advice by hosts. The ‘failure to see’ special needs students has been interpreted as a related ‘failure to act’ to accommodate those needs. We believe the failure to ‘see and respond’ was compounded by the ‘absence of impetus’, consequence or requirement to act.
5. The absence of accommodation of special needs did not appear to diminish the quality of the AiR projects as inclusive settings – the perception of AiRs and some hosts was that all students appeared to be fully involved in the project outcomes. In this respect involvement in a shared arts activity appears to have provided the vehicle for inclusion irrespective of the actions of the host or AiR. This echoes Kinder &

Harland's (2004) observation that it is the Arts' experience itself that fosters inclusion rather than the actions of teachers who operate as secondary agents.

6. The quality of artworks produced in the placements was of a high calibre and the AiRs expressed the view that the placement had met their own, and the schools', expectations that the placement would result in a substantial high quality art product.
7. The majority of PSTs in the study were supportive of inclusion in the regular classrooms.

### Recommendations

In this study the AiRs/PSTs demonstrated some awareness of the nature of inclusive education and most had touched on (or covered in more detail in their interviews) something about special needs education, yet almost nothing was done about it – either in terms of recognising the problem or in acting to modify the program (material and strategies). There were some implied low level adjustments made by some, yet little of substance. Despite these failures the very nature of the arts experience itself when undertaken with others appeared to translate into a positive and inclusive experience for all involved in the program. In other contexts where the discipline itself does not as easily foster inclusion through collaboration, much more is required of teachers in meeting AITSL responsibilities. Before action can be taken areas of need must be identified. More research is needed and despite much remaining unanswered, this study served as a reminder that perception and reality can co-exist in a state of disconnect, as exemplified in the observations of one of our AiRs who appeared to be unaware of the special needs of students in their AiR group:

*“Teaching is a walk in the park – actually... it really is ... less intense, lots less stress. The hours are much easier. Dealing with beautiful students who are so eager to learn (most of them)...”*

Reflecting on these findings, we accept that as teacher educators we have a major role to play in inclusive education practice improvement (both within and beyond the arts) and consider that in addition to further inquiry an appropriate first response may lie in making more explicit for our PST students, the expectation that *every* class will include special needs students and accordingly they have an overt obligation to investigate in order to ‘see’ and thereafter to ‘act’ to accommodate special needs. A first response framework might take its form from well accepted practice improvement settings such as action research which is already commonly used in Australian Schools. Action research is appropriate where an educational issue has an applied focus coupled with a participant desire for change in practice leading to improvement.

We hope in future iterations of our pre-service course work aligned to inclusion obligations, (as well as arts education specialisations) to impress upon our students the importance of a ‘First Principle’ response. In our own practice improvement response, the inclusion ‘First Principle’ we would advocate would take the form of an explicit direction to PSTs working in schools to always assume the presence of special needs students in every class and thereafter to routinely engage with mentors/colleagues to ‘investigate-see’, ‘implement-act’, ‘evaluate-reflect’ on needs within an adapted action research practice improvement cycle. The ‘First Principle’ mandate is intended as a bridge between inclusion theory and practice. With such a fundamental strategy in place in combination with further research and program consolidation, inclusion may follow.



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### Appendix 1 - Interview Questions

*Q: "Could you please explain what you understand the term 'special needs' to mean?"*

Definitions ranged from limited to quite strong. Overall; reasonable, though basic, understandings were demonstrated by PSTs.

*Q: "Were there any special needs children in your AiR placement project?"*

There was limited recognition that special needs children who are not obvious exist in most / all classrooms. No AiRs identified that they had identified or been told of more than three students with special needs in their classroom(s). None indicated that the issues were significant. Most indicated that the issues were very minor or that there were no issues. Two PSTs suggested that the 'evidence suggests' that some teachers may have selected particular students to join the program because they were not 'problems'. One class was identified as an English as a second language (ESL) class, and this was recognized as being "a little bit" of a special need.

*Q: If special needs students were present in your project group, were you given any advice about how to work with special needs children by your placement host?*

Nine PSTs answered this question. Seven of the nine suggested that they were not given any specific advice at all. One was given general advice to use praise and positive reinforcement, and the other confirmed she was given some basic information and advice. No specific disability or special need was identified.

*Q: Could you please explain what you understand the term "inclusion", as it pertains to arts education, to mean?*

Reasonable overall understanding by PSTs was indicated... No PSTs made statements which could be considered 'wrong' or 'off track'. Some observations were limited. Some were stronger.

*Q: Did your research into inclusion literature impact your approach to working with students on the AiR project?*

A range of responses was provided... Generally, those who identified that they had prior knowledge believed that this was valuable. Prior knowledge was gained from; Assignment research (2), general study during classes (4). However, those that indicated no prior knowledge through study (3), did not seem too concerned and seemed confident that they had coped with the requirements of the project. There was an apparent contradiction here, in that most of those indicating that they had done research or study, also indicated that they had no children with special needs in their classes and also indicated that they made no significant interventions.

*Q: "Did your AiR placement host offer any guidance specifically about inclusion issues with respect to your AiR project?"*

No specific advice or support relating to inclusion was offered to the six students who responded to this question. Some limited general advice seen to be available as required. Some general advice about making sure everyone (students) was involved was given by some host teachers. There was a perception of all PSTs that inclusion was not really an issue.... that those identified as having special needs were catered for without special adjustments being made.

*Q: "Did you take any actions steps specifically to create an inclusive learning context?"*

By the PSTs own admission, limited specific evidence of adjustments were made to ensure inclusion. Some indicated some minor adjustments had been made, however, no substantial strategies were employed by the PSTs. Some PSTs felt that by making it 'easy' for all, inclusion was occurring... There was no apparent awareness about how 'making it easy', might disadvantage the most able and motivated students.

*Q: "Is there anything else you can share about inclusive practice or your AiR project?"*

*Q: "Can you share an interesting or important anecdote related to inclusion?"*

*Q: "Do you consider yourself to be more or less capable of meeting your professional inclusion responsibilities as a pre-service and continuing teacher as a result of this AiR experience?"*

Responses to questions 8 – 10 were useful in terms of providing supplementary information about the AiR Program in general, but did not provide useful information pertinent to this research. Consequently, that information has not been included.

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